TRANSMEDIA

Moritz Fink

Understanding The Simpsons

Animating the Politics and Poetics of Participatory Culture

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To *D'oh!* The cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems.
(In memory of Robert S.)

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Preface to the AUP Edition

Publishing an updated edition of *Understanding The Simpsons* has been on my mind for quite a while, though I never planned it would be realized in tandem, and somewhat supplementary to, the general-audience book The Simpsons*: A Cultural History* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2019). The months during which I began revising *Understanding The Simpsons* were not only marked by the earlier book's release in connection with *The Simpsons*' thirtieth anniversary year of 2019; the Western world also found itself in a time of huge cultural turmoil. U.S. President Donald Trump and other nationalist mountebanks were seizing discursive space, reviving culture wars that had seemed long overcome. "The Media," "The Academia," and "The Intelligentsia" were, again, blamed as delusion organs run by smart alecks, liberal fundamentalists, bleeding hearts, and hopeless SJWs (Lisa Simpsons, that is, as Republican Senator Ted Cruz's infamously grotesque reference to The Simpsons showcased).

In late 2019—thirty years after Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie had debuted on their own television show—the Simpsons' currency, indeed, lay in the characters' meaning as cultural icons rather than in the show's ratings. Disney's acquisition of Fox earlier that year had signaled a will to prolong the already unusually extensive trajectory of America's longest-running fictional prime-time series; moreover, it would expand Disney's palette of media content, adding one of the 1990s' most popular cult TV shows to the company's streaming service, Disney+.

At the same time, the program's producers tried hard to revitalize *The Simpsons*' political meaning. With a number of satirical swipes and direct commentary against Trump, they were using the famous franchise as a forum for articulating dissent—in an era where reality appeared to have superseded all (satirical) fiction. Expressed in the form of television comedy, the stunts certainly resonated with a larger cultural sentiment. While popular media has always informed the civic discourse in modern societies, *The Simpsons*' gestures toward demonstrating political oppositionality might have contributed less to the public debate than to the amusement of the liberal community. But it seemed imperative in a time when vulgar, misogynous, and racist sentiments were no longer rhetorical excesses at the fringes but articulated by self-declared "democrats" who had become the figureheads of political powerhouses. This felt all the more true as we heard about the discontinuation of what used to be a constant of liberal humor for generations (*MAD* magazine); right-wing populism entering the

pop culture market (e.g., *Alt-Hero* comics); and "conservative intellectuals" (read: smart-ass right-wingers) and Fox News pundits naively slamming a media studies professor for publishing a critical reading of Disney's *Lion King* in the *Washington Post*, according to which the film promoted a fascist ideology (Dan Hassler-Forest).

As I finalize this preface at the onset of 2021, it is hard to estimate the political and cultural effects that will emerge from the post-Trump era, not to speak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump's presidency and the Disney–Fox merger brought *The Simpsons* back into the spotlight. And yet, to say that the show lost much of its originality, cultural vigor, and edge long ago continues to be more popular than to claim that *The Lion King* represents fascism. Nostalgia for the 1990s Golden Age of *The Simpsons* also means reminiscing about lighthearted laughter, liberal comedy on network TV, and a seemingly progressive zeitgeist. Nevertheless, while Homer and Co. appear to be television mavericks on the verge of retirement, this is clearly a time where every single progressive voice is needed, even the feeblest, faded-yellow Simpsons—as cultural agencies, shared media icons, and semiotic resources.

Introduction

Abstract
This introductory chapter links the Simpsons phenomenon to the emergence of convergence culture, which refers to the blurring of media production and media consumption in the digital age. Various cultural agencies, I argue, have both shaped and expanded the popular narrative associated with The Simpsons. In contrast to most other pop culture texts, The Simpsons' iconic characters and storyworld are mainly parodic commentaries that reflect sensibilities rooted in popular culture, informing what I call the series' "popular semiosis." Furthermore, the chapter discusses the cult series in relation to the label "fan" as well as in relation to media scholarship that adopts the dual role of critical inquiry and pop culture fandom.

Keywords: The Simpsons, convergence culture, popular semiosis, cultural studies, media fandom, aca-fandom

Thirty-plus years after its prime-time premiere on December 17, 1989, the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons* represents a pop-cultural institution: on the one hand, a globally recognized icon of American popular culture, on the other, a media text whose major subject is popular culture itself.

Today, most people in the Western world will know of *The Simpsons*. Many adult TV viewers, including myself, consider the series and its characters a part of their media socialization—a part of their media culture. Looking back to the show's phenomenal success in the 1990s and 2000s, the Simpsons brand appears quite dated; for younger generations, the media franchise holds far from the same attraction that it originally did for Gen Xers and millennials. But why, then, is *The Simpsons* still in production and being broadcast all over the world? And how have the Simpsons characters preserved their recognizability and meaning as popular cartoon icons?

