

## Animating Reality Walter Metz

“*The Simpsons*, Forever?”

With the May 2010 airing of its 464th episode, *The Simpsons* ended its 21<sup>st</sup> season, now making it possible that babies born during the week of the airing of the pilot, “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” in 1989 can legally drink alcohol in the United States. I taught my first college class that year, and used the credit sequence on my final exam as an example of short-form narrative. The fact that some of those students were younger than I at the time, and that now my students this semester were not yet born when *The Simpsons* premiered, is more than a bit depressing for this exponentially aging professor.

However, for the discipline of television studies, the advanced age of *The Simpsons* raises less petty questions. *M\*A\*S\*H* (CBS, 1972-1983), the longest-running sitcom of my generation, had to reinvent virtually its entire cast to last a paltry 256 episodes.

Animation allows *The Simpsons* to solve some standard geriatric sitcom problems: Bart and Lisa have remained in their same elementary school classrooms, as opposed to the grotesque aging of children on live action domestic sitcoms, from cute little ones to awkward teenagers, as lamentably happened on *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-1999). The larger question revolves around how *The Simpsons* has transcended its status as a television show and become more real than the world around me. On any given day in my household, my family members quote lines from the show—“mmm... sacrilicious,” “that’s obviously not the Pope... get the weekend guy,” and “if its cloudy and brown, you’re in cider town, if it’s clear and yella, you’ve got juice there fella”—as shorthand communication. Whereas more trendy viewers have long since abandoned the show for more recent forms of hipness, first *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present), then (twice) *Futurama* (Fox and Comedy Central, 1999-present), and *Robot Chicken* (Cartoon Network, 2005-present), we remain tethered to *The Simpsons*.

In my book on *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972), I celebrated the inventiveness that its 254 episode run forced on the staff: remaking episodes allowed the artists to change a conservative Ben Franklin into a radical George Washington without increasing the production costs by writing a new script. A similar “creativity by exhaustion” is occurring on *The Simpsons*. Consider a recent Halloween episode, “Treehouse of Horror XIX” (11/2/2008). In the final segment, “It’s the Grand Pumpkin, Milhouse,” the writers parody the famous Peanuts Halloween special, “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown” (CBS, 1966), in which Milhouse replaces Linus as the believer in the squash god. Unlike the Peanuts episode, which allegorizes Christianity through Linus’ faith in the orange deity, Milhouse’s tears actually bring to life a monstrous pumpkin.

The squash-man comes to discover that humanity’s Halloween rituals are barbaric (“My god, you roast the unborn [pumpkin seeds]?). In a startling moment, *The Simpsons* politicizes the milquetoast Peanuts allegory. When the Grand Pumpkin realizes that the humans are only carving yellow pumpkins, his anger subsides. When the kids call the squash a racist for only caring about orange pumpkins like himself, he declaims, “All

pumpkins are racist, the only difference is that I admit it.” After Surrealist shenanigans involving the summoning of a monstrous Tom Turkey to murder the pumpkin, the squash dies screaming, “pumpkin segregation forever,” a George Wallace mantra that produced one of the most boisterous rounds of laughter ever heard in my household.

This case study indicates not only that *The Simpsons*, after 424 episodes, is still very funny, but more importantly, that the longevity of the show is ideologically productive. What can it mean that it took the writers 19 years to notice that one of its central recurring motifs, its Halloween specials, is related to the Peanuts special? After all, the very pilot of *The Simpsons* ends with the cast singing a Christmas carol in a partly satiric, partly nostalgic reworking of the even more iconic “A Charlie Brown Christmas” (CBS, 1965).

At stake is the notion that long-running television is something more than exhausted. Instead, I would argue that, at its best, television’s attachment to characterization results in a ravenous need to reinvent these characters obsessively, often resulting in fabulous acts of invention. Had *The Simpsons’* writers turned to the Peanuts Halloween special in its fifth season instead of its nineteenth, it would not have been in order to position a monstrous pumpkin as an allegory for Southern segregation. And thus, I am grateful that *The Simpsons* has reached its 22<sup>nd</sup> season, and would not mind seeing it run for the rest of eternity. That’s an animating of reality with which I can live.