Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of The Simpsons

It's an odd thing when a cartoon series is praised as one of the most trenchant and "realistic" programs on TV, but there you are.

— Josh Ozersky, media critic (quoted in Ozersky 11)

It's just a cartoon. People shouldn't pay that much attention to a cartoon.

— Andy Schulze, fifteen year old (quoted in Shahid, "Hey, Dude")

Few television programs exemplify 1990s media like The Simpsons—popular culture sensation, marketing phenomenon, generic mixture, (alleged) embodiment of postmodernism, and representative of the post-Fordist network era. Yet before celebrating (or critiquing) the show as the program of the decade, I believe we must stop and examine some of the assumptions that have been made about 1990s media and postmodern culture. Specifically, The Simpsons provides a valuable case study to examine issues of niche marketing, genre mixing, and postmodernism that mark our understanding of contemporary media. In order to discuss these issues, I will focus on how The Simpsons's generic status affected its larger cultural circulation. I contend that the show's genre mixing is crucial to understanding the program and that genre has had deeper and more significant ramifications than one might presume by following the typical approaches to genre study, namely, identifying generic definitions and meanings. Instead, by conceptualizing genre as a discursive process of categorization and hierarchization, rather than as a core textual component (a theoretical move I discuss below), we might be able to view the cultural workings of genre as it relates to television programming such as The Simpsons. Specifically, I want to focus on how genre impacts The Simpsons regarding issues of cultural hierarchies, assumptions about target audiences, codes of realism, and the implications of genre parody, all of which can add to our understanding of contemporary media landscapes.

Before offering a generic analysis of The Simpsons, we must reconcile how to approach a program that is often labeled "postmodernist," a term that has implied generic transcendence for many critics (see Perloff for examples of this argument). Postmodernism, as might befit its theoretical pedigree, is a slippery signifier, producing new meanings and implications practically every time the word is spoken or cited. Instead of weighing in as to whether The Simpsons should be viewed as postmodernist or not, I wish to question the term's value in studying The Simpsons and 1990s media culture. How will labeling the show "postmodern" better our understanding of either the text or its cultural context and circulation? Most critics who have lauded The Simpsons as an example of postmodern media call attention to its hyper-referential and self-awareness. Jim Collins labels an instance of Bart watching his own Macy's Thanksgiving Parade float on television "emblematic of a postmodern textuality" (335–36). Likewise, Matthew Henry points to the show's "shattering of the fictional illusion" as fulfilling one of postmodernism's "prerequisites"; he exemplifies this point with an episode's opening sequence in which the family runs into the living room, overshoots, and ends up off the frame of the "film" and into the realm of sprocket holes (95). Yet to celebrate these aspects of the program as indicative of postmodernism...
ignores some substantial continuities within media history. As John Caldwell suggests, Simpson-style reflexivity and intertextuality have been features of television comedy since its first decade. Caldwell cites numerous examples such as the oft-mentioned Ernie Kovacs Show and Burns and Allen Show but also less notably reflexive shows like Texaco Star Theater, Your Show of Shows, and I Love Lucy (23). For Caldwell, if the textual practices that typify postmodernism have run throughout television history, there is little benefit to such a label that cannot effectively demarcate the medium's historical eras or aesthetic movements.

However, the textual ancestry of The Simpsons predates even television, as it is certainly part of a longer tradition of animated film. Reflexivity has always been a defining component of animated shorts, dating back as early as 1914's Gertie the Dinosaur—definitely prepostmodern. Donald Crafton has argued that the early years of animation were marked by the central tendency of "self-figuration, the tendency of the filmmaker to interject himself into his film," an aesthetic technique that has recently been hailed as typically postmodern but clearly predates any claims for a postmodern era (Before Mickey, 11). Later animation in the 1930s and 1940s was well known for its reflexivity and self-awareness, regularly breaking down the artifice and illusion of the medium; these techniques are most often tied to Tex Avery's work but were also employed by nearly every animation studio in Hollywood. Even the specific example Henry uses from The Simpsons to typify the show's postmodern tendencies is in itself a specific allusion to 1953's Duck Amuck, Chuck Jones's celebrated deconstruction of Daffy Duck's animated universe. I thus regard these claims to The Simpsons's postmodern textual aesthetic with skepticism, as the very same techniques that are hailed as typically postmodern have clear roots in the show's generic precursors.

Another aspect of postmodernism that bears direct relevance upon our understanding of The Simpsons, especially regarding the show's generic status, is the role of parody in textual practice.1 There is little question that parody is an operative mode within The Simpsons, but the scholarly implications of this parody are less clear. Does the show's use of parody make the program emblematically postmodern or an anachronistically modernist relic? One way of resolving the debate is to consult the vast scholarship concerning parody and postmodernism. We might look to Fredric Jameson's oft-cited nomination of pastiche as postmodern "blank parody"—parody without the critical edge of satire typical to modernist works (16–19). Alternatively, we could consider Linda Hutcheon's discussion of postmodernist "ambivalent parody" that both follows and ridicules a genre's conventions (A Poetics). Holding up these definitions of postmodern parody to The Simpsons, we might be able to itemize the elements of the show's parodic tendencies and label it postmodern or not according to these (or other) schemas. But so what? How does this really further our understanding of the text or its cultural life?

This is not to say that parody is not a vital aspect of The Simpsons; I will return to this topic as I investigate the show's mode of genre mixing. However, I see little point in locating the program's use of parody within larger trends of postmodernism—this usage does not correlate with the categories that either producers or audiences use to make sense of the text. It is more productive to analyze media in actual cultural circulation than theoretical abstraction. After all, what does it matter to our goal of understanding the cultural life of The Simpsons that it is (or is not) "postmodern" according to one definition? If "postmodern" were an active term that many critics, audiences, and producers used to make sense of the program, then it might be worth further inquiry. However, the only audience that uses this label to understand The Simpsons is academics (and just a small group at that). Unless we are interested in charting the discursive reception of the show within academic circles (which is not my project here), the postmodern label seems unnecessary to this analysis. In fact, I view it as a hindrance, as there is a common assumption that postmodern texts transcend genre definitions through radical eclecticism and boundary blurring.2 I contend that The Simpsons as well as other generically mixed and parodic texts often labeled postmodern activate genre categories more than so-called pure genre texts, a position I explore below through the intersection of the program and television genres.

