

PRIME TIME ANIMATION

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Jody

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"WE HARDLY WATCH THAT RUDE, CRUDE SHOW"

Class and taste in *The Simpsons*

Diane F. Alters

"What is so obnoxious about *The Simpsons*," a friend of mine says, "I don't like the way they look. I don't like the way they sound. I'm not going to watch them!... The humor doesn't appeal to me. A lot of it's slapstick and rude. Violent. I don't find it funny. I don't find it amusing. I don't find it socially uplifting."

(Susan Garcia, 41)

"Occasionally we'll watch Bart Simpson. Occasionally there'll be a really funny show, but when they get crass, I'll turn it off."

(Sharon Hartman, 42)

Introduction

AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE ON THE AIR, *THE SIMPSONS* still represents the worst in television for many parents, despite the appearance of harder-edged animated shows such as *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *South Park*. In a series of open-ended interviews I conducted for a study of media and daily life, some parents, such as Susan Garcia, above, even said that they hated the show.¹ But most of these critical parents eventually also expressed a more positive view; a contradiction that is one of the subjects of this essay. This ambivalent view of *The Simpsons* also worked in other ways: some parents who first described the show as insightful social commentary also worried that it was not suitable for their young children. Even those who said they just thought it was funny watched it with

some apprehension. Mixed feelings about *The Simpsons* were frequently voiced: it was one of the most-contested and most-watched shows among the families interviewed.² I argue that this ambivalence and anxiety around *The Simpsons* have a great deal to do with class and taste distinctions, as parents sought to distance themselves from a show they defined as lower class, and from television itself, also seen as lower class. Yet they also undermined such distancing attempts by describing their own or their family's viewing in middle-class terms, in a process of legitimization that will be explored below.³ These conflicting opinions and practices are part of a larger, dynamic social process, as I view cultural practices and cultural production as major, constitutive elements of a social order (Williams 1981: 12).

A similar process of legitimization also occurs in other places in American culture: middle-class periodicals such as the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* have also sought to elevate *The Simpsons*, animation, and television against a wider tendency to view them as lower class. In what follows, I discuss these efforts in terms of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "competing principles of legitimacy," in which the order of cultural importance of various genres in the field of cultural production changes as a result of internal and external processes (Bourdieu 1993: 50–5). In addition, Bourdieu's conception of *field* offers an instructive model for studying social relations, as a *field* is made up of both subjective and objective positions, both of which respond to synchronic and diachronic changes (Bourdieu 1993: 29–73). The concept of *field* is Bourdieu's attempt to study culture in terms of both individual experience and social structure, and it is especially relevant in terms of my research because I talk with audience members about individual experiences but also examine this talk in terms of social conditions and relations. This approach allows me simultaneously to look at the ambivalence of viewers as contradictions held in a kind of tension as I seek to explore the social relations of cultural consumption that underlie that ambivalence.

In the two families presented here, the process of distinction seemed strongly connected to their tenuous class position, as both had a somewhat precarious relationship with middle-class status. Their cultural capital (education and related tastes) marked them as middle class, but their low economic capital was a marker of their proximity to a lower-class position. The stakes involved in policing the boundaries of taste in these families were particularly high, as they needed to maintain or increase their cultural capital to guard against the effects of any loss of economic capital – a loss that could plunge them definitively into the lower class, with material and symbolic consequences. As a result, they struggled to secure more highly regarded middle-class positions by laying claim to more cultural capital. This analysis emphasizes the symbolic dimensions of class relations as well as their economic dimensions; class identity is seen as a matter of perception and also as materially constructed (Bourdieu 1984: 482–4).

In addition, the interviews suggest a link between class/taste and gender, as it was mothers who seemed to worry most about taste. It was mothers who most often expressed their reservations about *The Simpsons*, described attempts to control their children's viewing, and thus took on certain aspects of a woman's traditional, historically constructed role as moral guardian. However, in both families the parents' home roles were linked in some way to their roles outside the home, and there were indications that power was shared in connection with television. This link between class/taste and gender underscores the complexity of social relations involved in understanding the role of popular culture in modern life.

To explore this complex process of distinction, this essay examines the two case-study families in some detail. I do not intend to universalize these families but to explore them as "particular case[s] of the possible," a way of emphasizing particularities in a social context (Bourdieu 1984: xi).⁴ Family members are treated here as historical subjects whose engagement in mediated popular culture offers a way to elucidate their positions in relation to the society around them.⁵ In this essay, I focus on the social conditions of the two families and how they regarded *The Simpsons* and its central characters, members of a working-class nuclear family who struggle with and sometimes triumph over the chaos wrought by social change.⁶

Class and taste

In my first interview with the Hartman family, the mother, Sharon, 42, brought up *The Simpsons* as a way of emphasizing that her family was *not* the Simpsons.⁷ She said the show was unsuitable for her children, Glen, 14, Laura, 9, and Amy, 8, because the bad words and unruly behavior – Bart's in particular – were inappropriate models for well-behaved children.⁸ Indeed, in an individual interview Laura remarked that her mother sometimes denied her request to watch *The Simpsons* with this exclamation: "No! I don't want my kids growing up to be brats!"⁹ Still, the Hartmans watched *The Simpsons* often enough for the children to be able to enthusiastically describe plot details – something that Sharon cheerfully acknowledged when her daughters caught her in a contradiction in her concern to distance her family from that of the Simpsons:

Some of the shows, just because of their attitude towards things – we don't watch *The Simpsons*, hardly at all, and it's mostly because, I'm sorry, I'm not going to raise a spoiled, rotten brat! [*Her daughters, 9 and 8, have been giggling while she speaks. She pauses and laughs.*] Yeah, occasionally, yes, they will watch that, and occasionally, it's okay. But it's not a steady-diet kind of thing.

