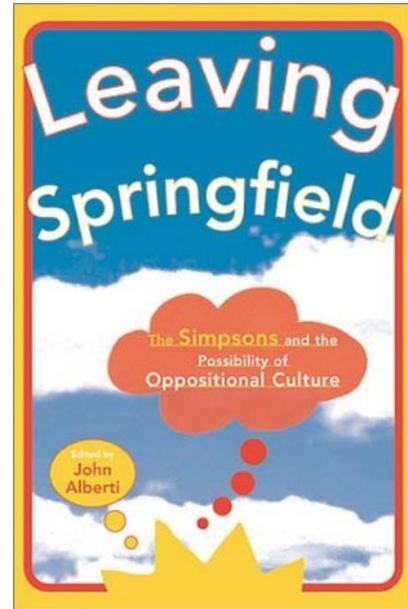


Review of:
Alberti, John, Ed. *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*. Detroit: Wayne State U P, 2004.

by Cathlena Martin



1. Some readers may wonder why a review of the animated cartoon *The Simpsons* was chosen for *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. While *ImageText* is an interdisciplinary journal focusing on the visual rhetoric of text and image, the main focus tends to be comics; and *The Simpsons* do have strong comic ties. Most essays in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* address the fact that Simpsons' creator and executive producer Matt Groening was an alternative comic artist with his *Life in Hell* comic strip. In the introduction, Editor John Alberti classifies Groening's vision and realization of the cartoon as, "the emergence of an underground-comics sensibility on network television" (xiv). But on a larger scope, *The Simpsons* use of iconography, identification with both high and low culture, its place in oppositional culture, and its status in the dominant pop visual culture realm remain the primary reasons for its inclusion and worthiness of study.
2. My justification for *The Simpsons* inclusion in this journal reflects the academic justification found in *Leaving Springfield*. A fear with texts of this nature and pop culture content is that they will be fan-based books, glorifying the product without any critical stance. However, *Leaving Springfield* critically approaches *The Simpsons* through a variety of theoretical lenses, including: cultural studies,

gender studies, queer theory, new criticism, as well as other approaches.

3. The heaviest theory laden essays begin the text with chapters one and two, almost as a justification for the text itself and the critical study of *The Simpsons*. David L.G. Arnold's "Use a Pen, Sideshow Bob: *The Simpsons* and the Threat of High Culture" and Kurt M. Koenigsberger's "Commodity Culture and Its Discontents: Mr. Bennett, Bart Simpson, and the Rhetoric of Modernism" both have lengthy sections establishing theoretical background material to culture and Arnold Bennett respectively, but that pertain little to *The Simpsons*. This length may frustrate some readers who mainly desire the applied theoretical without the previous discourse, but the subsection titles in each essay make it readily identifiable which sections contain prefatory material. This is particularly true in Koenigsberger's discussion of Arnold Bennett, when large chunks of the essay pertain only to Bennett and are only later strung together with *The Simpsons*.
4. Arnold, using the opposition of the intellectual Sideshow Bob and the brat Bart, addresses the "battle of culture(s)" between elite culture and mass culture, as well as how both cultures relate to and use television as a medium of power (2). However, in his discussion on Bob and Bart's destructive, hate relationship of Bob trying to repeatedly kill Bart, and its analogy for high and low culture, Arnold neglects to mention or analyze one of the most startling moments between Bob and Bart - in season fourteen's "The Great Louse Detective" - where Bob cannot bring himself to kill Bart because he has grown too fond of him. Possibly the paper was written before this season aired. If so, then the episode should be included in a revision. The symbiotic relationship Bob and Bart have created parallels the mutual reliance of high culture and low culture on each other to create each distinctive category. The strength of Arnold's argument lies in his close reading of Sideshow Bob, his interactions and power struggle with Krusty the Clown, and his determination to destroy TV while at the same time using it for his personal agenda to imbue culture into Springfield.
5. Megan Mullen's "*The Simpsons* and Hanna-Barbera's Animation Legacy" provides a lighthearted tone after the theoretical discussions of Arnold and Koenigsberger. She surveys the animation fore-families to *The Simpsons*, particularly *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* and provides an overview of animation and situation comedy in the 60s that leads up to the creation and acceptance of *The Simpsons*, which takes what has been done up to the next level. Her essay also includes a discussion of audience in relation to the cartoon medium.
6. Mullen claims *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* helped inspire and set the stage for *The Simpsons*, while Kevin J.H. Dettmar in "Countercultural Literacy: Learning Irony with *The Simpsons*" recognizes All in the Family as the television show *The Simpsons* owes the most to. Mullen and Dettmar differ in their opinion of which show, exactly, is the impetus for *The Simpsons*. Both allude to particular *Simpsons* episodes that draw from the respective shows as evidence of homage,

