

## The Simpsons Movie

# An audience of “big fat suckers”?

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“The Simpsons” has been a phenomenon since the animated television series first appeared in 1989. Currently in its 19th season, the show is the longest running situation comedy on American television (some 400 episodes in all). It has a wide global audience in dozens of countries.

*The Simpsons Movie* is the first feature-length film spun from the series. It has enjoyed a box-office success now approaching \$200 million since its release two months ago. This, along with the ongoing popularity of the television show, warrants an examination. There is an interesting background to the “The Simpsons,” which belies the sophomoric antics for which the series is perhaps best known.

Matt Groening was contacted in 1985 by James L. Brooks, producer of “The Tracey Ullman Show,” to do some animated shorts (called bumpers), to be aired between skits on the show. Brooks knew of Groening from the underground comic strip, “Life in Hell,” which the latter had been creating since 1978. Offbeat and anti-establishment, the strip had developed an ardent following. Its main characters were a rabbit named Binky, a bug-eyed sardonic variation of Bugs Bunny; Bongo, the one-eared illegitimate son of Binky; and Akbar and Jeff, a gay couple consisting of two identical fez-topped little men wearing Charlie Brown-style shirts.

Apparently Brooks was intending that Groening use the characters from “Life in Hell” in the shorts, but the artist decided otherwise, in order to segregate his “bunnies” from the caprices of the television business. (Groening’s commitment to his strip is such that he has continued to pen “Life in Hell” throughout the entire “Simpsons” period, and plans to do so indefinitely.) As the deal was being negotiated, in only 10 minutes’ time, he sketched out all-new characters. Loosely based in his own family, he created the five characters now known as the Simpsons. Homer, the father, was named after his own father; Marge is his mother’s name; Lisa and Maggie after his sisters. Bart was the only name that wasn’t taken from his own family. It is an anagram of “brat.”

The initial cast of “The Simpsons” that was selected for those bumpers became the core of the cast for years to come. Actors Julie Kavner and Dan Castellaneta still play Marge and Homer to this day. Kavner worked with Brooks in television’s “Rhoda” and “Taxi,” both of which he produced. Castellaneta was recruited from Chicago Second City.

“The Tracey Ullman Show” was one of the first shows aired on the fledgling Fox Network. As “The Simpsons” animated shorts became hugely popular, Fox was interested in creating a primetime weekly series out of them, the first cartoon series to have such a slot since “The Flintstones” in the early 1960s. As producer, Brooks negotiated a contract that gave the creators full artistic control over content. The first episode aired in December 1989.

The shorts were written to be shown in 15-second slots, so they almost inevitably consisted of slapstick and sight gags. With the half-hour format the interactions between the characters could be expanded. Brooks’s vision was that viewers should “forget they are watching a cartoon” and become emotionally engaged with the characters. And to a certain extent the show has succeeded in this. The nuclear family was placed in a context, a town called Springfield, satirically named after the town in “Father Knows Best,” a stereotypically bland American situation comedy from the 1950s. As the series progressed, the creators developed more characters and complex plots.

The Simpsons are a “middle American” dysfunctional family. Homer works as a guard at Springfield’s nuclear power plant; the responsibility of the job stands in obvious contrast to his lazy and selfish personality. Marge is a “typical” housewife, always seeing the best in Homer despite his apparent imbecility. Her huge blue hair was inspired by the beehive hairdos of the 1960s. Their mischievous son Bart has an endearing quality about him, often displaying a surprising sensitivity. His sister Lisa is a saxophone-playing intellectual, always involved with social causes. The baby, Maggie is continually and violently sucking on her pacifier. She doesn’t yet speak, but is often at the center of the resolution of problems.

Viewers are clearly attracted to the iconoclastic humor of the show, as well as the obvious intelligence behind the production. The episodes are sardonic and generally relevant to current issues. Politicians and preachers are regular targets of the show’s wit. The program, it’s clear, is put together by people who have eyes and ears, and brains. That “The Simpsons” has attracted such a consistently wide audience in the US (some 9 million a week in 2007, after 18 years) is an indication of the gulf between official patriotic, religion- and business-loving public opinion and the actual sentiments of masses of people.

Speaking of the irreverence of the show, Groening once commented, “For a while, it used to make me really happy that the show offended people and they got outraged. It always felt to me like we were Daffy Duck and there was a world of Elmer Fudds out there. But now even the Elmer Fudds have realized that you can’t mess with us, and so they pretend to like it, and I know they really don’t.”

The senior president Bush rebuked the series in his 1990 State of the Union address for glorifying dysfunctionality, referring to a Bart Simpson T-shirt that says, “I’m an underachiever and proud of it.” George Bush warned, “America needs to be a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons.” Despite that criticism, or more likely because of it, the series grew to attract voice talent from the biggest stars in show business, whose names read like a list of who’s who of Hollywood liberalism. A sampling of guest artists from

the series includes Albert Brooks, Danny DeVito, Dustin Hoffman, Sting, Johnny Carson, Bette Midler, Meryl Streep, Michelle Pfeiffer, Martin Sheen, Jack Lemmon, The Moody Blues, Cyndi Lauper, Ian McKellen, Liam Neeson, Anne Bancroft, Joe Namath, Tito Puente, Kirk Douglas, Ringo Starr, Michael Jackson, Meg Ryan, Melanie Griffith and Stephen Colbert.