This characterization of the Simpsons as ill-behaved was one of several declarations by Sharon that sought to distinguish her children as well-mannered, a supposed middle-class quality. In this instance, she interpreted her children's giggles as a check on her initial implication that the family seldom watched the show, and she sought to clarify her words by insisting that although they did see the show, their viewing was limited.

Sharon Hartman's critique of *The Simpsons* — she also said it was “rude” and “crude” — is based on stereotypes of working-class culture. Like Archie Bunker, the Simpsons bear many markers of working-class stereotypes: Homer's beer belly, his low-level security job at the nuclear power plant, his marriage to Marge while they were still at high school. Even their diet is mock working class, pure fantasy Elvis: pork chops, mashed potatoes, and Homer's stay-home-from-church breakfast of a caramel-filled waffle wrapped around a stick of butter on a toothpick (“Homer the Heretic,” 8 October 1992). The writers sometimes flirt with the Simpsons' class status, occasionally making them so crude as to be “white trash,” as Homer's breakfast suggests. More often, however, their supposed working-class attributes are emphasized, as when they are contrasted with “white trash” carnival workers who take over their house (“Bart Carny,” 1 January 1998), or wealthy socialites (“Scenes From the Class Struggle in Springfield,” 4 February 1996).¹⁰ Although they have at least one marker of being middle class — their house — their low economic position and their stereotypical working-class tastes are otherwise fairly constant in the show. George Meyer, a writer and executive producer for the show, describes the house as middle class, although “their finances are kind of glossed over” in relation to the house because they would not have been able to afford it on Homer's income (Owen 1999: 64+). The Simpsons are a nuclear family (Homer is the wage-earner, Marge stays home and is largely responsible for the three children), a form associated with the white middle classes in the 1950s and subsequently naturalized as “traditional” in American society as a whole (Coontz 1992; Mintz and Kellogg 1988). The depiction of a nuclear family is intentional — the show's creators wanted to keep a “traditional” core to the series as a setup to the “quirky” jokes, according to Meyer (Owen 1999).

Often, the jokes play off the Simpsons' stereotypical working-class attributes, with much humor derived from Homer's ignorance, his drinking buddies' travails, or Marge's taste in household decorations. Barbara Ehrenreich, writing before *The Simpsons* was a half-hour show on television, sees other white working-class stereotypes on television as largely manufactured by middle-class writers who would have been more inhibited about caricaturing other groups, including racial groups. She describes these stereotypes of the white working class: “Its tastes are ‘lacky’; its habits unhealthy; and its views are hopelessly bigoted and parochial” (Ehrenreich 1989: 7). In fact, she argues, the American

working class is much more complex and diverse. She notes that Archie Bunker was an “ambiguous” character, having lovable qualities (like Homer) as well as his stereotypical working-class ignorance. In some ways, Homer is an extension of Archie, an example of television's exploitation of what Ehrenreich calls the “humorous possibilities” of a class that had begun to be defined in the 1970s as “reactionary, bigoted, and male” (Ehrenreich 1989: 114). This representation has mellowed somewhat: although Homer is sometimes reactionary and bigoted, he is a more complex and sympathetic character than Archie Bunker.¹¹

More importantly, *The Simpsons* is not about Homer in the way that *All in the Family* was about Archie Bunker — and indeed the parents discussed here sometimes talked about watching “Bart Simpson,” the character that loomed largest for them because they were so concerned with their own children's behavior and its class-based implications. *The Simpsons* offers standards of family and behavior through stories about characters struggling with basic and changing issues in American family life. When the behaviors of the family were coded as working-class, this worried Sharon Hartman — for her, the Simpsons were somewhere near the bottom of a hierarchy of families. As a cultural product the show itself was at rock-bottom, one of the worst shows her children watched, mainly because of its general “crudeness,” in Sharon's view, and its depiction of children as “brats,” a quality she cited several times in the interviews. In addition, Sharon, like other parents interviewed, considered television itself to have little cultural value. Ellen Seiter also observed this widespread opinion in her own audience research and described television as “the least legitimate of media forms” (Seiter 1999: 4).

In Bourdieu's view, cultural consumption fulfills the social function of legitimating social differences (Bourdieu 1984: 7, 257–317). In Sharon's case, denying the “rude, crude show” implied that she embraced more polite, middle-class cultural products. Since cultural practices are closely linked to one's education (a form of cultural capital) and one's social origin, experience, and ways of thinking (the “habitus”), Sharon distanced herself from *The Simpsons* in an effort to situate herself in the middle class. Like the French working classes that Bourdieu analyzes, the Simpson family served as a negative reference point for the Hartmans: “As for the working classes, perhaps their sole function in the system of aesthetic positions is to serve as a foil, a negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations” (Bourdieu 1984: 57). Making distinctions is an effort to signify class status, and to slip in class is to lose power in both a material and symbolic sense. In an American context, class slippage is all too possible, as misfortune easily leads to a “downward slide” for all but the “most securely wealthy,” as Ehrenreich notes (1989: 15; 2001).