If we want to study genre and The Simpsons, what is it exactly that we should examine? I would like to propose a number of questions concerning television genre that we must consider if we are to understand the circulation of The Simpsons more fully. How does the show work in relation to the family sitcom genre? How does
it work as an animated cartoon? How do audiences and critics make sense of the show’s generic mixing? How are the conventions of each genre tied to assumptions of “proper” subject matter and audience? How are the multiple genres of The Simpsons configured within cultural hierarchies and norms? How does The Simpsons’s use of genre parody complicate its generic position? How might scholars approach these questions of genre regarding a generically complex and mixed program such as The Simpsons? Finally, what are the ultimate implications of genre for The Simpsons as well as the implications of The Simpsons for television genre study? To answer questions such as these, we need to revise our notions of genre and how we might study generic practices.

While I explore these theoretical issues of television genres in more depth elsewhere, I wish to briefly lay out a model of examining genres as cultural categories (see Mittell, “A Cultural Approach”). Rather than just looking at genres as collections of textual conventions or core meanings, I believe we should examine genres as culturally circulating sets of practices that work to categorize television texts and link together various cultural assumptions. Following the work of Rick Altman, Robert Allen, Steve Neale, and Ralph Cohen (“History and Genre”), I consider genres as cultural categories in process. Instead of looking at genre as a static category that may be precisely defined, I examine the processes of definition that are constantly undertaken by audiences and industries regarding genres. Instead of interpreting the meaning of genres as expressed within the deep structure of narrative texts, I look at the discursive meanings that are culturally articulated to both narrative and non-narrative genres and that are under negotiation within specific historic moments. Instead of assessing the cultural values expressed by genres, I look at how generic categories are culturally evaluated and tied to important hierarchies that situate genres within power relations. In short, I look at genres as dynamic cultural categories, comprised of discursive practices of definition, interpretation, and evaluation and constituted through the interactions between texts, industries, audiences, and contexts.

Rather than offering a more detailed theorization of this approach to genre here, I will explain my method through an applied case study. To examine the generic processes of definition, interpretation, and evaluation that are intertwined with the numerous genre categories running through The Simpsons, I have examined a variety of discursive sites, including popular press reviews, editorial commentaries, trade journal accounts, interviews with creative personnel, and academic critiques. I focus on the program’s early years, as the show’s initial novelty and controversial reception led to intense discussions and debates on how to make sense of this program. Through an analysis of these discursive sites, I will explore the competing uses of generic terms such as sitcom, cartoon, animation, and parody. I am not trying to arrive at the “proper” categorization of the show through this analysis; instead, I want to examine the discursive operation of genre surrounding the cultural life of The Simpsons to see how notions of genre helped constitute a framework of understanding for this unusual and controversial program and how this show is exemplary of 1990s media practices.

Generic Discourses and The Simpsons

It is obvious to even the most casual or inexperienced television viewer that The Simpsons is on some level a mixture of domestic sitcom and animated cartoon. It is hardly worth the effort to attempt to prove this categorical combination via either textual analysis or discursive examination. However, while it may be clear what genres the show draws upon, it is not always clear what the ramifications of this generic mixing are. How does this generic cross-fertilization affect the viewer? How do audiences make sense of these two genres in tandem? What meanings of the genres do they see at play within the show? What historical predecessors are linked to the program within both genres? How do these genres establish a framework of understanding for The Simpsons that impacts how the show has been figured as a cultural object? By looking at the critical discourse and press coverage of the show’s emergence, we can address these questions and point to the larger consequences of the program’s generic mixing in action. Specifically, I will focus on the ramifications of the show’s generic processes as they concern issues of cultural hierarchies, implications of target audience, codes of realism, and notions of parody. In exploring the discourses circulating around the emergence of The Simpsons, I am not offering a detailed reception study per se but instead engage in a contextual analysis of the program’s
circulation and larger cultural life beyond the text itself. Thus my use of critics and press commentaries is not meant to stand in for the audience at large but rather to point out how the program became activated within broader cultural circulation. Audience members might have drawn upon these contextual frameworks, but I am not arguing that they necessarily are typical of broader reading strategies.

Critics regularly label The Simpsons a sitcom first and foremost. As advertising executive Betsy Frank suggests, “[T]hat’s absolutely all that it is—a situation comedy that happens to be animated” (quoted in Williams). But what specific visions of this wide-ranging genre are put forward? The press discourse surrounding the program regularly evokes the domestic family sitcom tradition: television critic Tom Shales calls the Simpson family “the flip, dark side of the Nelsons, the Andersons, the Bradys and all other sitcom families from the dawn of television” (“The Prime's Time”). A celebration of the program in Time magazine suggests that the family “seem[s] to be a typical sitcom family—the Honeymooners with kids, the Flintstones in suburbia—with typically outlandish dilemmas to face and resolve each week” (“Simpsons Forever!”). Another critic specifically notes the antecedent of The Simpsons’s hometown: “When The Simpsons first went on the air, viewers and critics alike were surprised that the show had exhume[d] one of television’s hoariest formulas: a sitcom, albeit animated, about a blue-collar family living in a standard-brand American suburb, and not just any old suburb but a town called Springfield, just like the locale of Father Knows Best, the blithely Utopian sitcom of the 1950s” (Morgenstern). Some contemporary sitcom examples also stand in opposition to The Simpsons: “The slightly skewed perspective of The Simpsons makes them a far more human and believable family than such carefully conceived, endlessly responsible TV facsimiles as the Huxtables, the Keatons, et al.” (Lewis).