After the better part of two decades as a successful television show, the irony of making a movie that is more or less a longer version of the weekly program is not lost on the film's producers. In the opening scene the Simpson family and other Springfield residents are discovered in a cinema watching "Itchy and Scratchy," Bart and Lisa's favorite television cartoon show. Homer bellows, "I can't believe we're paying for something we could get for free on TV. If you ask me, everyone in this theater is a big fat sucker," and turns to point to the spectator, "especially you." The ambivalent attitude of the program's creators toward the American (and global) population is perhaps captured here.

The theme of the film pivots on the environment, about which the populace of Springfield is supremely apathetic. In an early scene, the band Green Day (played by themselves) are performing on a barge floating on Springfield Lake before a large audience on the shore. The crowd is enjoying the performance until the band asks to say a couple of words about the environment, at which point the barge is pelted with so much debris that it sinks into the toxic lake.

The pollution in the lake is so bad that it eventually becomes an issue for the local politicians and they take measures to prevent dumping, including constructing a concrete barricade around the lake's perimeter. Homer manages to foil the safeguards and deals the deathblow to the lake's ecosystem by dumping a large container of his pet pig's waste product.

As a result the federal government gets wind of the ecological condition of the town and the president, Arnold Schwarzenegger of all people, is posed with the choice of "five drastic options" by an aide. Saying, "I was elected to lead, not to read," he blindly picks one of the choices without even knowing what it is.

There is clearly a political bent to the humor, but it lacks a pointedness and urgency, often relying on the viewer to read between the lines. For example, why is Schwarzenegger the president rather than Bush? Simply as a comedic foil, the current president has it all over the California governor and former action film star. From the standpoint of political criticism, choices like that come with a large price. The filmmakers seem to have taken the line of least resistance. In general, despite the talents of all involved, too often the humor remains at a low, even juvenile level.

For example, in a scene that could have been chilling if treated differently, the Simpson family is on a train from Alaska. Marge cautions Bart on his behavior: "We have to keep a low profile 'til we get to Seattle to tell the world there's a plot to destroy Springfield."

Lisa whispers, "I don't know if you guys should be talking so loud!"

Marge replies, "No Lisa. It's not like the government is listening to everybody's conversations . . ."

The scene then switches to the vast offices of the National Security Agency (NSA) where thousands of agents at computers are listening in on random telephone conversations. One of them hears Lisa saying, "But we're fugitives. We should just lay low 'til we get to Seattle!"

This is turned into a big joke, however, when the agent screams, "Hey everybody, I found one! The government actually found someone we're looking for! Yeah, baby! Yeah!"

It is impossible to take this seriously. It is obvious that the creators themselves don't. The final joke is the means by which they pull their punches. It's not a crime, but it weakens the overall impact. This loose and somewhat lazy attitude toward big events was expressed by Groening in an interview. "I definitely was influenced by the counterculture growing up, and it seems to me that unless subversion is at least an element of what you're doing, then it's no fun. But it's also an entertainment product, no bones about it. And is it possible to be subversive in something so commercial? I can't say. I try."

Is it that the show's makers feel the need to make concessions to a mass television audience? Perhaps, but that doesn't explain everything. In the end, the difficulties are bound up with the artistic and political limitations of the creators themselves. Among the principals of the show, producer James Brooks is the largest contributor to the Democratic Party, with donations amounting to more than \$175,000. This liberal outlook, along with great financial success, places definite limits on the program's "subversive" element.

The over-reliance on puerile humor is intended to impart a spirit of irreverence. It tends to do the opposite. This weakest element of "The Simpsons" is ubiquitous in today's popular culture. This can become another form of conformism, calculated somewhat opportunistically to appeal to younger and more immature audiences. The audience itself needs to be challenged more than it is by "The Simpsons." That cannot be explained away simply by referring to the fact that television is big business and that there is an element of marketing involved in the creative choices of those who produce and write such shows. Bluntly, there are things the program's creators are willing to say and other things they aren't.

Obviously, the problem isn't that cartoons are inherently illegitimate or ill suited as a vehicle for political criticism. The medium has long been a significant element of the American political vocabulary. Thomas Nast (1840-1902) was probably the most well known of American cartoonists, effectively using his talents as a weapon in defense of democracy. Abraham Lincoln called him "our best recruiting sergeant" during the Civil War. His cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* were instrumental in defeating Tammany Hall/Boss Tweed corruption in New York City in the 1870s. He later became a friend of Mark Twain.

Today, animated cartoon production is a much more complex, expensive and social endeavor than traditional political cartooning. It is a relatively recent phenomenon that can be viewed as a medium of political commentary. There is something of that in "The Simpsons," but not enough. One can only hope that in the right hands such production will find a more satisfying expression.



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