

Through the Screen, into the School: Education, subversion, ourselves in *The Simpsons*

Carla Meskill*

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

There is little question that popular television shows influence the shaping of social norms, identities, and the ways we navigate daily life. High profile shows are also a common magnet for critical attention. No primetime television show has provoked as wide a range of reactions as Fox's *The Simpsons*. From shock radio to public broadcasting pundits pour condemnations, accolades, and adulations for this unique cartoon sitcom. From the masses to the literary elite, the world's most famous animated family touch one and all, from the raw funny bone to the higher intellect. In a parallel vein, there is no lack of strong and varied opinion regarding education in the USA, and few venues do a more effective job at representing its core controversies than this weekly cartoon. Here I angle a mirror at the primetime television screen and suggest some ways this animated series reflects inner, outer, and systemic relationships with education. The beauty of *The Simpsons* in this regard is that the translucent motility of an ostensibly average nuclear family in the anywhere USA town of Springfield buffers the gaze just enough to allow us room to laugh, however uneasily.

Introduction

In the USA, where talk of educational standards, hovering bars, leaving children behind, and the like diffuses the core intent of public schools as sites of civic commitment, community, and democratic process, it is refreshing for 21 minutes per week to be able to experience a fictional place where these core imperatives persist. That community is Springfield, USA, home of *The Simpsons*. During its unprecedented run as one of the top-rated television shows in the world the amount of critical attention paid to *The Simpsons* has been extraordinary in its range and intensity. The show, and Bart in particular, has variously been accused of spreading attention deficit hyperactivity disorder among pre-adolescent boys, wreaking havoc on the psyches of small children, and shredding the fabric of social mores. In addition to Bart's bad influence, alleging the reification of fatherhood through the character of Homer has been a popular pastime for media pundits. Indeed, an adjective often used to describe *The Simpsons* as a show and as a family and the

*Department of Educational Theory and Practice, University at Albany, State University of New York, ED115, Albany, NY 12222, USA. Email: cmeskill@uamail.albany.edu

Springfield community as a whole is the word dysfunctional. However, the one thing that this television show does not represent is dysfunction. On the contrary, Springfield, USA can alternatively be read as being representative of all that is functionally democratic about life in the USA, particularly in US public schools.

Springfield's elementary school shares the spotlight with Squidport Seaport (an upscale waterfront mall), the Springfield Knowledgeum,¹ the church, the nuclear power plant, and, of course, the Simpsons' home where, like many US homes, a great deal of school-related business is regularly discussed, with grades, homework, friendships, and special events commonplace sources of anxiety. Springfield Elementary, like most other schools in the USA, is the site of community action and decision-making. However, in Springfield such actions can often be salacious, precipitous or organized upheaval, and, when you least expect it, amenable to unity and communitarian celebration.

Springfield Elementary School, attended by Bart and Lisa Simpson, is at once the bedrock of community life and the bane of those who tend to its daily functioning. Just like real schools, Springfield Elementary serves educational as well as other community purposes for the town. It is a place where citizens gather for events and during emergencies. When a snow day is declared, the entire community celebrates along with students and their teachers. It is the place where Willy the Janitor, Lunch Lady Doris, Principal Skinner, Lisa's teacher Miss Hoover, and Bart's teacher Mrs Krabappel may all appear disenfranchised, indeed misanthropic at first blush, however, as viewers become better acquainted with these characters through their actions one detects their underlying warmth and steadfast good character. Through these characters' explorations of questions concerning democracy, fairness, equity, dissent, and conformity—questions identical to those central to education writ large—there is compassion and a lightheartedness that both transcends and sustains the structure of the institution.

School and Real Life²

In a recent episode the tenuous relationship between the routines and traditions of public schooling and the adult world of work was treated in the show's inimical pastiche of personalities, events, and popular and traditional cultures, intermingled with social issues. In the opening scene Springfield Elementary Career Day is proving a dismal failure. Local speakers are not capturing the students' attention, let alone their imaginations. Today the school loser's (Milhouse's) father fills only three minutes of his scheduled hour-long Career Day slot describing his job as assistant to a man who places advertising flyers under the windshield wipers of parked cars. This plays to an audience of vacant stares. When Principal Skinner attempts to enliven the pathetic talk by probing for a highpoint in the speaker's career, Mr Van Houton perks up for a few seconds to say that there had been one special day when his boss had been ill and he placed the flyers under the wipers himself. Faced with a sea of blank stares and 54 minutes of assembly time to fill, Skinner takes desperate counsel with

Bart's Grade 4 teacher, Mrs Krabappel. She warns that giving up Career Day would mean teaching, and she was just not willing to face that same sea of blank stares. At the suggestion of Lisa Simpson, the three visit the Springfield Speakers Bureau to find a more lively speaker. Lisa urges them to invite the creator of a popular cartoon (a parody of *South Park*) as someone the children would be excited to hear.