This family sitcom ancestry is echoed in quotations from production personnel: creator Matt Groening noted, “[A]t an early age I was most strongly affected by Leave It to Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet. [The Simpsons] is my skewed reaction to those shows.” Even as he asserts the importance of these previous sources, Groening asserts the show’s violations of the genre’s conventions: “[T]he show has all the elements of its live-action family-oriented prototypes, with a twist” (quoted in Mason). Specifically, Groening notes that, unlike the sitcom tradition of limited numbers of characters and settings, the show’s animated form gives the writers and animators freedom to open the genre outward from the typical domestic setting. Thus he suggests that the show is “a hallucination of a sitcom” or “a sitcom, but there’s no ’sit’” (quoted in O’Connor; see also Clark). As I will discuss below, the specifics of the show’s blending complicate easy definitions of a single generic tradition.

Other critics specifically link The Simpsons to a more recent trend within the domestic sitcom genre. While wholesome programs like The Cosby Show and Family Ties were among the genre’s most popular incarnations in the 1980s, the most successful new sitcoms of the late eighties and early nineties constituted a backlash against this vision of the successful and happy American family. Typically, critics pointed to the highly popular (and controversial) triumvirate of Married . . . with Children, Roseanne, and The Simpsons as representing “a new development of the situation comedy. Each program . . . focuses on a family marked by visual styles and characterization as bleak and miserable as those of former TV families had been handsome or cheerful” (Ozersky 11; see also Berkman). One TV Guide reader characterized this phenomenon more aptly than any critic by suggesting that such “antifamily” backlash is typical whenever “there’s an abundance of family sitcoms”—whether it is Roseanne as a response to Growing Pains in the 1980s or The Addams Family and The Munsters turning the 1960s family into literal monsters (see Pierce).

Critics also focus on The Simpsons’s place within the genre of television animation or cartoons. The discursive difference between “animation” and “cartoon” is significant. “Animation” works as a fairly neutral term, connoting a technological process and visual technique. “Cartoon,” on the other hand, is more loaded, implying predominantly a children’s (or childish) audience, whimsical content, and questionable social value, having been linked to notions of Saturday morning cartoons since the 1960s. Thus even though critics regularly use the term cartoon to describe The Simpsons, they often have to qualify it with additional markers of legitimacy or clarification. Hence critics label the show a “cartoon family show,” a “half-hour adult cartoon series,” the most multi-layered cartoon since Rocky & Bullwinkle, and “more than a cartoon, it’s TV’s most intelligent comedy” (Zoglin, “The Fox Trots Faster”; David; “From Toddlers to Teens”;
Siegel). Clearly, critics are working against dominant meanings of cartoons as just “kid’s stuff” and unsophisticated entertainment by citing the show’s intelligence and quality in the face of the low expectations of the cartoon genre.

Critics point to how the show successfully aspires to levels generally reserved for live-action programming to counter the traditional hierarchy that places all things live over all things animated. One critic labels the show “a prime-time cartoon series that’s livelier and more vividly human than most live-action shows” (Morgenstern). Another dismisses the question “too much fuss over a cartoon show?” by citing the show’s openness to “interpretive calisthenics,” its high level of “topical satire,” and numerous “cultural references,” all attributes that legitimate the program in the face of cultural stigmas against animation (Shales, *The Simpsons: They’re Scrapping Again*). Even an adolescent audience member asserts this hierarchy by denying the show’s cartooniness: “It’s not really like a cartoon... but that makes it better” (Shakia Jackson quoted in Anderson). However, the cartoon’s pejorative qualities and low cultural status are never far from the surface, as one critic describes the show’s wild success and ensuing controversy and notes, “[T]he whole thing’s totally improbable: we’re talking about a half-hour cartoon” (Waters, “Family Feuds”).

We do see an indication of these hierarchies’ origins within press discourse as well. One USA Today article interviews animation historian Charles Solomon regarding the success of *The Simpsons* with all age groups:

> We tend to forget that what we think of as the great cartoons—the Warner Brothers cartoons of the ’40s and ’50s, the Disney cartoons of the ’30s—were made for general audiences and could appeal to the most sophisticated member of the audience as well as the least. During the ’60s and ’70s, animation became stereotyped as a children’s medium because of Saturday morning, which was a distortion. There’s always been a big audience for animation, and this is one of the first projects that’s been sophisticated enough in its approach to once again appeal to adults as well as to children.

(Quoted in Shahid, “*The Simpsons*”)

Solomon’s argument has been borne out, as numerous other animated programs followed *The Simpsons* to succeed with an adult audience (*Beavis & Butthead, Dr. Katz, King of the Hill,* and *South Park*). The rise of the Cartoon network as a highly successful twenty-four-hour exhibition site of animated programming, airing the very same animated shows that were once stigmatized as “just” children’s programming on Saturday morning, further suggests the constitutive role of industrial practices in defining a genre’s audience.

*The Simpsons* is often explicitly contrasted with Saturday morning programming. One critic praises *The Simpsons* compared to a characterization of the genre in 1990: “cartoons are either toy-oriented syndicated strips or huggable Saturday morning specials where a real crisis occurs when a bear loses his sweater” (Horn). Groening echoes these sentiments: “[I]f there’s anything this show has to overcome, it’s adults considering it just another one of those crummy cartoons on TV” (quoted in Scheffelman). Just as he cites *Ozzie & Harriet* as a formative text for *The Simpsons*, he names *Rocky & Bullwinkle* and other Jay Ward programs (like *George of the Jungle*) as the only previous examples of successful television cartoons to combine animated form and sophisticated humor (Anderson). *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, prime-time animated sitcoms, are often mentioned as key predecessors, but *The Simpsons* is generally held up as more sophisticated and critical of both its sitcom and animated form, “an anti–Flintstones cartoon” (Reese). Thus while the show draws on a wide range of sitcom ancestors as satirical fodder, it has a more distant relationship with most previous cartoons.