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This book traces the cultural phenomenon of The Simpsons. This refers not only to the eponymous television show itself but to the associated media franchise at large, as well as to various forms through which we encounter The Simpsons beyond *The Simpsons*.[1] To approach this nexus, my study will reflect how media production has undergone tremendous changes over the past three decades: the television industries have shifted from broadcasting to narrowcasting; storytelling strategies have moved away from illusionist approaches toward self-referential and self-deprecating forms of representation; and traditional models of mass-communication have been reshaped by media convergence in the digital age. As I will show, The Simpsons' remarkable trajectory has followed these momentous transformations. Tracing the rise of the yellow-skinned cartoon characters as they became media icons helps us better understand these larger cultural shifts.

Consider the figure of Bartman, Bart Simpson's Batman-style superhero alter ego. Initially a piece of merchandise—for example, printed on T-shirts in connection with a variety of Bart Simpson motifs to promote *The Simpsons* during its formative years in the early 1990s—Bartman made it into *The Simpsons* television series and, over the years, has taken on a life of his own. In a parodic nod to Tim Burton's popular 1989 *Batman* movie, Bartman had his serial debut in the Season 2 episode "Three Men and a Comic Book" (1991) and was only featured on the show once more, on the 2007 episode "Revenge is a Dish Best Served Three Times," in the *Batman Begins* spoof segment "Bartman Begins." But Bartman has proliferated far beyond *The Simpsons* on TV. While not a part of the regular series' cast, Bart's alias developed in Simpsons comics (most notably in a six-issue *Bartman* miniseries [1993–1995]), video games, and memorabilia. In *The Simpsons Game* (2007), for example, the figure of Bart Simpson can turn into "Bartman," thus enhancing the character's powers (he can climb walls and use a cape to glide through the air or generate bats as weapons).[2]

However, Bartman's dissemination has hardly been limited to these "official" outlets of the Simpsons franchise. To gain a more nuanced understanding of the figure as a cultural signifier, we have to widen our focus and enter the "unofficial" domain of Simpsons fan culture. For instance, before the series' creators revived Bartman in the wake of Christopher Nolan's

1 Throughout this study, I italicize *The Simpsons* when I refer to the television show, while instances related to the series in a general sense appear in regular type.

2 The episode "Revenge is a Dish Best Served Three Times" can therefore also be viewed as an instance of transmedia cross-promotion, as it originally aired on January 28, 2007, the same year *The Simpsons Game* was released.

Figure 0.1: "Bartman Begins" (2005). Remix poster by Erik Skov.

2005 *Batman Begins* movie, the then fifteen-year-old Canadian Simpsons fan Erik Skov had already riffed on the connection (Skov 2021), creating a "Bartman Begins" poster and circulating it via the social media platform DeviantArt in 2005.[3]

Another fan work on DeviantArt, created and posted by American teenager D. J. Whittaker in 2014, situated Bartman beside Fallout Boy, a superhero-sidekick within The Simpsons' fictional comic book series *Radioactive Man*. Through parody characters such as Bartman or Fallout Boy, *The Simpsons*' creators have suggested a remix universe, which is then taken up by fans who render Fallout Boy the perfect match for Bartman in a humorous nod to comic book superhero Batman and his "ward" Robin.

Critical voices might object that such remixes based on pop-cultural icons—creative as they may seem—tend to merely reproduce corporate signifiers that form popular culture's image bank. In that logic, mixing and matching commercial media images often fails to be transformative in gesture, "disrespectful" towards the appropriated object, and thus critical or "democratic" as discursive practice (cf. obsession_inc. 2009). This argument is reasonable and will reverberate as I discuss The Simpsons' role in digital remix culture in Chapter 6. For now, the example of Bartman serves the

3 DeviantArt is online art platform where users can share self-created visual content. Open to virtually everybody, the website constitutes a forum for professional as well as amateur artists—many of whom are fan artists.

Figure 0.2: "Fall Out Boy and Bartman Selfie" (2014). Fan art created by D. J. Whitaker.

broader purpose of demonstrating how a signifier originating in a mass-media context (Bartman) traverses multiple media platforms as well as multiple cultural sites. Not only have commercial media producers created a character that is already a parodic homage of another pop culture icon (Batman); this homage has in turn inspired an active fan culture which participates in (re) negotiating and reproducing versions of the derivative signifier "Bartman."

What Do We Talk About When We Talk About "The Simpsons"?

In analyzing the interplay between a specific mass-media text and popular culture, this book considers The Simpsons as an instance of what Frank Kelleter and others have conceptualized as "popular serial narrative"—a pop-cultural mythology which "emerges from situated historical actors and agencies" (Kelleter 2017, p. 11). The dynamic relationship between The Simpsons and an increasingly participatory media culture has been crucial to the cultural impact and longevity of this particular media franchise. The word *animating* in the subtitle of this book hence refers to both senses of the term—to an animated cartoon that *represents* a participatory media culture and to a serial narrative that *stimulates* this kind of participatory media culture.