Indeed, like many families in the US, the Hartmans faced the possibility of such a downward slide. For example, they rented their small house, a situation

particularly precarious for those earning near minimum wage. Rent is "exquisitely sensitive" to market forces that have significantly pushed up the price of housing in recent years (Ehrenreich 2001: 199–201). In the city in which the Hartmans lived the rental vacancy rate was in the low single digits, making rental housing scarce and expensive. John Hartman, the 43-year-old father, held two part-time, low-paying blue-collar jobs while Sharon worked part-time as a clerk. They had spent the last decade or so following their religion and had lived frugally while John founded two ultimately unsuccessful churches in other cities. In terms of cultural capital, they had many middle-class attributes. Both John and Sharon had undergraduate degrees, and both grew up in families that were at least middle class, with John's perhaps more well-off in terms of economic and social capital, his father being a medical doctor. The Hartmans sought to retain this foothold in the middle class, although their own low income made that foothold precarious.

Sharon also made a point of describing habits that added cultural capital to the family's stock: family members read many "classic" books, frequently used their library cards, and encouraged the children to excel in highly academic programs.¹² Perhaps in part to demonstrate their cultural capital, John and 9-year-old Laura were playing a game of chess when I arrived one evening. The Hartman children clearly were "readers," as Sharon termed it — they summarized favorite book plots as deftly as they did story lines from *The Simpsons* and other TV shows. In describing herself and her children as "readers," Sharon was drawing on a sense of "reading" as a cultured pursuit, a definition which has developed from the Renaissance to today and which eventually came to connect reading literature with social class. Reading, as understood by Sharon, functions as "polite learning" in the domain of "taste" and "sensibility" (Williams 1977: 51). More complexly, Sharon, like the mother in my other case-study, compared reading books with watching television, an evaluation that broadens this definition of reading to include reading television shows — or at least *The Simpsons* — as literature, a point explored in the next section of this essay.

Sharon's attempts to distinguish her family from that of *The Simpsons* and to downplay their viewing of the show also seemed aimed at me as an academic. It is possible that she saw me as a representative of high culture (and thus dismissive of popular culture, although I stated otherwise) because I was studying for a doctorate and taught at a university. In any case, she wanted to make sure I did not confuse her family with the *Simpsons*. It is a "class privilege" of audience researchers that they have access both to the high culture represented by academia and the low culture of television (Seiter 1999: 27). Sharon also claimed this "class privilege" as she emphasized the family's interest in reading and education and her critique of television and *The Simpsons*. In addition, Sharon's distancing from *The Simpsons* and television was perhaps also an attempt

to turn back another stereotype, one that connects evangelicals such as herself with the working class. As a group, evangelicals have less education and less cultural capital than non-evangelicals, although those attributes have begun to change in recent years (Roof 1999: 99–104; Wuthnow 1988: 132–72). Indeed Sharon and John, who both converted during college, were part of a more educated neo-evangelical movement. Sharon may have wanted to distance her family from class-based stereotypes about her religion in case I held such views of evangelicals.

It is significant that it was Sharon, not John, who most consistently and firmly described standards for behavior and distanced herself and her family from what she saw as a low-culture product. In doing so, Sharon took on a woman's role as moral guardian of the domestic sphere. This ideology has roots in the nineteenth-century distinction between public (husband as breadwinner) and private (wife as homemaker, child-rearer) realms, but is complicated by Sharon's own role as one of the family's wage-earners and John's position as a former pastor. Sharon's attempts to distinguish the Hartmans from the *Simpsons* were supported by her husband, although unlike Sharon he did not initiate discussion of these distinctions or elaborate on them. Instead, he leveled his sharpest critique at themes connected with his former career as a pastor: he identified as "unacceptable" story lines that "mock Christianity and might be mocking something that someone has done being a Christian, trying to be a Christian." Sharon indicated support for this position, but left such assessments to John to make and act upon. As a result, he had turned off an episode in which Homer concocts his own religion to get out of attending church, prompting some friendly visits from God ("Homer the Heretic"). Despite John's reservations, one child, Laura, knew the plot of "Homer the Heretic" and had thought about it because her best friends agreed with Homer's complaint that church is boring. Still, to all the Hartmans, some shows were just funny. For example, John liked *Simpsons* episodes about aliens, a theme more distant from his religion. The overall point is that the Hartmans held their ambivalence in a kind of tension: the father objected to a particular episode because he believed it mocked Christianity and the mother abhorred the *Simpsons'* conduct and voiced her concerns about her children's behavior in relation to the show, but they still found episodes they all could watch and enjoy.

Distinctions and gender in a transitional space

Susan and Bob Garcia had many disagreements about the value of television in general and *The Simpsons* in particular, but they had achieved a kind of ragged harmony about both in their actions and their assessments of them. What they achieved at home with television is not unlike what they constructed outside the

home, where they tried to share responsibility. Over time, their attempts at power-sharing outside the home helped structure how they lived inside — and perhaps vice versa. Although they were very different in their approaches, they ended up sharing power in regard to television, due to complex mental and material accommodations they made to one another's approaches.

Susan and Bob's differences regarding *The Simpsons* and television were expressed in their use of space in their house.¹³ *The Simpsons* was a major reason Bob García, 44, had enclosed the porch of their house, creating a special room for the television set so that he and the children, Peter, 10, and Janie, 8, could watch without disturbing Susan, who hated the show. *The Simpsons*, which aired in rerun every weekday evening, took up one-third of the daily hour-and-a-half of television Susan allowed the children to watch during the school year. (The other shows they chose, eclectically enough, were *Wishbone* and *Fresh Prince*, and on weekends the limit was eased so that they could watch sports.) In explaining this arrangement, Bob and Susan made some gender distinctions but it also seemed that in some ways they tried to share power over television much as they tried to share work inside and outside the home. Usually only one parent at a time worked at a low-paying job so that the other could be at home to help with the children's schooling, and they frequently switched places to do so, a situation that will be elaborated below. By focusing on this household, I describe how one family dealt with many social divisions that challenged the parents' efforts to construct a life that positioned their children in the middle class both symbolically and economically. With their work arrangements, Bob and Susan García in effect challenged gendered roles in the American economy, while at the same time they also reproduced and challenged gendered practices at home in relation to television and work. Their practices and opinions open up a space to examine how certain ways of thinking are reproduced and challenged in one family — a particular case of the possible.