The show’s creators offer a number of textual instances of *The Simpsons* working against cartoon traditions. Executive producer James L. Brooks notes some of the benefits of the animated form, such as the ease of changing “locations” and including many characters, but adds, “[D]ucks won’t talk... But little girls will play great blues on the saxophone! And women will have their money hidden in their hair” (quoted in Shales, “The Primest Time”). Thus while the world portrayed on *The Simpsons* refuses to violate certain codes of realism, it does take advantage of its animated form in ways that a live-action show simply could not manage or afford. Groening further suggests, “[T]here’s a rule in drawing *The Simpsons* that they can never go cross-eyed, like all those cartoon characters on Saturday morning” (quoted in Morgenstern). Elsewhere, he remarks that “we’re the only cartoon show where, when people hit the ground, they actually get bruised and bloody” (quoted
Finally, he points to other typical genre conventions that The Simpsons violates: “[T]he characters’ heads do not get crushed by anvils. Their eyeballs do not pop out of their heads, and their jaws do not drop to the ground. Also, we have no laugh track” (quoted in Scheffelman). Thus Groening suggests how the show ignores particular conventions of both animation and sitcom genres.

The key exception to the rules Groening and Brooks offer is, of course, the show’s cartoon within the cartoon, The Itchy & Scratchy Show. A direct parody of Tom & Jerry as well as other classic chase cartoons, Itchy & Scratchy works to bring the cartoon’s generic conventions to the forefront, highlighting how The Simpsons as a whole abandons them. Paul Cantor offers a compelling explanation:

If you are going to distinguish a cartoon within a cartoon, you must raise its cartoonicity to a higher power. In Itchy & Scratchy, anything that is not pure cartoon has been ruthlessly stripped away to leave us facing the meaninglessness and gratuitous violence that is the quintessence of cartoon...The total flatness of the cat-and-mouse world gives a rounded quality to the world of the Simpson family, and the humans no longer seem quite so cartoonish.

Cantor’s analysis points to the strategic use of certain generic conventions within Itchy & Scratchy that not only allow it to parody typical cartoons but further separate The Simpsons as a whole from the connotative links to mindless children’s entertainment that the cartoon genre has accrued over the years on television.

The case of Itchy & Scratchy points us toward important issues of parody and genre mixing. Before getting into the specificities of parody and The Simpsons, we should consider the ways in which critics frame the program as a generic mixture. As already suggested, critics often point to the show’s dual generic identity, but we should consider how they see the dual genres in relation to one another. Not surprisingly, the sitcom is noted more as the object of the show’s satire, while the animated form becomes the vehicle for undermining the more typical sitcom genre. One critic called The Simpsons “the Antichrist of television sitcoms, with no surrender to tedious convention. The animated form unshackled the producers and opened the series to wild flights of irreverent fantasy” (Carman). Critics also note the simultaneous rebellion against typical animation techniques as well: “[T]he script is wickedly anti-sitcom; the animation is viciously unDisneylike” (Lichfield). Another critic notes its violation of both genres: “[S]ophisticated and satirical dialogue ensures that the humour is not typical of a cartoon series and unlike other cartoons, the characters are not cute and lovable. The producers deliberately avoided a ‘sitcom’ feel and the script has been described as, ‘like Woody Allen writing for the Road Runner’” (Hetherington).

The two major effects of the show’s generic mixture concern the breadth of the show’s target audience and the paradox of realism. The issues of target audience and genre are explicitly and inextricably linked—genres are often defined (especially industrially) by whom their audiences are surmised to be, such as soap operas as dramas for housewives or sports as magnets that deliver men to advertisers. The sitcom traditionally has been a mass format that appeals to all demographic groupings; the domestic sitcom has been specifically framed as entertainment “for the whole family.” The genre has often been more targeted than this—think of the early 1970s rise of urban “quality” sitcoms (like All in the Family and Mary Tyler Moore) as part of the turn toward a younger, more urban, and more affluent audience than the rural fans of The Beverly Hillbillies and Green Acres. But there is no traditional linkage of the sitcom as a whole with any narrow group beyond general notions of “family entertainment.”

The cartoon has been far more bound to specific audiences in its history on television, with the genre clearly marked as children’s programming. As the earlier quotation from Solomon suggests, however, this has not always been the case. The same animated short films that entertained mass audiences in 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s cinemas became redefined as “kids’ stuff” following the industrial shifts that took shorts out of theaters in the 1950s and onto Saturday morning television in the 1960s. There is nothing inherently “childish” about the animation genre in terms of textual form—most cartoons from this era were created for adult senses of humor and contain many references that sail above children’s heads. But the genre and the Warner Bros. (among other studios) animated texts that found themselves in both of these two contrasting eras of animation took on new meanings through these industrial practices. Hence we must look to the genre’s assumed appropriate audiences in the discourses of industrial practices that place shows
on the television schedule and commentators and critics who work to situate programming within frameworks of comprehension for their readership.

*The Simpsons,* as noted in nearly every mention of the program in 1990, was the first network prime-time cartoon since *The Flintstones* shifted to Saturday mornings in 1966.

Groening often relates the troubles of getting a prime-time cartoon on the air, as network executives were reluctant to target only kids but also assumed that adults would not watch a cartoon. He was given his chance primarily because Brooks had a successful track record, and Fox’s fringe position in the late 1980s allowed it to take significant risks in hopes of unexpected payoffs. Additionally, in the late 1980s Groening had introduced the characters in short segments on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (Fox), a program with a narrow but dedicated following among a sophisticated adult audience. *The Simpsons* debuted on Sunday nights at 8:30 eastern standard time, a time slot that Shales suggests is typically conducive to “family fare” more than any other night of the week ("The Primetime Time"). *The Simpsons* succeeded beyond all expectations, providing Fox with its first top ten ratings hit and crossing demographic boundaries to reach “a huge and still-expanding audience of little kids, trend-wise teens and hip adults” (Morgenstern). The program had a huge initial college following and successfully merchandised to children and adults alike (Cary; Ozersky 11).