First and foremost, the show *The Simpsons* developed a distinct fan sensibility, which greatly contributed to the series' meaning as a cult phenomenon. And as audiences were becoming more and more interactive via the emergence of the internet, *The Simpsons*' producers also encouraged fan engagement by recognizing these forms of participation. This has typically occurred in the form of promotional gimmicks, such as the digital "Simpsonizer" tool featured on the official website for the 2007 *The Simpsons Movie*. The application gave fans the ability to create customized Simpsons avatars using template forms such as the characteristic overbite, bulgy eyes, and some of the characters' recognizable haircuts—presets that indicate the extent to which corporate media have a solid interest in domesticating, channeling, or otherwise incorporating fan activities.

Other examples of Simpsons fan creations, however, are "unauthorized" Simpsons productions—that is, productions *not* commissioned and licensed through 20th Century Fox, the commercial rights holder of the Simpsons media property (and part of the Walt Disney Company as of 2019). As the aforementioned Bartman examples have illustrated, amateur producers often create Simpsons-related artifacts without the copyright holder's consent, thereby reclaiming their space within the Simpsons universe (or, rather, within the textual construct that is "The Simpsons").[4] As we will see, Fox has reacted on various levels to what it sees as the unauthorized use of intellectual property. And yet, like "authorized" Simpsons avatars were routinely created through *The Simpsons Movie*'s website, "unauthorized" Simpsons material plays a significant role within the textual derivatives that typically proliferate around pop culture phenomena. While unauthorized productions featuring The Simpsons may be considered illegitimate or even violations of copyright, instances such as bootleg Simpsons T-shirts, which I will discuss in Chapter 5, also inform the cultural meaning of The Simpsons (albeit, perhaps, in less privileged or circulated ways).

In that sense, The Simpsons has always been more than a television show. Rather, the series has been a cultural "catalyst" similar to Henry Jenkins's (2003) description of the *Star Wars* saga: not only has *The Simpsons* created a media franchise, which licensed the series' characters and iconography to a variety of corporate partners, including comics, video games, toys, and

4 I use the term "amateur" only to indicate that these people do not belong to commercial media organizations and usually do not make a living from their art. Indeed, most of these amateur artists are extremely talented as well as media-savvy, and their works frequently exhibit professional skills. Often enough, talented "amateurs" will turn "pro" and become freelance artists or are hired by commercial media.

other merchandising companies. The series has also popularized a set of characters and recognizable iconography, adding them to a shared media space that provides meaningful cultural resources for a wide variety of audiences, as described by Jenkins in his 2006 landmark book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*:

> [The] circulation of media content—across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers' active participation. . . . Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives. (Jenkins 2006a, pp. 3–4)

From this perspective, The Simpsons represents what Diane Penrod (2010) calls a "public image" in the semiotic playground that is contemporary remix culture: a corporate-owned media text, globally distributed, highly popular, and thus convenient for a diverse range of cultural producers that rework it for various purposes. In describing The Simpsons in terms of a "public image," this project adopts a cultural studies notion of popular culture that emphasizes the liberties of semiotic participation (see, e.g., Fiske 1987).

This book's transmedia approach, then, views The Simpsons more as cultural text than as licensed media property. As Emanuel Ernst and Sven Werkmeister asserted at the turn of the millennium, in a German-language edited volume on the Simpsons phenomenon, the agencies that have shaped the cultural text "The Simpsons" refer to at least three different categories: Matt Groening and the production team being the "inventors" and creators of the show; the media corporation 20th Century Fox (now owned by the Walt Disney Company) as the copyright owner and distributor; and the audience and fans, not only as viewers and consumers but also as interpreters, appropriators, and rewriters of the Simpsons universe (Ernst and Werkmeister 2001, p. 100).

Moreover, given its three-decade-plus lifespan, The Simpsons has resonated with various generations of viewers and media consumers. Over the years, The Simpsons' fan base has naturally changed. New fans have arrived; veteran fans grew older and might have either given up their fandom, or pursued their passion with varying degrees of intensity. But fan sensibilities typically become entrenched in people's identities. A media text as long-lived and popular as The Simpsons constitutes a collective point of reference in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century's global popular culture. In various contexts and situations, you will meet people familiar with the series and its characteristics. As a cultural artifact, The Simpsons has

entered their (former) viewers'—or (former) fans'—everyday lives as well as the professional lives some of those hold within the worlds of commercial media production and other forms of creative art.