Bob described the television room with some irony as a "family value" because it maintained harmony in the family by separating Bob's and the children's *Simpsons* viewing from Susan's dislike of the show. Thus the room is a kind of borderland or transition space where differentiation can best be examined because contradictions operate most clearly. In fact, a complex array of contradictory sensibilities made up the television room. When Bob showed me the coal-burning stove he had installed in the TV room, he used the Spanish word for coal, *carbón*. This was a reference to his Mexican-American background — he had installed the stove because the aroma of coal reminded him of his childhood. Bob described both good and bad experiences emerging from his background; good in what he called his "mixed" marriage (Susan was of Anglo-American background) and in his college involvement in the Chicano movement, and occasionally, bad in his conservative city.¹⁴

Enclosing the porch marked the third time the television had shifted location in the García home, and the story of where it was placed highlights some of the tradeoffs the Garcías made to keep harmony. Shortly after Bob and Susan married, they bought the three-bedroom house and arranged it to accommodate their separate interests: one bedroom was theirs, one was his for the television set and one was hers for her sewing machine. When Peter was born, the sewing room became the nursery and the sewing machine went to the living room, eventually coming to serve as a table for the family computer. The television remained in a room of its own. A few years after Janie was born, the children moved to separate bedrooms and Bob enclosed the porch for the television set. Susan explained why:

I hated going into houses and seeing the *whole house* built around a television. I just wanted a place where I could get away from it. And, we like company and sometimes someone comes over to watch television, and we have a place where we can have a conversation or a game without a television. And so that was my insistence, and that was how we accomplished it, by enclosing the porch so that we could have a TV room and still have a whole living room.

The history of the García family's television space highlights the contradictions in the social relations represented in the family.

The Garcías had negotiated a set of work roles that implicitly challenged more traditional divisions of labor in a household. Early in the marriage, Bob and Susan had agreed on a kind of serial employment: one would work full time for pay for a year or so while the other stayed home with the children. Sometimes the "home parent," as they called the non-waged person, also worked part-time for pay outside the home but only if that parent could still devote a great deal of time to the children's schooling, to be an advocate for them. This included carefully choosing schools, studying curricula, and working on library, fundraising and other school-support activities as well as helping with homework. Both had wanted to be deeply involved in their children's daily lives and to encourage their academic success, something that would have been much harder for Bob to do if he had always held the primary paying job. On the surface, it seemed that Bob had taken on a women's notion of "success" as more home-centered and economically weaker than male success — a socially constructed standard analyzed by Maria Markus (1987: 102–3). More complexly, both Bob and Susan challenged those gendered standards of achievement, and in the process had to sort out related problems associated with these divisions.

When the children were younger, the home parent worked few or no waged hours, but those had increased as the children grew older. At the time of the

interviews, Susan was the home parent and worked almost twenty hours a week as a secretary — more than usual for the home parent — while Bob worked full-time as a custodian. A few months after the initial interviews, they “traded off,” with Bob working part-time for wages and Susan full-time as a secretary. As home parent, Susan cooked and had more domestic duties than Bob. After the switch, he took on most but not all of her domestic tasks. The Garcias’ economic arrangements were aimed at helping the children excel at book-based learning in order to secure a claim to the middle class. Like Sharon Hartman, Susan was adamant that she wanted her children to be educated “readers” rather than television viewers.

The Garcias’ arrangement committed them to low-wage jobs, although both had college degrees and at least theoretical access to better-paying but less-flexible middle-class professional jobs. They had opted out of the long period of almost thirty years that is required to establish oneself securely in the middle class in order to maintain professional jobs (Ehrenreich 1989: 76). This period is a time to obtain graduate degrees, devote long hours to work, and pay others to care for the children — things that the Garcias did not want to do. Indeed, Bob had recently left a job in which he had faced a promotion after five months. “They wanted me to work *a lot*,” he said, laughing. “Family is our priority. I wasn’t going to spend sixty hours a week working somewhere, not getting to eat dinner with my family too often.” In return for working at low-wage jobs, which were plentiful in their city in the 1990s, they got flexibility — but not cultural capital or much economic capital. (Unlike the Hartmans, the Garcias’ economic situation was not connected with religion — Bob was an atheist and Susan an agnostic.) The Garcias had paid off the mortgage on their small house, a purchase that would help cushion them in a recession, but they still worried about stretching their paychecks. They always tried to find jobs with health insurance, for example. They sometimes joked about being poor, but their somewhat precarious economic status was no joke.

How the Garcias constructed their lives was to some extent played out in the television room and around *The Simpsons*. The show was an important symbol of Susan and Bob’s differing opinions of television, and it had prompted changes in their daily lives to accommodate those differences. For example, when Peter was small, Susan had objected to his watching *The Simpsons* with Bob, but made an accommodation that seems to speak to gender distinctions. She related her story:

Bob likes to sit and watch *The Simpsons* after dinner. You could ask him why. God knows. [laughs] And because it was a cartoon show, Peter [10 at the time of the interview] liked it. He was kindergarten age. He would sit down and watch it with him.