As is now clear, the program transcended the expectations of the cartoon genre, reaching the broad-based audience more typical of the sitcom. But how did critics make sense of the show in terms of its target audience? Most reviewers insisted that *The Simpsons* was intelligent, clever, and sophisticated, moving the program away from typical preconceptions about animation. As the show progressed, ratings and widespread merchandising demonstrated that the program was drawing a significant audience among young children as well, prompting a quick backlash. People who opposed the show’s cynicism, satiric edge, or representations of Bart’s mischief critiqued the reasons that kids were watching. One editorial argued, “*The Simpsons* is really an adult program whose cynical message appeals to people bored with conventional programs on other channels. Because the program is a cartoon and is broadcast early in the evening, it attracts many children” (“Bad Bart”). This editorial draws upon generic assumptions tied to animation to critique the show’s “adult” content and representations of disruptive children and troubled families, implying that cartoons should stick to their place—fringe programming times and unchallenging, nonconfrontational content.

More enthusiastic critics offered differing views for the show’s popularity with kids: “*The Simpsons* is an unusual-for-TV, kid’s-eye-view of the world, managing to tap genuine emotions and experiences, from violent video games to the euphoria of learning that school’s been canceled by the season’s first heavy snow. Yes, this is that rare series about kids that is written by people you can envision actually having been kids” (Rosenberg).

*Newsweek*’s Harry Waters offered, “[T]here’s little mystery to why the saga of the Simpsons enthralls the young. The series shamelessly panders to a kid’s-eye view of the world: parents dispense dozy advice, school is a drag and happiness can be attained only by subverting the system.” He goes on to suggest that children view the program as “real,” a position that he juxtaposes with more adult views of the program as hip and sophisticated. Another critic summed it up by arguing that the show “appeals to kids who like cartoons, to intellectuals who like satire ... and to thugs who like a troublemaking hero” (Hughes).

Even as critics looked for ways to explain the show’s appeal to diverse audiences, Groening insisted that they were writing for adults, not kids. He went on to assert the particular brand of family entertainment that *The Simpsons* offered: “I like to think it’s something that’s going to be family entertainment in a new sense. It’s going to offer something for every member of the family, depending upon whatever level they’re going to meet the show. Adults are going to enjoy the witty dialogue and the funny story turns and kids are going to enjoy some of the wild sight gags” (quoted in Clark). Brooks similarly noted that “we finally found out what ‘family entertainment’ is, or should be. I’ve sat there watching the show with my folks and my young children and we all laughed at different things. I like that” (quoted in Shales, “*The Simpsons*: They’re Scrapping Again”). Clearly, the show’s producers conceived of a broad audience, even if they were (at least initially) aiming for the adults and were happy to pick up the kids without effort.

But while Fox was certainly ecstatic to be able to reach such a broad audience, enabling the fledgling network to establish itself as a legitimate contender, *The*
Simpsons's broad reach spurred a number of controversies. The program debuted to critical praise and high ratings but soon became the target of critics and commentators who decried the show's "antifamily" content and questioned this prime-time cartoon's suitability for children. The show's success generated a wave of marketing and merchandising, but just as Bart Simpson T-shirts became ubiquitous in elementary schools across the United States, new debates emerged as to whether "Underachiever and Proud of It" was an appropriate slogan for American youth, leading to school bans and public outcry. Given these critical discussions surrounding the show's audience base, what are the linkages between these controversies, the program's assumed target audiences, and the role of genre in the cultural life of The Simpsons?

Notions of the "proper" audience for a given program, as often tied to the show's genre, are cited and mobilized in a variety of ways to further specific positions surrounding such cultural controversies. Thus the above-quoted anti-Simpsons editorial cites the "cartoon-for-kids" assumption to criticize the show's rebellious characterizations and cynical attitude as inappropriate. Another writer suggests that the program is primarily a satirical critique of family politics and that his kids "misinterpret" the show as a celebration of Bart's actions; thus their cartoonocentric appeals are "misplaced," even though the show's adult appeals are held up as admirable (Tommy Dentine quoted in Glynn 66–67). Finally, a mother of a child whose school banned Bart T-shirts directly criticizes the controversy in generic terms: "They're blowing it way out of proportion. It's only a cartoon ... To me, it's comical" ("Principal Expels Bart Simpson"). For this viewer, the show's genre serves to locate the program both as appropriate for children and as not worthy of "serious" cultural consideration.

As these three examples demonstrate, there is nothing inherent in the genre to suggest that cartoons have particular meanings, appeals to audiences, or even proper viewers. They each use the same claim to "cartoonishness" to further quite different arguments. Since The Simpsons is often labeled a cartoon and thus appropriate viewing for kids, viewers can alternately use these assumptions to support both adult anxiety over the show's rebellious attitude and the perceived ridiculousness of this anxiety over what is culturally positioned as an "insignificant" form of entertainment. Viewers and critics use the generic history of animation and its ensuing linkages with children's programming to situate the program within hierarchies of taste and cultural value. Just as some voices label The Simpsons a cartoon to call for greater industrial responsibility in targeting its assumed childish audience, others use the low cultural value of animation to dismiss moral concerns over such an inherently unrealistic and fantastic (and therefore culturally harmless) genre. But this latter notion of "only a cartoon" needs to be expanded on more fully, as numerous critics and audience members highlight the show's realism—a trait that seems to directly contradict dismissive remarks about the irrelevance of a cartoon—as one of the defining and pleasurable features of The Simpsons as a generic mixture.