"Off-Screen Studies" and the Meaning of Paratexts in the Age of Convergence Culture

Certainly, it is a well-established method to take into account aspects of reception in order to better understand how a mass-media phenomenon such as The Simpsons works as a cultural text. The field of cultural studies offers a particularly long tradition of ethnographic audience research, emphasizing specific readings of specific audiences to interrogate the range of meanings a certain text may offer. Strikingly, the internet has provided audiences with an infrastructure to share and document reception practices. The Net's datasphere has become a substantial source for media scholarship to analyze the ways audiences respond to mass-media products in form of "visible" texts, as discussed by Jonathan Gray in *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. A significant part of "off-screen studies" (Gray 2010, pp. 6–7), the internet constitutes the quintessential medium where we see the two traditional categories of media reception and production interacting and intersecting.

Henry Jenkins reflects on the impact of the internet when he notes that Ien Ang's 1985 study on *Dallas* once drew on just a few dozen letters, which Ang requested by means of a magazine advertisement, whereas Jenkins sampled from online fan forums at volumes of a dozen postings an hour during the online research for what would grow into his eminent 1992 *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (see Jenkins 2006b, p. 115). Notably, Jenkins undertook his pioneering study of participatory media culture way before the internet became a mass phenomenon with the rise of the World Wide Web during the 1990s. In the meantime, the internet has become synonymous with the accessibility of media consumers and the growing visibility of participatory culture. It is definitely no exaggeration to propose that the digital revolution constitutes the single most significant technological development in this process of recognizing audiences. A device of communication that operates in a much more democratic fashion than the traditional media,[5] the internet has greatly amplified the impact of audience-generated paratexts.

5 For the problem of the digital revolution viewed as a democratizing force, see, e.g., Dean (2002) and Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013, pp. 39–41).

The term *paratext* denotes additional material linked to a given source text, such as a television program or film. In this context, some media scholars (e.g., Hills 2004) have followed John Fiske's definition of intertextuality. Fiske distinguishes between "vertical intertextuality," consisting of "secondary texts such as studio publicity, journalistic features, or criticism [and] tertiary texts produced by the viewers themselves" as opposed to "horizontal intertextuality," which Fiske refers to when he speaks about the relationship between primary texts (see Fiske 1987, p. 108). With the digital revolution, however, the distinction between secondary texts and tertiary texts has become increasingly blurred. Why should a review in a newspaper be ranked "secondary" while a blog review by a user is (only) "tertiary"?[6] Fiske and Hills both draw the line at the point where some material is commercially available (see Hills 2004, p. 510). Yet this implied hierarchy is increasingly inaccurate given the growing visibility, circulation, and thus accessibility and marketability of user-generated content in the internet age. Instead, we might treat all the work created in relation to a certain media text equally as secondary material. Following Gérard Genette, I therefore reserve the term *intertextuality* for the authorial practice of quotation or allusion; *paratextuality*, on the other hand, refers to all secondary texts that provide the primary text with "a (variable) setting and sometimes commentary, official or not" (Genette 1997, pp. 2–3).

As Gray argues in *Show Sold Separately*, the paratexts surrounding a television program such as *The Simpsons* may consist of ads or promos, commentaries, interviews, reviews, articles, blog entries, the show's website, merchandise articles, and so on. That is, all that contributes to (re)framing and (re)situating the source text, *The Simpsons*. According to this definition, instances where audiences discuss and talk about the series are also paratexts. As Gray observes,

> audience paratextuality also includes criticism and reviews, fan fiction, fan film and video (vids), "filk" (fan song), fan art, spoilers, fan sites, and many other forms. Type the name of almost any popular film or television program into Google, and beyond the first two or three links for official, industry-created paratexts, one will likely find several if not hundreds or thousands of pages with various forms of audience-created paratexts. (2010, p. 143)

6 For the relative character of these categories, see also Gray (2015).

Indeed, my research on the Simpsons phenomenon corroborates Gray's hypothesis. Googling "the simpsons" produces around 45 million hits at the time of writing. From this number, "official" websites linked with The Simpsons as Disney-owned media property only account for a tiny fraction. Consequently, the majority of hits refer to paratexts not directly produced by The Simpsons/Fox but rather by unaffiliated media outlets and, to a significant extent, by bloggers and/or alternative media such as user-generated podcasts, YouTube videos, and online wikis. However unofficial such venues may be, they belong to a paratextual realm which helps us to understand the phenomenon of The Simpsons—its various cultural meanings and popular extensions.

Popular Semiosis

The wealth of imagery provided by commercial media—movies, television shows, computer games, comics, and so on—has always been vital for popular culture's practices of semiotic reworking and remixing. Yet, as this book will demonstrate, The Simpsons constitutes a special case. Given the show's extraordinary longevity as a TV phenomenon and its global impact as one of America's most successful pop culture exports, The Simpsons' cultural status can be called iconic. But unlike most other media icons, The Simpsons has cultivated a parodic perspective tied to a recognizable iconography as central features of what I am calling "popular semiosis"—a term borrowed from semiotician Umberto Eco.