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I thought at the time, “This is not a child’s show. This is not a five-year-old’s show. I don’t care if it’s funny-looking cartoon characters who do the kinds of things that Bugs Bunny did. It’s not a children’s show.”

Now, I voiced that opinion to Bob, and he didn’t care. He liked to watch the show and he liked to have his boy tucked under his arm. So I thought, “Well, okay.” That wasn’t a battle I was going to win.

And, frankly, I used it. It gave me half an hour to sit down and do something I wished to do. And be off duty.

So, they — and that’s been going on for years, and obviously, Janie [8 at the time of the interview] grew up into that, too. I think they like to sit and watch it together now that they’re older, it’s less totally inappropriate. The language is still really — they’ll say, “Bart just said a rude word.” Cost a quarter to say those words in my house!

Susan’s comment about being “off duty” during *The Simpsons* in some ways expresses the historical role of women as domestic laborers in American households. *The Simpsons* signaled a welcome break from domestic tasks, as Susan did somewhat more domestic work, such as cooking, even when she worked for wages. But her sense of being “off duty” also involved being excused from her role as the moral guardian who pointed out bad words and bad behavior. And in any case, Bob also had taken on the role of moral guardian, as he warned about language and behavior when he watched *The Simpsons* with his children — an example of a kind of power-sharing about television that is related to their attempts to share wage-earning and child-rearing roles.

Gender was also involved in the distinct ways in which men and women watched television in David Morley’s classic study of working-class London families. Morley observed that women tended to watch television with distraction because they were usually engaged in some domestic duty at the same time, while men could view without disruption (Morley 1986: 147). The differences Morley saw between men and women stemmed from the social roles they occupied within their homes, not from their biological characteristics (1995: 175). This applies to Susan and Bob, but in a somewhat different way. In the London study, Morley observed that the home was defined primarily as a site of leisure for men, away from their employment outside the home, while for women the home was seen as a place of work, whether or not they also held jobs outside the home. In the Garcia home, labor roles were not so starkly divided, as Susan and Bob shared work outside the home and tried to do the same inside, although Susan sometimes did more domestic tasks than Bob, for example cooking. Neither, however, considered the home to be a leisure site for the man and a work site only for the woman, as they carefully switched home roles when they switched paid-work roles.

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Both parents assigned gender to the acts of "reading" and "watching television," a situation also evident in many ways in American society. Susan was the reader of books, while Bob was the television watcher with considerable knowledge of early television. In fact, Susan described television viewing as a "guy thing." Bob had become engaged with television as a pre-teen when he watched *The Monkees* on Saturday mornings, and eventually amassed a vast collection of videotapes of other favorite TV series. He read magazines, but few books. Historically, book-reading has been gendered in American society. As Janice Radway notes, most book-reading and book-buying in the US is done by women, and middle-class women have been assumed to be book-readers because they have the money and time (Radway 1984: 44–5). Interestingly, both Garcia parents described the children as "readers," although they also watched television regularly with their father. This contradiction may have something to do with the sense in which the parents regarded reading as a mark of learning (thus representing high cultural capital), while television-watching (low in cultural capital) could be shunted off to the television room and at any given moment ignored. In any case, both parents shared the notion that reading has great value, and although Bob did not read as many books as Susan, he certainly worked to encourage book-reading among his children, who each had stories about the time spent reading with him.

A distracted mode of viewing may have also played a role in Susan's dislike of *The Simpsons*. It is possible that because she watched with distraction, she did not become engaged in the show and did not get the rewards it offered to more engaged viewers. The show's "textual density," one writer observes, "gives rise to innumerable small touches that reward attentive viewing" (Owen 1999). In contrast, Susan seldom made it through an entire episode, although she tried to find something she liked in the program. She voiced a critique that emphasized her strong reaction to the look and feel of the show rather than particulars such as plot or language, which she had criticized earlier, also in general terms.

Diane: So *The Simpsons*. How did you figure out it was not one of those shows that you thought was great for kids?

Susan: Oh, I'd sit down and watch it a few times. Bob was enjoying it, so I'd sit down. It's something we could do together. After a long day of work, you sit down, want to be together. I hated it.

Diane: Do you remember the episode that got to you? Or is it cumulative?

Susan: Cumulative, I would assume. I don't know, it's just not appropriate.

Diane: So, bad words. Plot?

Susan: Yeah, sure. [*We were interrupted briefly by a telephone call.*] "What is so obnoxious about *The Simpsons*," a friend of mine says, "I don't like the way they look. I don't like the way they sound. I'm not going to watch them!" That's a start.

Diane: That's a start.

Susan: Yeah. The humor doesn't appeal to me. A lot of it's slapstick and rude. Violent. I don't find it funny. I don't find it amusing. I don't find it socially uplifting. [*Both laugh.*]

Diane: Do the kids talk to you about it, or do they know it's something you don't like?

Susan: They know it's something I don't like. And every now and then, I'll go and watch it with them. I don't hold my nose up that much. Sometimes I just want to sit down. Sometimes I just want to be with the kids. Sometimes that's the warm room. The fire's been going, and it feels good to sit down. And I want to see what they're doing. Usually, I can't sit through the whole thing. Had enough, and I get up and walk out.

Diane: So even when you volunteer to watch it, it doesn't work for you.

Susan: Right.