As suggested in this essay's epigraphs, there is a certain ironic paradox in The Simpsons's "realistic" vision of the American family as achieved through the traditionally antirealist mode of animation. In discussing the notion of realism concerning The Simpsons, I use the term not as an uncritical and uncontested concept but as a marker of struggle that audiences, industries, and critics mobilize to further their points. Realism has long been a topic of debate within media studies, as the term is marked by both a variety of definitions and assumed ideological impacts. Rather than arguing whether the show is realistic or not, I examine the ways discourses of realism became articulated to the cartoon genre surrounding The Simpsons, as critics point to this paradox as key to the show's success. In discussing Barbara Bush's negative reaction to the program, one critic calls the show an "all-too-real TV cartoon series" (Radcliffe). Shailes notes that "they are funny-mirror reflections of what's weird and askew in American society, characters who have achieved a level of affection beyond that of most sitcoms performed by mere mortals" ("The Simpsons: They're Scrapping Again"). Another critic suggests that "the animation disguises the fact that it consists of what we laughingly call in TV 'adult humor.' It is the most serious program we have about family relationships, the decline of education, the failure of parents, and the fact that kids today are no damn good" (Kitman). Perhaps most interestingly of all, a survey of schoolchildren in Australia voted The Simpsons "the most realistic program on TV after the news" (Flew 19).
This paradox of animated realism becomes more explicit when *The Simpsons* is compared to other live-action programs. One common comparison is to *The Cosby Show*, specifically motivated by Fox's decision to program *The Simpsons* directly opposite *The Cosby Show* in the 1990 fall schedule. This clear juxtaposition—between a live-action family that embodies nearly impossible to realize economic achievements (especially exceptional for an African-American family) and few real-life counterparts and an animated family whose socioeconomic situation and emotional tenor looked more real to viewers—provoked numerous commentaries. "Johnny Carson observed in a monologue that even though the idealized Huxtables on *The Cosby Show* are played by flesh-and-blood humans and the Simpsons are mere cartoon characters, *The Simpsons* seems more realistic. Family life at the Simpson home probably reminds more families of their own households than do the relatively homogenized antics of the Huxtable clan" (Shales, "The Simpsons: They're Scrapping Again"). Similarly, an article quotes a street vendor selling bootlegged Bart T-shirts: "Cosby is the way it is supposed to be. *The Simpsons* is the way it really is—that's life" (Walters). Thus even though some of the cartoonish goings-on in Springfield might be somewhat unpredictable and unusual, many found the perfect family life of a black doctor and lawyer more inexplicable in contemporary American culture.

*The Simpsons* is also described as more real than its cohort of "anti-family" sitcoms in the early-1990s. "Gross and funny in roughly equal measure, *Married...With Children* turns the TV family into a vicious cartoon. *The Simpsons*, a real cartoon, is actually much closer to recognizable human life" (Zoglin, "Home" 86). Another critic similarly suggests that *Married's* Bundys, "like all sitcom characters, aspire to the televisial purity of cartoon characters, but are stuck in rubbery bags of protoplasm with nothing but one-liners and a laugh track to hide behind. The Simpsons, oddly, are freer than other TV families to act human" (Ozersky 14). Groening himself points to *Married's* more outrageous "cartoonish" take on the family while claiming that *The Simpsons* moves away from outrageousness in exchange for "a family that is desperately trying to be normal" (quoted in Sullivan). Other critics compare *The Simpsons* to *Roseanne* as well and conclude that the animated family is more revealing and realistic than the Conners (Elm; Berkman 68–69). But how might we explain this seeming paradox of a cartoon being hailed as highly realistic, in spite of the genre's strong tradition of violating codes of realism?

Groening points to certain strategies that the producers employ in creating *The Simpsons*: "I think the show delivers on our goal, which is to tell stories that people can connect to, that are funny and actually have some sort of emotional resonance you don't expect in a cartoon. We don't go for laughs for laughs' sake; we really are trying to tell stories that make you forget from time to time you're watching a cartoon" (quoted in Rense 106). Executive producer Sam Simon credits James Brooks for his "marching orders to do a show based on the emotional inner lives of its cartoon characters, and that's really never been done before" (Schembri). Thus despite their animated form, the characters are as (if not more) three-dimensional as those on most sitcoms. But since they are "only cartoons," the writers can heap indignities and trauma upon them without making audiences feel bad for the characters. As Solomon suggests, "[If] they were too real, you'd become too sympathetic and too sensitive about their feelings. But because they're obviously not real people, you can exaggerate and make things funnier without feeling any pain" (quoted in Shahid, "The Simpsons").

Dave Berkman furthers this argument, suggesting that unlike *Roseanne*'s visual realism of working-class struggles, "there is an even more devastating reality to *The Simpsons*, one which succeeds only because, as a stylized cartoon, it is visually unreal" (69). He goes on to itemize the ways in which *The Simpsons* breaks the taboos of American television, portraying the threats of nuclear power, the negative effects of excessive television viewing, and the "deceits perpetuated by American education"—aspects of reality that can only be seen on television when rendered by a team of cartoonists. Whereas the standard sitcom traditionally reaffirms the family through its weekly restoration of equilibrium, *The Simpsons* works within its cartoon form to pose problems, more akin to those of real life, that simply cannot be solved within a half-hour. The show then regularly solves these very problems in spite of itself, demonstrating both the artificiality of the sitcom tradition and the power of animation to represent "realities" that cannot be captured in a three-camera studio or before a live audience.
One of the many examples of this dual use and abuse of the sitcom formula is the episode “King-Size Homer.” The far-fetched premise of this episode is that in order to qualify for disability benefits, thus allowing him to stay home instead of going to work at the nuclear power plant, Homer gains sixty-one pounds to become medically obese. Once this goal is achieved, Homer both revels in his governmentally enabled flexibility and experiences discrimination as an overweight person. Throughout the course of the episode, Homer’s weight gains and subsequent treatment of his “disability” both violate the decorum of the normal sitcom and express the flexibility of the animated format to represent that which would be unfeasible for a live-action program, drawing upon the convention of cartoon size changing paradigmatically expressed in Tex Avery’s *King-Size Canary*.