- but Dettmar uses irony as his founding reason. Several essays in this collection address the familial ties to previous shows, sometimes selecting one, two, or three particular influences. However, *The Simpsons* direct predecessor seems to be not one particular show, but the vast array of both television and movies that *The Simpsons* allude to in their pastiche.
7. Dettmar focuses on the use of irony in *The Simpsons*, and correctly labels the show, "the most consistently, intellectually ironic show on television" (88). He spends the majority of his essay analyzing an episode on gun control, "The Cartridge Family," and its ironic segments and ending which leave the viewer at an unstable balance on the issue.
 8. Valerie Weilunn Chow in "Homer Erectus: Homer Simpson as Everyman . . . and Every Woman" breaks down Homer's body into three sections - head, gut, and butt - to address the issue of postmodern parody and to place Homer in consumer culture as both commodity and consumer and as both male and female. She cites Lynne Joyrich's *Critical and Textual Hypermasculinity* to make a case that all consumers are feminized, which places Homer "both the white male head of the household and the feminized consumer" (110). Homer's literal head becomes a television set representing consumerism and the self-reflexive nature of the show; Homer's gut is a literal depiction of consumption. And through gender iconicity, Chow links his exposed butt crack through a rip in his pants with leakage, which she claims is a feminine aspect, and with losing the right to wear the pants in the family, thus again being feminized. She never addresses Homer's brain in relation to his head, but instead just uses his head as being transplanted by television. She concludes her insightful essay with an analysis of "Homer's Enemy."
 9. Robert Sloane in "Who Wants Candy? Disenchantment in *The Simpsons*" also analyzes "Homer's Enemy," but to a different end. Chow discusses the episode in regards to the white, male patriarchy, but Sloane reads it through the aspect of reality and the possible interpretation of *The Simpsons*' writing staff's disillusionment with the show. He discusses the self-reflexivity of the show and the various ways the producers and writers communicate directly to their audience through the show. One way is through episodes like "Homer's Enemy" where Frank Grimes can be read as the real world and Homer and the Simpson family can be read as the fictitious world set apart from reality. Another avenue for connecting to the audience is with the cartoon within a cartoon, *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*. He also addresses the various characters that make self-referential comments in regards to something alluding to the show itself, for instance, Comic Book Guy's "worst episode ever" line. Sloane claims Comic Book Guy "has become a sort of shorthand for criticism of the producer-receiver relationship" (162). While the producers and writers, speaking through the characters, may feel that the show has lost steam and its effectiveness, both Sloane and I disagree: "*The Simpsons* indeed continues to offer smart, politically charged television" (167).