It was important to Susan that a show have some social value, and the fact that she did not find *The Simpsons* to be "socially uplifting" counted against it in her eyes. It was not like the Public Broadcasting Service shows she said she sometimes watched, nor was it "quality television" in the way that critics described *Hill Street Blues*, the last show in which Susan had become absorbed. In fact, she described watching that show, intensely, without disruption, in a way that corresponds to Morley's description of male viewing described above. She had regularly watched the detail-heavy police drama when she was single and living alone, with no husband, children or other family-based distractions. She had found the show's "upscale" commercials fascinating, especially because they contrasted greatly with the working-class characters depicted on the show. In fact, Susan said she read about television – in newspaper and magazine stories about new programs, the industry itself, actors – more often than she watched it. She said she did so because she believed that TV was important in American society and to her family, a comment that indicated she, like Sharon Hartman, claimed access to my "class privilege" of studying television. In this, Susan demonstrated the complexity of social relations around *The Simpsons*. However, social roles were only one aspect of the Garcias' approach to the show.

Although Susan and Bob's television habits were different, their notions of taste were similar, and this may speak to their attempts to share power at home. Bob criticized *The Simpsons* in terms similar to Susan's. When I brought up *The Simpsons* in an individual interview, Bob made a face. He clearly had mixed feelings about his children watching, as the following passage indicates:

Bob: *The Simpsons* is an animated cartoon that is not a children's cartoon.

Diane: Oh, you seriously don't think it's for children?

Bob: No. It was never for children. Fox produced it not as — *The Flintstones* was the first prime time, animated children's cartoon. *The Simpsons* is not an animated children's cartoon. It's a sophisticated adult animation. And I think it's cute, the story lines and the comedy is cute. It's adolescent humor on a scale of too many dirty words and the representation of behavior that you might not want to let your children participate in! [*He laughs.*]

Diane: Yeah, what about that?

Bob: [Still laughing] Now, unfortunately, my kids sit here and watch it with me, and enjoy it. I often have to say, "Don't ever do that!" and "These are bad words!" They owe us a quarter. We charge a quarter in here, in the house....

It's the one that [*he slaps his hand, hard*] that I shouldn't let them watch. And there's no other program that they watch is worse than that one.

While Bob continued to watch and enjoy *The Simpsons*, he also criticized language and behavior depicted on the show and expressed uneasiness that his children watched it with him. In this, he seemed to share with Susan a role as the moral arbitrator of the family's tastes and her efforts to distance herself and her family from working-class attributes, while at the same time he and the children continued to watch a show that both felt represented the worst on television. In a similarly mixed assessment, Susan described her family as a "TV family" because, thanks to Bob, they had always had a cable connection and Bob's watching was "non-negotiable," although she and Bob worked to emphasize the family's readerly attributes as well. These contradictions indicate that the Garcias had accommodated *The Simpsons* and television spatially, intellectually, and emotionally, keeping their contradictory evaluations in a kind of tension, in Bourdieu's terms, between mental and social structures. One particular consequence was that Susan and Bob had opened a door to considering *The Simpsons* as more important in the hierarchy of cultural goods than they had originally described, indicating a process of legitimation that will be considered in the next section.

Legitimizing *The Simpsons*

While Susan disclaimed television, with Bob sharing her critique and at the same time watching guiltily, Susan also found some good things in television-watching. She noted that her children watched television for the stories, just as they read books (and indeed, the children recounted plots of books and of television shows in similar, detailed, and enthusiastic fashion). She said they were reader-like in their focus on television stories because she had limited their watching to an hour-and-a-half a day, forcing them to actively choose what to watch and thus to

watch more carefully. The children's treating *The Simpsons* as stories also led Susan to a conclusion that conflicted with her declarations of dislike for the show: if *The Simpsons* could be read like a book, then it might not be so bad. Likewise, in a separate interview, Bob said he saw television programming in general in American culture "as an extension of story time," and in his family in particular, as books and stories:

I think that my kids have the ability to understand TV as limited, at-arm's-length kind of stories, just like they enjoy the books that they read. They're just books and stories. So to a large extent, yeah, that's the way I see it as well, they're just books and stories.

This view is in keeping with the Garcias' emphasis on book-based learning. But it also suggests a larger move to redefine television as literature, with *The Simpsons* as a prime example. There is an important contradiction in what the Garcias had to say about television. They used a naturalized, contemporary definition of books: that books represent "real" learning, a mark of the educated (and middle-class) person, as does criticism, as in the children's recounting of plots and ideas. As Williams notes, "literature" and "criticism," in the perspective of historical development, are "forms of class specialization and control of a general social practice" (Williams 1977: 49–51). The Garcias struggled to expand those notions by contemplating *The Simpsons* as part of what was once the exclusive province of "literature": as stories, with the children's skill in relating them an example of book-reading competence. In addition, defining television and *The Simpsons* as literature would legitimate the children's watching, as it would Bob's extensive knowledge of television and the time spent accumulating this knowledge.

Another indication that the Garcias saw *The Simpsons* as literature was in the respect Bob and Susan accorded their children's commentary on the show. The commentary was treated as acceptable behavior, with neither parent interrupting their children when they recounted and evaluated plots, often loudly and excitedly, with one prodding on the other.¹⁵ The parents were quiet and sometimes smiled while the children did this, encouraging them to continue. In contrast, in another family I interviewed, the mother tried to change the subject when her 13-year-old daughter began to recount a *Simpsons* plot, and the father objected outright when the girl brought up another *Simpsons* story later on. But even these parents tried to legitimate the show, although in an evaluation geared more to adult competence than to that of children: they said the show was good social satire.