The show’s resolution highlights (and underscores) the sitcom’s need to restore equilibrium, relocating the show firmly in the realm of the sitcom while simultaneously parodying the genre’s conventions. Homer’s negligence in performing his job duties from home—he goes to a movie matinee, leaving his computer terminal, which monitors the nuclear power plant’s safety, unattended—causes a potential meltdown, a typical dig that questions the nuclear power industry in a way that most live-action shows could not politically sustain. He ends up saving the day by falling to his seeming death into the exploding nuclear tank, though his enlarged size gets him stuck in the tank’s vent, thus scaling the rupture and averting the crisis. As Lisa notes, “I think it’s ironic that Dad saved the day while a slimmer man would have fallen to his death,” highlighting the typical machinations of the sitcom’s pat narrative resolution. Finally, in order to restore the show’s situation to its beginning equilibrium, Mr. Burns agrees to pay for a liposuction to restore Homer to his normal 239-pound size in time for next week’s episode. Thus *The Simpsons* works to strategically assert the conventions of its sitcom genre while simultaneously parodying the assumptions the genre typically requires. This type of explicit generic parody and reference is typical of other episodes as well, with common allusions to the lack of continuity between episodes and the characters’ loss of memory of past events.

This combination of both denial and exaggeration of the norms of the sitcom form suggests the ways in which *The Simpsons* uses parody to define itself generically. Linda Hutcheon has argued that we should look to parody not just as a textual element or formal attribute but as a “pragmatic” component of texts in their cultural encoding and decoding (*A Theory*). Thus the parodic realism of *The Simpsons* emerges not only in the text but also in the interpretative insights of critics attempting to make sense of the show. One critic notes, “[T]hey are caricatures, not just of us, but of us in our national delusion that the life of the sitcom family is the way things are ‘supposed’ to be” (McConnell 390). Similarly, another argues, “*The Simpsons* is satire. Rather than engage in the pretentious misrepresentation of family life that one finds in the ‘model family’ shows (from *The Donna Reed Show* to *The Cosby Show*), this program admits that most parents aren’t perfect” (Rebeck). The program’s realism emerges not in its adherence to norms of live-action programming but from its parodic dismantling of unreal live-action sitcom conventions.

Parody surfaces in the debate surrounding the show’s legitimacy for children as well. Peggy Charren, president of Action for Children’s Television, defends the show on satirical grounds; she suggests that principals who banned Bart’s image from school would probably interpret Jonathan Swift’s classic satire “A Modest Proposal” as a legitimate cause to worry about child abuse (Arnold). At the other extreme, a writer described how his children watched the show, unaware that it was parody. He claims that after he intervened by teaching them to understand the show’s “proper” parodic framework, they stopped watching the show because they disliked thinking of the show as satire, ultimately supporting his claim that it was not well suited to children (quoted in Glynn 67). *The Simpsons*’s parody, and an audience’s “failure” to interpret it as such, can serve both to argue for the show’s inappropriateness for kids and to refute such age-based condemnations of the program.

Through parodic conventions such as caricature and hyperexaggeration that are typical of animation, *The Simpsons* forces us to question the codes of realism associated with live-action systems of representation. Likewise, critics point out that satire is often missed, leading to “mistaken” interpretations that may cause viewers to either enjoy or condemn the program. But in all cases, parody is held up as a legitimating trait, a sign of *The Simpsons*’s legitimacy as more than just an average cartoon. Critics note the show’s satirical edge in order to legitimate the adult pleasures of the text, even if kids (or
other adults) miss them. Just as the program’s animated form is often tied to its lack of cultural value, its parodic take on the sitcom (and nearly every other American cultural norm) works to elevate the position of *The Simpsons* within cultural hierarchies.

This brief account of parody within the text and contexts of *The Simpsons* differs significantly from a postmodernist account of either blank parody or generic dilution. Through the show’s use of parody, I contend that the discourses of genre are reiterated and foregrounded explicitly, not “flattened out” or disrupted. Of course, these enunciations of genre are often framed critically, calling the assumptions of genre into question. Whether this happens through undermining sitcom realism by highlighting the genre’s artificial narrative structure or by exploding the assumptions of the cartoon through the hyperbolic violence of Itchy & Scratchy, *The Simpsons* does not work to destroy generic codes but to highlight their cultural circulation and common currency among the show’s media-saturated audience. By calling attention to these generic assumptions and mocking cultural conventions, the show can certainly serve as a site of opposition, treating traditionally marginalized topics (from problems of nuclear power to a “realistic” nuclear family) and questioning the very media system that circulates the show (as demonstrated most pervasively in the unusual episode “The Simpsons Spin-off Showcase”). Thus the animated form of *The Simpsons* enables a critical take on the sitcom genre, probably the most conventional and mainstream television genre.

But just as our approach to genre necessitates examinations of the specificities of individual instances and contextual circulation, we need to avoid sweeping generalizations about parody “always” leading to opposition, co-optation, or postmodernism. Parody must be regarded as a historical and contextual mode of production and reception, in addition to its more common textual conceptions. We must also recognize how parody can work to support more dominant and traditional notions of television culture. Jonathan Culler aptly points out how genre parody can further dominant meanings even in the face of seeming “oppositional” content. He argues that “pseudo-parody” can create the illusion of resistive critique of the ideological conventions of a genre, providing readers an oppositional position in relation to the conventions of the form. But often this mode of parody serves only to “forestall a possible objection” for the reader, establishing a level of goodwill with an audience to create the sense of opposition, even as the text works to reassert the norms of the parodied genre (Culler 148–52). Thus many viewers have commented that while *The Simpsons* mocks the norms of the sitcom genre, ultimately the show contains the same level of sentimentiality and “family values” of the shows it allegedly satires. I do not wish to resolve this debate between “real” or illusionary oppositional content and *The Simpsons* here—such arguments need to be supported by research and analysis aimed more at this particular question than my generic inquiry. Rather, I want to point to the problems with sweeping claims of genre’s (or genre parody’s) inherently oppositional content or attitude. Such generalizations are one of the central reasons why genre analysis has fostered such a bad reputation within contemporary media studies.