Cut to the Career Day assembly where the auditorium is now filled with bright eyed, excited children. The cartoonist, while thoroughly captivating the students with clips from the newest, yet to be broadcast episode and a surly description of his lifestyle debaucheries, greatly angers Principal Skinner. Skinner tries desperately to redeem the moment by pushing the cartoonist to talk about hard work, ethics, and their rewards. In response to each question, the cartoonist chuckles and further darkly tarnishes traditional notions of "career" by responding with, what are to Skinner but not to the children, outrageous answers. This life or death struggle to resurrect Puritan traditions and by the bootstrap work attitudes on the part of Skinner is thoroughly emblematic of socio-economic cultures old and new in deep conflict. Where popular media tell children that quick easy riches, irreverence, and the twenty-something screw around lifestyle is the current reality, the school (Skinner) attempts to reinstate and reinforce traditional notions of what constitutes meaningful adult work. As usual, his attempts—"Tell us about how HARD you had to work to make something of yourself"—are hyperpathetic. And yet, most of us who have attended public school readily recognize this conflict between what is valued in school and what happens outside its doors.

What is clear about Springfield Elementary is the profound affection with which its daily challenges are undertaken. Beneath the constant antics that undercut authority, the fundamental work of the school staff and faculty remains supportive of students in their social, intellectual, and emotional development. The methods used to do so are often ironic and reflective of postmodern malaise, and the show's writers waste no opportunity to target any and all aspects of education, especially those that receive attention in the television news media—one of the show's main agendas being to parody the very medium that gives it life (Roshkoff, 1996). Whatever appears as news, as sound bites in the popular media, make prime targets (e.g. standardized testing, contaminated cafeteria food, the drugging of less than compliant students), as do contemporary trends and features of the medium itself (e.g. the raw meanness of scripted television dialog, the edgy plots and non-plots of reality TV, and the visual and auditory extremes to which the networks now reach to maintain our attention).

No matter how stinging the satire, how edgy the parody, however, the school is ultimately a humane and caring institution. In spite of being continually abused by the rambunctious Bart and the dictatorial Superintendent Chalmers, Mrs Krabappel and Principal Skinner never take themselves so seriously as to forget their professional commitments: they are always accessible, attentive, and responsive (albeit with attitude). Where some of their actions might appear spiteful—Bart's weekly chalkboard punishments, Ralph made to sit in the corner (oblivious that this constitutes punishment), Lisa expunged from the school orchestra for improvising on her saxophone—deep down we see these adults struggling to do right by the children,

the institution, and the community. Skinner (the name is no accident) is a principal in whom trust and authority is imbued by the citizenry. Classrooms look and feel like classrooms, teachers teachers, and children children. Just like real schools, however, under the surface lurks the unmentionable; a psychological undergrowth that can make us squirm with uncomfortable recognition. But, *The Simpsons* rarely fails to illuminate this discomfort and thereby makes us laugh.

The following exchange between Lisa and her third grade teacher, Miss Hoover, exemplifies such moments of illumination:

Miss Hoover: [Addressing class on Valentine's Day] First we're going to construct paper mailboxes to store the valentines.

Lisa: Isn't that just pointless busy work?

Miss Hoover: [Taps her nose] Bull's-eye! Get cracking.

Implicit in Lisa's question and Miss Hoover's response is a genre of complicity readily recognizable within the seams of public schooling; uncomfortably on target, and close enough to the edge to incite our laughter. Further, Lisa is not rewarded for this display of critical thinking and articulation except through the cynical moment she shares with the adult she challenges, "Bull's-eye!" Here and throughout the show's nearly 400 episodes Lisa tends to embody the nation's schizophrenic relationship with institutions in general, and the institution of public schooling in particular. On the one hand, she sees through the institution's many guises and resents what she sees (warped agendas and blatant hypocrisy). On the other hand, she maintains a deep affection for Springfield Elementary and the less than perfect adults who comprise that community. Schooling within democracies of necessity promulgates this bipolar relationship—we are indeed instructed to see, but told to tolerate; we are nurtured to individualism, but commanded to conform; we are taught to ask questions, but hushed if these are not the right ones. Creator Matt Groening's paradoxical creations, Springfield Elementary and its star pupil Lisa Simpson, are clever instantiations of the inner conflicts schooling in a democracy instills.