10. William J. Savage, Jr. analyzes censorship to animation by paralleling two similar episodes in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. He begins "'So Television's Responsible!': Oppositionality and the Interpretative Logic of Satire and Censorship in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*" by also discussing the cartoon with a cartoon feature in both shows, with a similar conclusion to Sloane that these are a vehicle for the writers to speak to the audience in a more direct manner. He writes that the "cartoons-within-cartoons [?] give both general audiences and scholars a fairly reliable indication of how the show's writers and producers want viewers to think about the cultural status of the medium, especially regarding its ideological content" (198).
11. Vincent Brook's "Myth of Consequences: Ideological Fault Lines in *The Simpsons*" used a questionnaire method of his students in an ethnographic survey to argue, based on "Lisa the Iconoclast," to determine that *The Simpsons* requires diversified political or oppositional readings.
12. Matthew Henry's "Looking for Amanda Hugginkiss: Gay Life on *The Simpsons*" discusses one specific politically charged issue - homosexual portrayal, specifically through the character of Waylon Smithers. However, Henry never addresses the sexual orientation of Lenny and Carl, which is ambiguous in the show and should at least be mentioned in a queer theory look at *The Simpsons*. Another episode that has aired since the books printing, but should be included in this discussion, is "Three Gays of the Condo," where Homer moves out and rooms with two homosexual men.
13. In *Leaving Springfield*, one essay in particular addresses specific thematic images in *The Simpsons*. Mick Broderick in "Releasing the Hounds: *The Simpsons* as Anti-Nuclear Satire" analyzes the overriding nuclear imagery within the show. In particular, Broderick elaborates on an episode Henry touches on, "Homer's Phobia," but Broderick specifically points out exact nuclear imagery and subtext. He also discusses one of the comic heroes in the storyline, Radioactive Man and Fallout Boy, his sidekick. Broderick pans back from *The Simpsons* to address television in general in relation to atomic culture and history, as well as nuclear weapons. Like Chow and Sloane, Broderick also uses the episode "Homer's Enemy" for his own particular bent and perspective to address the "foibles of nuclear energy" (252).
14. Duncan Stuart Beard's "Local Satire with a Global Reach: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*" reads the show through "its ironic use of pre-existing mass media stereotypes [?] in order to destabilize them" (273). However, Beard's own personal bias and connection to Australia skews his reading of *Simpsons* episodes that seemingly mock Australia, like "Bart vs. Australia." Most of the other authors in this collection have used stereotypes in *The Simpsons* to show counterculture trends or multiple readings. Beard tries to do this in regards to his reading of Apu, but with his personal connection to Australia, Beard seems to take it too personally and cannot find the multiple

- readings in regards to Australia that he finally concludes with. His conclusions seem disconnected from his commentary and biased analysis.
15. Also, Beard makes an offhanded, incorrect statement that Maggie, "being a baby, does little but suck on a pacifier" (274). Beard tritely blown off an essential member of the family. Koenigsberger also disregards Maggie with his comment that she, "never says more than her first word," a remark he uses as an example of the consistency and unchanging staying power of the Simpsons (45). Yet, just because she sucks on her pacifier and only says one word does not mean she is not a developing or integral character. The only other author in the collection to mention Maggie is Savage who discusses the use of Maggie in "Itchy & Scratchy & Marge" to consider and mock the idea that children repeat everything that they see on TV. In this episode, even though she does not talk, her actions are quite loud.
 16. A weakness of this collection is that it does not address more gender issues and analyze the main or supporting female characters more. The title implies with the possibility of oppositional culture is the aspect of a gender divide. Yet there is not an essay that specifically addresses the major female characters and their roles. The only essay that uses a gender approach, Chow's essay, analyses Homer in respect to gender, consumption and consumerism. The lack of analysis in regards to the female members of Springfield is decisively missing.
 17. While the collection lacks a feminine study of *The Simpsons*, the text does include several reoccurring themes that come up in numerous essays. Even though each essay analyzes the show from its own theoretical lens, there are several episodes, theorists, and themes that overlap. Numerous thematic tendencies reoccur in several essays that look at the current state of *The Simpsons*. The most consist theme in several essays consists of an analysis, or at least an addressing of the self-reflexive nature of TV culture in which the *Simpsons*, a TV program, watches and interacts with their own TV and its contents. Chow cites Jim Collin's essay "Postmodernism and Television" for a definition of the term hyperconsciousness, a similar stance as self-reflexive where the program is aware of itself as a television show. Particularly, the cartoon within the cartoon, *The Itchy & Scratchy Show* reflects the Simpsons and is used by the writers to suggest of possible reading of the episode or to more directly interact with their fan base. However, the essays that address the self-reflexive or hyperconscious nature of *The Simpsons* neglect to mention episodes when the Simpsons themselves are on TV, such "Helter Shelter" where they participate in a reality TV show set in 1895. These episodes also provide an opportunity, even more poignant that *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*, in which the writers can specifically address their audience and the Simpsons family can reflect on being on TV.
 18. Questions of high and low brow cultural in regards to the aspect of commodity run throughout the essays. This idea of commodity and power relate to Douglas Rushkoff's idea of the media virus. Rushkoff's brief essay "Bart Simpson: Prince

of Irreverence" concludes the collection, while also penetrating the who collection with his overarching theory of the media virus, where "media events provok[e] real social change" (301). Rushkoff claims that Bart "launch[es] his own media virus," but the collection as a whole agrees that *The Simpsons* television program itself acts as a positive media virus through politically charged, oppositional writing (298).