To clarify, I do not consider it very helpful to engage in depth with the theory of semiotics in this context; this book will not spend any time with Ferdinand de Saussure or Charles S. Peirce. Rather, I draw on semiotics as it has been fruitfully employed by theorists of cultural studies—as a resource of popular empowerment. By the category "popular semiosis," then, I am referring to the sign system through which a media text (in this case: The Simpsons) provides people with a specific vernacular enabling them to communicate and express themselves in creative, effective, and efficient ways within contemporary media culture. In short, the various forms through which The Simpsons manifests itself as and in popular culture.

As a concept, popular semiosis is particularly applicable to The Simpsons. Like most other commercial entertainment media content, Springfield's cartoon world has given fans and other cultural creators a distinct mythology and image system, a "discursive repertoire from which to make their popular culture" (Fiske 1989, p. 125). Significantly, the Simpsons universe

Figure 0.3: An early 1990s Bartman action figure by Mattel.
From the collection of Bart of Darkness. Photo courtesy of Warren Evans.

has represented a didactic venue that invites us to do what the franchise is premised on: to view media culture as an image bank; to appropriate, remix, and match elements from it; and to generate new meanings by putting them into new contexts. In that sense, the series has provided vital semiotic resources, not only to interact with The Simpsons' participatory realm but also to deploy The Simpsons as a meta-media text.

This indicates The Simpsons' intended parodic posture vis-à-vis other media texts (Batman, Star Wars, television sitcoms, canonic movies, animated cartoons, etc.). Beyond suggesting an autonomous fantasy cartoon world, The Simpsons has always represented a cultural commentator. What distinguishes The Simpsons from most other media franchises, then, is the referential humor that has become its trademark—the series' abounding parody-oriented references to the pop culture world (including The Simpsons itself) as well as "ironic" merchandise items (such as "Bartman" action figures). Through its aesthetics of semiotic play, The Simpsons has drawn on the satirical humor popularized in the United States during the baby-boomer era by different media formats—from *MAD* magazine (1952–2019) through CBS's *Saturday Night Live* (1975–)—whose comedy reflected what cultural studies scholarship had originally identified as practices of participatory (sub)cultures.

Methodology, Chapter Overview, and Some Simpsons Background

A transmedia analysis of The Simpsons, as proposed in this book, involves multiple areas of critical inquiry—not only in relation to the show's "official"

producers but also in relation to amateur producers and fans who participate in shaping The Simpsons as a cultural text. Therefore this study first looks at the industrial level and examines the specific production context that gave rise to the Simpsons phenomenon; I then discuss the show's aesthetics in terms of representing an interface between commercial and alternative media practices; last, the book investigates how The Simpsons and its iconography has found expression in contemporary remix culture. In interrogating The Simpsons' meaning as popular semiosis operating within the politics and poetics of participatory culture, I will draw on a tripartite cultural studies approach as suggested by Douglas Kellner (2009), which establishes the following areas of critical inquiry:

- the socioeconomic context that situates a particular cultural artifact
- the textual composition of the cultural artifact and its representation of ideologies and social groups
- the ways the cultural artifact under question interacts with certain groups of people

To do so, this introduction will be followed by a chapter on theory, in which I lay out the basic concepts used within this book: participatory culture, popular semiosis, and media fandom.

Chapter 2 traces the socioeconomic context out of which grew The Simpsons—from some crudely animated cartoon vignettes to one of the 1990s' and 2000s' most popular media phenomena. The iconic cartoon characters around the Simpson family, derived from Matt Groening's original sketches, first appeared in between TV skits starring Tracey Ullman. When *The Tracey Ullman Show* (Fox, 1987–1990) was dropped due to low ratings, producer James L. Brooks managed to convince the executives at the nascent Fox network to spin off the segments featuring the chaotic cartoon family into a show of its own. Thus, *The Simpsons* became the first animated prime-time sitcom since the demise of Hanna-Barbera's groundbreaking *The Flintstones* (ABC, 1960–1966) and the shows following in their forerunner's wake—*The Flintstones*' sci-fi counterpart, *The Jetsons* (ABC, 1962–1963; syndicated, 1985–1987), *Wait Till Your Father Comes Home* (syndicated, 1972–1974), and *Where's Huddles?* (CBS, 1970). Contrary to the 1980s media industry standard that considered animated comedies for adults an outdated concept, the impact of *The Simpsons* led to the 1990s' and early 2000s' boom of cartoon shows for young adults. The most significant of these were *Beavis and Butt-Head* (MTV, originally 1993–1997), *The Simpsons*' sister shows at Fox (*The Critic* [1994–1995], *King of the Hill* [1997–2010], *Family Guy* [1997–],

and *Futurama* [1999–2003, Comedy Central, 2008–2013], and *American Dad!* [2005–2014; TBS, 2014–]), as well as *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997–) and a battery of shows produced for the Adult Swim network, culminating in the cult show *Rick and Morty* (2013–), all of which followed the trail blazed by *The Simpsons*' creators.