I have not resolved the paradox of this essay’s epigraphs: if *The Simpsons* is figured as quite “realistic,” can it be “just a cartoon”? I would argue that *The Simpsons* does work as both realistic animation and just a cartoon. By looking at the ways in which *The Simpsons* has been linked to generic codes of realism, notions of cultural validity, and assumptions of target audience, we can see how the discourses surrounding a program work to locate new cultural phenomena within already extant hierarchies of cultural norms and values. *The Simpsons* was figured as “just a cartoon” by those wishing to dismiss its cultural value or positioned as inappropriate to the cartoon genre in order to question its legitimacy for children. Other critics hailed the show’s parodic take on the sitcom as “realistic” and therefore “quality” television, working against the normally held cultural conception of animation as children’s programming. For these critics, animation was the generic addition that, ironically, enabled *The Simpsons* to be the era’s most effective and realistic critique of the live-action sitcom. Thus even though traditionally cartoons have figured low on cultural hierarchies, in the case of *The Simpsons* the animation genre worked to raise the program above the ordinary sitcom and critique that conventional genre’s vaunted place within American culture.

In my account of genre and *The Simpsons*, I have demonstrated how generic terms, definitions, and meanings serve as a discursive framework for the program’s cultural comprehension. Assumptions about animation and family sitcoms situate the program within hierarchies
and systems of power relations that impact the show’s reception and the ensuing controversies that emerged. But it would be a mistake to regard this generic framework as fixed or static. Just as the show is positioned within already extant generic codes and discourses, *The Simpsons* and its circulation have worked to reconstitute and change the very generic notions that were partially formative of its initial cultural understanding. The success of the show with adults, partially overcoming the stigmas of animation’s “childish” audience, have somewhat eroded these notions. We can see the effects of this generic shift most dramatically in industrial practices, as numerous successful adult animated sitcoms have followed *The Simpsons*, from Fox’s similar family sitcom *King of the Hill* to the even more adult targeted cable programming of *Beavis & Butthead* and *South Park*.

But the generic assumptions of animation have not simply disappeared in the wake of *The Simpsons*, as both *Beavis & Butthead* and *South Park* have been embroiled in similar controversies surrounding the program’s appropriateness for a children’s audience that is assumed to be the “natural” target of animation. What these instances indicate most clearly is that an account of genre is necessary to understand how audiences and industries make sense of these mixed and parodic programs, and thus we cannot simply apply the rubric of the “postmodern” and deny the show’s generic markers. While “postmodernist” may be a compelling categorization of this program textually, we must look beyond the text to see how discourses in a variety of realms work to articulate and constitute generic assumptions and conventions that may work against tenets of postmodern criticism. The discursive hierarchies that are linked to both the sitcom and animation are accrued over time and constantly undergoing reformation. Additionally and most importantly, the site of genre definition and meaning is not intrinsic to the media text. Genres are formed within the dynamic interactions between texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts, not statically embedded within programs. Thus if our goal is to understand the cultural life of a program like *The Simpsons* and contemporary media culture, we must critically explore the shifts and implications of its genres as discursive processes found in the interactions between these spheres of media practice. If we are to better understand the complex operations of television programs like *The Simpsons* within contemporary society, we must look beyond the media text and explore the contextual relationships and issues like genre that constitute a show’s “cultural life.”

**NOTES**

1. Note that parody is another hallmark of animated cartoons. For further discussion on parody in animation, see Crafton, “The View from Termite Terrace.”

2. Collins implicitly suggests this in his discussion of *Twin Peaks*; see Cohen, “Do Postmodern Genres Exist?” for a compelling discussion and refutation of this argument.

3. This approach to media studies—examining the interrelations between industry, audience, text, and context—is drawn from D’Acci; see also Hall; Johnson.

4. For discussions of critical discourses and reception studies, see Staiger; Klinger.

5. Shales’s quote refers to Ozzie & Harriet’s Nelson family, Father Knows Best’s Anderson family, and The Brady Bunch as The Simpsons’s sitcom forefamilies from the 1950s and 1960s.

6. The Huxtables inhabited The Cosby Show and the Keatons were on Family Ties, two highly successful 1980s sitcom families.

7. Similarly, Groening has been widely quoted as calling The Simpsons a “mutant Ozzie and Harriet” (see Oszersky 11).

8. I explore this case study in further depth in Mittell, “Telegeneres.”

9. This is not to say that The Flintstones was thought of as safe children’s entertainment in the 1960s; I am merely using critical references to the show in the 1990s to provide a contrast with The Simpsons.

10. Note that exceptions to this certainly do emerge, such as Homer’s noted trait of being nearly impervious to physical harm, especially head injuries.

11. The lack of laugh track is notable, as previous prime-time cartoons such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons* had adopted the sitcom convention of the laugh track, even though they were clearly not “filmed before a live studio audience.”

12. For a compelling argument as to how various conventions of typical cartoons such as “stretch & squash” came to be the dominant mode of animation, see Thompson.

13. I deal with this shift in industrial practice concerning the cartoon genre more fully in Mittell, “Telegeneres.”

14. *The Flintstones* remained on the air in Saturday morning and syndicated reruns; new variations occasionally appeared on Saturday morning.

15. Note that many articles suggest that the show did have an unusually high following among children as compared to other family sitcoms.

16. For accounts of these controversies, see Glynn; Fiske.

17. See Snead (84–85) for an account of animation’s “rhetoric of harmlessness.”

18. *The Simpsons*, “King-Size Homer,” originally aired November 5, 1995. While I have focused on the discursive circulation that surrounded *The Simpsons* in the early 1990s, this mid-season episode is representative of typical generic practices used throughout the series’ run.

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