This move to legitimate *The Simpsons* by assigning it high-culture attributes is not unique to the Garcias and the Hartmans. The *New York Times* has also sought to reveal "quality" attributes of *The Simpsons* and other television shows, as it did in a story that identified many of the show's writers as Harvard graduates, a fact that

the reporter clearly felt would be a surprise to *Times* readers. The story also noted the high economic and cultural capital of television writers and producers: they are "frequently better-paid and at times better-educated" than those in the more glamorous movie business:

Prime-time television may be reviled in intellectual circles for its supposedly lowbrow sensibilities, but many people in the medium regard this as a second golden era, both in terms of money and the quality of writing. Few things demonstrate the growing attractiveness of the field more than the presence of dozens of Harvard graduates (as well as many other Ivy Leaguers), particularly in the realm of comedy. Writing staffs of shows like *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Show with Dave Letterman* have come to look like Harvard alumni clubs.

(Sterngold 1997: C11)

Further, these writers thought television allowed for more creativity than movies or novels, indicating a superior position in the field of cultural production. As further indications that a process of legitimization is taking place for *The Simpsons*, George Meyer, a top writer (and Harvard graduate), was profiled in the *New Yorker*, and the former poet laureate Robert Pinsky praised *The Simpsons* in a long essay for the *New York Times* (Owen 1999; Pinsky 2000).

This critical praise for *The Simpsons* is to some extent informed by the fact that its creator, Matt Groening, a political cartoonist, is vocal and articulate in his own analysis of American society, in contrast to Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the creators of *South Park*. For example, in an interview with *Mother Jones*, Groening is reflexive and critical as he sums up his work:

I grew up completely overwhelmed by TV, and part of the reason why I have gone into television is as a way to justify to myself all those wasted hours of watching TV as a kid. I can now look back and say, Oh, that was research. For me, it's not enough to be aware that most television is bad and stupid and pernicious. I think, "What can I do about it?" Is it the nature of the medium, the structure of the networks these days, or some failure of the creators that keeps television so lousy? I feel a little bit like a fish trying to analyze its own aquarium water, but what I want to do is point out the way TV is unconsciously structured to keep us all distracted. With *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, what I'm try to do — in the guise of light entertainment, if that's possible — is nudge people, jostle them a little, wake them up to some of the ways in which we're being manipulated and exploited. And in my amusing little way I try to hit on some of the unspoken rules of our culture.

(Doherty 1999)

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This analysis would also resonate with Bob Garcia and other parents who invested a lifetime in watching television and the past decade enjoying *The Simpsons'* commentary on contemporary life.

Conclusion

I have examined the ambivalence of some parents' analyses of *The Simpsons* in a framework suggested by Bourdieu. This has enabled me to look at parental objections to the show as class distinctions based upon perceived working-class attributes of its characters and the show itself, and the negative status of television within the wider field of cultural production. Once examined in domestic spaces, furthermore, the social relations around the show can be seen to include inevitable and complex gender divisions for which I have attempted to account. Different attempts to legitimate the show are also apparent in the two families discussed here and in middle-class periodicals that seek to attribute middle-class characteristics to *The Simpsons* in terms of production and quality. In this analysis, I have suggested that a process of distinction is at work around *The Simpsons*. This process deserves further study, as my interviews indicate some rich possibilities for describing and understanding the social relations and structures in which this process operates.

Bourdieu reminds us of the importance of studying the cultural product itself, the production of the value of the product, and the social conditions and relations in which it is embedded, all understood as manifestations of the field of cultural production as a whole (Bourdieu 1993: 37). By discussing the tensions and contradictions around *The Simpsons* in two families, I have attempted to illustrate how complex and fruitful this study can be. Further investigation of family life and cultural sensibilities could tell us much about how these divisions and processes operate in contemporary life.

Notes

- 1 All names of interviewees are pseudonyms. Although this analysis is my own, my interviews were also part of the "Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse" project funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. at the University of Colorado's Center for Mass Media Research. The study was directed by Dr. Stewart M. Hoover, and Dr. Lynn Schofield Clark, Associate Director. The field researchers included Joseph G. Champ, Lee Hood, and myself. A total of 249 people in 62 families were interviewed in their homes in this interpretive study. The families were of a variety of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds and included parents who were single, divorced, remarried, unmarried or same sex. The families were not selected randomly and were not intended to be representative of the US population, or to be average or typical cases. The fact that interviews were carried out in the context of the family is important: media use, especially television, is seen as a social activity occurring within the context of the family as a set of social relations (following Morley 1986: 2). The methodology of the