Indeed, few expected the success story *The Simpsons* would become. The show and its characters turned out to have a mass appeal for millions of mostly young Americans, just before it proved to be marketable throughout the world (today, *The Simpsons* airs in almost every country around the globe). In addition to creating a marketing bonanza, the series resonated with the 1990s' zeitgeist by displaying an appreciation of complex television comedy writing (which earned *The Simpsons* accolades such as *Time* magazine's title of the best TV show of the twentieth century and numerous Annie and Emmy Awards) and signifying the (neo-)liberal spirit that reshaped America toward the Age of Clinton (Troy 2015, p. 108).

On a textual level, the "postmodern" media entertainment of the 1980s and early 1990s (parody-films such as John Dante et al.'s 1987 *Amazon on the Moon*, 1984's mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*, the indie movie vogue ushered in by Richard Linklater's 1990 *Slacker*, and TV comedies like *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and *Saturday Night Live*'s "Wayne's World" sketches) may count as signposts pointing towards the trend of popular media reflecting the culture of popular media consumption through ironic humor. As I will argue in Chapter 3, *The Simpsons*' success was a significant driving force in this development. Jim Collins has suggested the term "hyperconsciousness" to refer to a media text that comments explicitly on "its cultural status, function, and history, as well as of the conditions of its circulation and reception" (Collins 1992, p. 335). Notably, this characteristic goes beyond the traditional artistic trope of self-reflexivity as described by Robert Stam (1992), for instance, as well as "postmodernism" as a fetish for pastiche and referentiality. Following this idea further, I argue that *The Simpsons*' impact is indicative of what I term "meta-television culture"—that is, the cultivation of an awareness among the 1980s' and 1990s' young adult (YA) audience regarding the various effects of mass media, which fed back into an ironic position towards all media messages, as a key characteristic of the so-called Generation X.

What originally framed *The Simpsons* as an unconventional television experience, then, was not only the return of animation on prime-time TV. As I will further discuss in Chapter 4, the producers charged the cartoon series with their boomer sensibilities: rock music, comics and geek gusto, and especially media fandom constituted (sub)cultural traditions through

which the creators around Matt Groening forged bonds with a consumer group that embraced *The Simpsons* as an "authentic" expression of their media culture. In addition to its strident cartoon style and protagonists tapping into the children's market, *The Simpsons* provided a second layer of adult-oriented comedy which successfully courted a YA fan audience whom we may associate with the so-called Generation X. These Gen Xers related to the ways their own media engagement was represented, and thus acknowledged, on mainstream television in form of *The Simpsons*.

The Simpsons thus follows a larger paradigm of TV programs showcasing the artistic potential of television entertainment and inviting new, "quality" audiences (see Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 1984). When *The Simpsons* first aired, critics celebrated the series for effectively blurring the boundaries between high and low culture by conglomerating references from modernist paintings and Hitchcock movies to media history in its broadest sense, including virtually every sitcom trope imaginable. Moreover, *The Simpsons* soon established itself as a site that acknowledged the cultural agency of people actively engaging in popular media discourse. Thus, the series successfully fended off the stigma of pop culture serving as tranquilizer, as its writers included richly layered reflections on media consumption and fandom.

As I will discuss in Chapter 5, *The Simpsons* has not only expressed the social relevance of pop culture fandom; its producers have also actively fostered media fandom by tapping into the realm of participatory culture. Since the series' inception, its creators have invested in audience engagement through transmedia approaches while, at the same time, seeking strategies to maintain the hegemony over their intellectual property. Addressing the subcultural sensibilities of cult media fans, the Simpsons franchise has not only drawn in preexisting fan communities (especially comics and sci-fi fandom) but also cultivated a massive fan following of its own, and thus a powerful form of interpretive community. As the examples of online fan sites such as The Simpsons Archive illustrate, while active audiences have forged networks to discuss and document media texts before, these formations have increasingly gained cultural status in the media landscape at the turn of the twenty-first century. The rise of the internet and digital culture has made fan culture—or participatory culture in general—more visible and therefore more significant as agencies of cultural production, a process reflected in the *Simpsons* series.