Lisa's frustration with the limiting aspects of her education are expressed in many telling ways. For instance, when she learns that there is a private preparatory school in Springfield she reacts virulently to what she views as her parents' ultimate betrayal. "You told me there *were* no private schools!" Homer, who is a classic skinflint, responds "Daddy will send you to any college you want," underscoring his belief that what is free is free (public schools) and should thus be taken advantage of here and now, the future be damned. Thus, Lisa's world continues to be one where she cannot know what she knows. She goes through the motions of taking strong stands against injustices, of expressing her disapproval for things less cultured than a standard she has set for herself, but never ceases her longing to belong. She is a staunch feminist who is vocal and sanguine concerning the *condition féminine*. She is long on compassion, insight, and, as exemplified in the above exchange, a bit short on patience when it comes to perceived inequities and the shortcomings of public

education. However, for all of her brilliance she rarely benefits socially. Indeed, she is adversely rewarded when she demonstrates compassion for the class outcast, Ralph Wiggum, to whom she addresses a valentine on seeing he has received none. He in turn lavishes pathetic, unwanted attention on Lisa. These acts of critical thinking and compassion are Lisa's hallmarks and are ironically what keep her on the margin. Like creative improvisation on the saxophone and preaching humanism and feminism, Lisa herself is not part of the curriculum in a way that makes sense to the institution. Where others are compliant, her role is to keep trying to elucidate.

Another sample of complicity that extends outside the school building is Miss Hoover's granting the same Ralph Wiggum the leading role in the school play in spite of the fact that significantly more talented students have auditioned. As she announces that Ralph has won the starring role of George Washington, she flips the classroom shade up and down to signal to Ralph's father, Police Chief Wiggum, to remove the Denver boot (wheel clamp) from her car. Such actions can endear us to these characters in that, on the one hand, there is simply pleasure in rule breaking, in subversion, a theme that pervades this unusual sitcom. On the other hand, such events can remind us of ways of being part of a community for which there is nostalgia. Miss Hoover's ready surrender to extortion reinforces that tight grip of close community, for good and bad.

The Lives of Teachers

Many of Springfield's characters are loosely based on composites of television characters of the past. Bart's fourth grade teacher, Mrs Krabappel, for example, is a character we desire from the sweet, halcyon interior of the *Little Rascals* one room schoolhouse where Miss Crabapple ruled with syrupy caring and compassion. At the same time we desire social evolution, a most certain prerequisite of a highly educated populace. The cauldron of Springfield Elementary forces these two incompatible desires to merge and the result, embodied in the character of Mrs Krabappel, is quite often a frightening display of schizophrenia. Where one can see just below the surface a woman once enthusiastic about working with children, Mrs Krabappel frequently suffers mid-life loneliness and disenchantment, classic burnout. The only acts that charm her sufficiently to bring on her throaty smoker's laugh are typically sadistic. Characteristically cruel acts in which she takes pleasure are giving bad grades, belittling children with low self-esteem, and seeing Bart Simpson, a source of great frustration, sent to the remedial (special education) classroom, examined by the school psychiatrist, put on medication, and humiliated. This sadistic side is mitigated by a 'tough teacher' guise that, on the surface, speaks of her wish for her students to do well and be held to high standards. As in real life, the viewer is not entirely fooled into believing that she operates in the best interest of the students in the school. Both the caring educator side of Mrs Krabappel and her sadistic alter ego are alarmingly familiar and their juxtaposition a source of unease, much like the unease of the children in her Grade 4 classroom.

Mrs Krabappel: [As she is passing out standardized test booklets] Now I don't want you to worry, class. These tests will have no effect on your grade. They merely determine your future social status and financial success.

In a sense, the Krabappel character is the embodiment of such anxiety and delights in resignation to external powers.

[Miss Hoover and Mrs Krabappel sit in the back row of the Twirl King Yo-Yo Champions Assembly]

Miss Hoover: I question the educational value of this assembly.

Mrs Krabappel: Hey, it'll be one of their few pleasant memories when they're pumping gas for a living.

Krabappel is a vehicle for dark humor through the unearthing and illumination of what typically goes unspoken, unchallenged, and is made light of through the veil of her crabbyness. "Indeed, by displacing certain anxieties and disabling habitual resistances, comedy can bring to light things that might otherwise be too uncomfortable to acknowledge" (McMahon, 2000, p. 230). Krabappel makes us squirm and in doing so illuminates those issues of human learning in institutions that otherwise go unexamined: the motives, hubris, and emotional lives of teachers, for example.

Quantitatively and qualitatively women are not well represented in the world of *The Simpsons*. Male characters outnumber female characters 63 to 16 (Snow & Snow, 2000). Springfieldian women are disproportionately unhappy, in often regressively co-dependent relationships, and rarely—save for Mrs Krabappel and Miss Hoover—work out of the home. Signs of wear are manifest on both working women's faces. Mrs Krabappel's chief pleasure (apart from reeking revenge on Bart) is her steamy, on-off, semi-secret affair with Principal Skinner.