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- "Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse" project is discussed at length in Hoover (1996) and Clark (1999).
- 2 These comments from parents and children in my qualitative interviews were similar to opinions expressed in a series of national surveys carried out by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. In 1998 and 1999, children aged 10 to 17 said *The Simpsons* was the third show the parents were most likely to prohibit their children from watching, after *The Jerry Springer Show* and *South Park*. In 1997, the same age group said *The Simpsons* was the second most prohibited, behind *Beavis and Butt-Head*. In contrast, in 1998 and 1999, children aged 10 to 17 also told pollsters that *The Simpsons* was their favorite program, up from the fourth-place position that age group awarded it in 1997 (after *Seinfeld*, *Home Improvement* and *Family Matters*). It is no surprise that *The Simpsons* was not on the list of shows parents most encouraged their children to see in those years, nor was it among the best shows for kids as rated by parents in those years. However, in 1998, children aged 10 to 17 rated *The Simpsons* top of programs they perceived to be best for their age group, although it slipped to second place, behind *Seventh Heaven*, in 1999 (Stanger and Gridina 1999).
 - 3 Animation itself is often defined as less valuable in general. Television animation writers, for example, are less well-regarded and lower-paid than live-action writers (Argy 1998). However, the parents I talked with did not see much difference in cultural capital between animated and live-action sitcoms, both of which they discounted in seemingly equal measure. Still, the fact that *The Simpsons* is animated was a mark against the show for some parents who regarded animation as a children's medium but *The Simpsons* as an adult story – the show was questionable in part because its stories did not fit their notion of animation.
 - 4 Bourdieu uses this term to describe his focus on French society and his intent "to avoid unjustifiably universalizing the particular case" (Bourdieu 1984: xi).
 - 5 The historian George Lipsitz discusses the notion that people are historical subjects who make meaning in part through popular culture (Lipsitz 1988: 147–61).
 - 6 I argue elsewhere (Alters 2002) that interviewees' unsettled feelings about the show were prompted in part by the unsettling stories *The Simpsons* tells. Its characters engage with the dislocations provoked by three important, ongoing changes in American society during the past half-century: in family structure, in religious practice, and those changes prompted by the arrival of television in American homes. For more than a decade *The Simpsons* has observed, satirized, exaggerated and otherwise aired many fears provoked by these changes, with stories of family squabbles, attitudes towards gays, religious diversity, God, television violence and effects of television on children, among many others ("Hurricane Neddy," 29 December 1996; "Itchy and Scratchy and Marge," 20 December 1990; "The Joy of Sect," 8 February 1998; "There's No Disgrace Like Home," 28 January 1990; "Treehouse of Horror IX," 25 October 1998). In this essay, the stories are treated as context for parental critiques of the show.
 - 7 I interviewed the Hartmans over the winter of 1997–98.
 - 8 What constituted bad language in *The Simpsons* varied from family to family in this study. I did not ask children to repeat bad words for me. However, several parents said they objected to such words as *hell*, *damn* and *butt*.
 - 9 With this, Sharon discussed characters in *The Simpsons* as people, just as she talked about live-action family sitcom characters as people. Like other interviewees, she merged animated shows and live-action ones: both are sitcoms and both are about families. This does not mean that interviewees saw *The Simpsons* as live action, but rather that the show has an air of reality that can absorb, entertain and, conversely, offend. This may have had to do with the success of *The Simpsons*, which has led to the proliferation of animated family sitcoms, naturalizing it as a television form (Holtz 1999). Robert Pinsky makes a related point when he describes television as a "literal medium" that makes people feel they are watching something happen, even in cartoons and in "cartoonlike" sitcoms such as *Gilligan's Island* or *The Beverly Hillsbillies* (Pinsky 2000). Pinsky says *The Simpsons*, which he regards as one of the best shows on television, plays with this literal quality.
 - 10 The academic use of the term "white trash" represents a way of indicating differences within whiteness. Wray and Newitz (1997) use the term to examine various constructions of white-

- ness across class, gender, and sexual lines as well as how the constructions vary according to region and place.
- 11 See, in particular, "Saturdays of Thunder" (14 November 1991), for an illustration of this point.
 - 12 "Classic" books for the Hartman girls included *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a series by C. S. Lewis; *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls; and *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.
 - 13 I interviewed the Garcias over the fall and winter of 1997 and maintained contact with them for the next three years.
 - 14 Elsewhere, I call this room a domestic "transfrontiera contact zone," a reference to a term used by José David Saldívar (1997: 14) to describe attempts "to invoke the heterotopic forms of everyday life whose trajectories cross over and interact." This point deserves far more attention, and I develop it elsewhere (Alters 2002). For the more limited purposes of this essay, Bob Garcia's Latino background contributes to the contradictions within the broader field of cultural production considered here.
 - 15 For example, they offered a detailed discussion of "Bart the Daredevil" (6 December 1990) and "Treehouse of Horror VI" (30 October 1995), in particular a segment about Homer entering a third dimension.

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"MISERY CHICK"

Irony, alienation and animation in MTV's *Daria*

Kathy M. Newman

DARIA MORGENDORFFER, WHO STARRED IN HER OWN MTV animated show, *Daria*, was a smart-mouthed, misanthropic 16-year-old, perpetually dressed in a mustard-yellow shirt, a green jacket with wide lapels, a charcoal-colored skirt, big round glasses and knee-high combat boots. With her sharp tongue and wicked sense of humor, *Daria* made being a brainy misfit look cool. In the first episode which aired in the spring of 1997, *Daria* was found by psychologists at her new school, Lawndale High, to be suffering from "low self-esteem." She explained to her lawyer-mother, Helen, that she did not have low self-esteem, she simply had "low esteem for others." And thus began the five-year run of one of MTV's most successful animated features.

For five years *Daria* stood out as a sage among fools. Her family included her impossibly perky younger sister, Quinn, her workaholic mother, Helen, her dopey, stressed-out dad, Jake, and her mother's sister, Aunt Amy — a cool and attractive thirty-something. Her best friend was the artsy Jane Lane, whose savage bob, skinny legs, dark jacket, and combat boots made her a perfect gothic gal-pal for *Daria* — especially when *Daria*'s own sister refused to acknowledge they were related. Jane's older brother, Trent, a post-high-school rock-'n'-roll wannabe, was an occasional crush-object for *Daria*, but her only real "relationship" was with the dashing, wealthy Tom (who was Jane's boyfriend first). Back at Lawndale High, where most of *Daria* took place, Jane and *Daria* were surrounded by the vacant cheerleader/quarterback combo of Brittany and