Lastly, Chapter 6 looks beyond the "official" Simpsons. Widening the focus will reveal the meaning of The Simpsons' semiosis in the digital age. As the series—its mythology and characters—has proliferated through

the (visual) practices of cultural producers via such popular platforms as DeviantArt or YouTube, The Simpsons became fully integrated into online culture. The franchise's distinct iconography, which is both iconic and easy to recreate, in combination with The Simpsons' parodic/satirical ethos, has animated popular culture's politics and poetics of semiotic appropriation, providing protocols on how to translate the show's aesthetics into participatory pleasures and practices.

In addition to "classic" examples of fan work, digital culture has not only borrowed from The Simpsons' iconography but also built on the franchise's parodic and satirical impulses in what is often referred to as "Simpsonizing" in the popular vocabulary. As demonstrated in various case studies, the internet provides a wealth of memetic derivatives linked to The Simpsons: images of Marge as sexy cover girl, Simpsons vaporwave videos and parodic clips of the show's iconic intro sequence, or Simpsons characters being used in political contexts in Germany are all examples of participatory culture creatively repurposing The Simpsons. More precisely, in these instances the series' semiosis has given participatory culture a rich mythology and image-system to articulate perspectives of reframing, nostalgia, critical correction, and what Henry Jenkins and others have called the "civic imagination" (Jenkins 2016, pp. 29–32; Jenkins et al. 2016; Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova 2020).

Fan Stereotypes, Fan Critics, and Aca-Fans

More often than not, people who "talk back" to, or otherwise embrace and participate in, The Simpsons will be considered "fans." But we have to be careful with that label. Although most people are "fans" of something, many still use the category with hesitation; fandom has for a long time been subject to cultural depreciation and social stereotyping. Dean Fraser, for instance, whose *Springfield Punx* blog will be discussed in Chapter 6, expressed reservations about being a Simpsons fan. Although Fraser declared to (still) like and watch *The Simpsons*, he mentioned his fan relationship with the series with reluctance. In a rather defensive tone, he stated:

> I am a fan of the show. Not necessarily a live-and-breathe fanatic for it, but it's great fun and I still watch it. I am confident I've seen most of the episodes so I feel pretty well versed in The Simpsons' world and its history. (Fraser 2012, n.p.)

While this position clearly corresponds to a general understanding of the concept of fandom—Fraser has seen "most of the episodes," has an inside knowledge of the show's history and storyworld, and has been inspired by The Simpsons' stylistic features—he does not really feel comfortable with being associated with the "fan" label. He views his personal relationship with the show distinguished from that of the cliché die-hard fan or "fanatic." Whether this latter fan-model refers to a pathologized subject being "obsessed" with the show or a naively (i.e., excessively) consuming superfan (cf. Jenson 1992), it suggests how Simpsons fandom, as well as the attribution "fandom" in general, continues to be carefully and critically considered by many fans themselves. The label "Simpsons fan" is therefore complicated by some of those who have an affective relationship with the franchise because of stereotypes and prejudices that have traditionally been associated with media fandoms.

One obvious reason for the hesitation to call yourself a Simpsons fan may stem from an assumed expectation that fans are supposed to know *everything* about their favorite piece of pop culture—an expectation that is hard to meet in the context of a massive media text such as The Simpsons. At the same time, this reluctance may have to do with The Simpsons' trajectory from representing edgy, "alternative" television entertainment in the series' early stages to end up as one of Hollywood's pet media franchises. Indeed, most people are acquainted with The Simpsons, and to many, the stamp "Simpsons fan" might suggest reservations.

Matt Hills (2004) has emphasized the particularities of fandom involved in cult media texts such as The Simpsons. Cult fandom, as Hills describes it, is often characterized by an anti-commercial, or at least a consumer-critical stance. While cult fans do not necessarily "'resist' processes of commercialism" (Hills 2004, p. 517), they assume the role of a "constructed Other" which is based on an uneasy relationship with mindless or uncritical consumption practices (Hills 2010, pp. 68-69). According to Hills, this typically results in an analytical as well as a critical approach that fans adopt towards their object of devotion. Criticizing the qualitative decline of one's favorite TV program, such as Simpsons fans debating which episode has been the "worst ever" (see Chapter 4), is a definitive characteristic of cult fandom. "Being a fan of cult TV," Hills writes, "doesn't mean just displaying subjective enthusiasm or 'special devotion.' It also means, at the very least, being able to attempt to account and defend one's fan passions; being able to analyse and critically appreciate one's favoured text" (2004, p. 517).

Most clearly, such a position comes to the fore in the 2012 e-book *Zombie Simpsons: How the Best Show Ever Became the Broadcasting Undead* by a

Simpsons fan who goes by the name of Charlie Sweatpants. In the preface, he writes:

> [Today], if you flip on Fox at 8 p.m. on Sundays, you will see a program that bills itself as *The Simpsons*. It is not *The Simpsons*. That show, the landmark piece of American culture that debuted on 17 December 1989, went off the air more than a decade ago. The replacement is a hopelessly mediocre imitation that bears only superficial resemblance to the original. It is the unwanted sequel, the stale spinoff, the creative dry hole that is kept pumping in the endless search for more money. (Sweatpants 2012, n.p.)

For fans such as Sweatpants, the moment they view their favorite TV show "jumping the shark" is crucial. As well as justifying his passion for *The Simpsons* with the cultural significance of the series, Sweatpants criticizes the makers of *The Simpsons* for having become predictable, "superficial," and trite in comparison with the series' "original" creative output; The Simpsons franchise is only kept alive in order to generate more money, reads the common argument.

Such forms of evaluation or canonization of a TV series are manifestations of "fan criticism" in relation to media cults (cf. Jenkins 1992, pp. 94–98). Typically, fandom operates informally, yet is driven by networked communities, influencers, mentors, curators, gatekeepers, and tastemakers which form hierarchical structures (Brower 1992; MacDonald 1998; Baym 2000; Kompare 2017). These are the agencies that shape the interpretive fan community around a media text, constituting fandom as a hegemonic discourse (Johnson 2017). Traditional threads in this context are discursive constructions of "aesthetic histories" (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995): Star Trek enthusiasts debating the links and inconsistencies between the different generations of individual TV series and movies; Star Wars fans evaluating the original trilogy against the prequel or sequel trilogies; Simpsons aficionados being nostalgic about the show's heyday in the early 1990s and lamenting how their favorite program began to lose its original edge.

This dimension of fan criticism also informs *Planet Simpson* author Chris Turner's periodization of *The Simpsons*. Turner distinguishes between the show's "Early Days," starting with the *Tracey Ullman* shorts through the middle of *The Simpsons*' third season in 1992; the "Golden Age," beginning in the middle of Season 3 and continuing throughout Seasons 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8; until the show entered a phase of diminished originality and wit with Season 9 in 1997, which Turner calls the "Long Plateau" (Turner 2004, pp. 36–41). Both Sweatpants's as well as Turner's assessments demonstrate

a shared sentiment that often exists among fans vis-à-vis their favored texts (see Jenkins 1992, p. 95). In the fans' readings, *The Simpsons* lost its authenticity linked to the series' "original" quality as satirical, offbeat TV show. If *The Simpsons* was designed to develop a fan audience, the same fans have turned out to be the show's harshest critics. Many a Simpsons fan shares Sweatpants's frustration over the latter-day *Simpsons* being merely a pale imitation of itself.

Besides these fan-authored publications, a tremendous amount of literature on The Simpsons already exists, contributing to what we may call Simpsons studies or "Simpsonology," which is often driven by Simpsons fandom (see, e.g., Gray 2006; Waltonen and Du Vernay 2010; Henry 2012; Waltonen and Du Vernay 2019; see also Chapter 5). In an academic context such "partiality" should be acknowledged, building on scholarship of popular culture and media fandom that follows Jenkins's (1992) "dual role" as fan and academic—the so-called "aca-fan." Although such an aca-fan position clearly bears the danger of obscuring analytical distance, Jenkins has famously advocated the advantages of writing as "both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture . . .) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)" (p. 5).

At this point, I also wish to disclose my own background growing up with *The Simpsons*, as well as various other American TV programs brought into the German television landscape since the 1980s. Arguably, this is an important factor in approaching such a complex, multilayered, and enduring cultural phenomenon as The Simpsons. Thus, I believe an inside knowledge of The Simpsons is helpful, if not necessary, for understanding the series and the cult around it in all its cultural and aesthetic nuances. In reflecting on my own subjective relationship to the cultural text that is The Simpsons, I am following a turn in media studies—linked to the tradition of cultural studies—to acknowledge, rather than to obscure, one's role as being an insider and a critical examiner at the same time (cf. Jenkins and Scott 2013, p. ix). Hence, I consider bringing to the table some degree of "fannish" enthusiasm towards my object of study not so much an obstacle in maintaining "critical distance" than an advantage in navigating through the digital jungle of today's complex and vast mediascape to explore the complex and contradictory cultural meanings of The Simpsons.

The transmedia lens adopted in this book is meant to expand previous research in Simpsons studies, building most notably on Jonathan Gray's (2006; 2007) publications in relation to the series and accounts of its history and evolution (Turner 2004; Ortved 2009; Fink 2019), as well as spadework exploring The Simpsons as a merchandise empire and media franchise (Ernst and

Werkmeister 2001; Gray 2010; McAllister 2004; Shores 2019). Adding to the shelf of existing literature on the show, *Understanding The Simpsons* delves into The Simpsons as a cultural phenomenon—the franchise's evolution, its relationship with media fandom, unofficial Simpsons productions, and The Simpsons' role in digital culture—by adopting a historical perspective that follows the series' trajectory and its deflections into the age of convergence culture.

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