Like Krabappel, Principal Skinner's professional life is a composite parody of earlier traditions: he is not only nefariously controlled by his Hitchcockian, *Psycho*-inspired mother, but also plays yes-man to outsider Superintendent Chalmers—the classic no-nonsense alpha boss of the 1950s. Skinner's daily existence is also plagued (à la Mr Wilson's in *Dennis the Menace*) by the same Bart Simpson. Unlike the *Menace*, however, Bart's ingenious attacks on Skinner do not smack of childlike innocence, but rather of cranked up nastiness tempered by deeper motives of social justice—this is what Bart must do; the idiocy must be exposed, the postmodern guffaw must be coaxed.

Bart: [of Skinner, proudly] Wow! I broke his brain!

Bart's laughter is part devilish and part redemptive. It indicates success in exposing what needs to be exposed and it is from this (and other more scatological forms of) exposure that both Bart and the viewers derive great pleasure.

Springfield's faculty and administrators possess qualities that ring familiar to any graduate of US public schools, even in the face of its odd admix of the stereotypical and hypercontemporary. Mrs Krabappel has the dress and demeanor of the

traditional elementary teacher—neatly coiffed, dressed, and well-spoken—her behaviors can take on surprisingly quick, hard shifts to the progressive and reflective and just as quickly continue her mundane check of multiple choice answers with “Old Faithful” (her trusty red pen). Moments of otherwise uncharacteristic softness never fail to throw both the children in her class as well as the viewers.

Just as the reputation of US education suffers shallow criticism from all directions, the multiple trajectories from which sharp arrows of satire are slung render Springfield Elementary target to many, all, and sundry forms of criticism. In the world of *The Simpsons*, however, that criticism is the gleeful, postmodern point. The institution slyly, naughtily opens itself up to critique while cleverly representing critique itself. When all school activity comes to a sudden halt because Lisa (having been angered when told her predicted occupation would be “homemaker”) has hidden the school’s teachers manuals, the viewer is invited to study the messages inherent in the paralyzing of instruction, the stunned, impotent staff, and the deeper social learning that appears to take place anarchically in lieu of the lock-step curriculum. When Superintendent Chalmers visits the building, the fear and vulnerability his inspection stirs is startlingly familiar and all the more present to examine.

In spite of their foibles, in spite of times when the best interests of the school and its students appear to lapse on their radar, these educators nonetheless remain heroes in the eyes of the community. They keep at their craft, continue in the service of the children and their families, and rarely sway from their professionalism. In effect, they reflect our hopes and desires for US children: that professional educators will continue to care and take care of children’s development no matter what. Springfield Elementary overall serves viewers a delicious reminder of our own postmodern condition—chock full of ironies, inconsistencies, blunders, and joys.

In psychoanalytical terms, through Springfield we experience what Freud called “the pleasure in remembering.” In sociological terms, this is a remembering that concerns our own social identities in relation to a culture that, in this case, challenges their very existence. Therein but one of many ironic twists characteristic of Groeningesque humor: that little space in between where we are encouraged to confront contradictions while taking pleasure in actively producing new meaning.

The Craft of “Producerly” TV

“Cartoons have writers?”—a wide-eyed Bart asks of no one in particular.

Animation provides artists with *carte blanche* on plot, theme, character, and action. *The Simpsons* never lets us forget that what we are seeing is only achievable through 100% artifice. The art and craft of disassembling institutions—the media, popular culture, schools, governmental institutions, social institutions—is enabled by the irreal plasticity of the animation genre, a genre that defies physics and human physicality, thus opening wide the range of paradoxical possibility. The authors themselves are the first to point out that what *The Simpsons* accomplishes in the way

of subversion and irreverence would fall flat in a non-animated form. Constrained by no aspects of real life, they can guide viewers through territory not possible in non-cartoon genres. In this artificial world—from the humanoid quality of Springfield’s citizens’ four-fingered hands to releases of killer radiation from the town’s nuclear power plant—what is in real life eerie and unfathomable for Springfieldsonians is just part of the regular flow of their poignantly absurd, yet community grounded existence. Even though a number of episodes contain apocalyptic moments where fear reigns, these end up being as short and as inconsequential as the typical attention span.

The craft of animation generally, and the craft of this series in particular, has the power to pull us into a sparse, yet distinctive universe, a world comprised of minimal visual information. In this sort of universe, one that consists of highly stylized spaces that lack distracting real life details, we are more inclined to suspend disbelief (McCloud, 2000; McLuhan, 1964). As we were once pulled into the dense universe of school, we are drawn into and immersed in the world of Springfield, USA. There we are provided with literal outlines and minimalist material to recreate our sense of that experience, both personal and, due again to this particular crafting of the cartoon medium, at an ironic distance. This immersion into the creation/recreation of experience is what Fiske pointed to as the key to the “producerly pleasure” we derive from good television; in short, the pleasures we derive from the process of making meaning with and from what we view (Fiske, 1994, p. 254). *The Simpsons* is at once a producerly text—one viewers actively co-produce in ways not dissimilar to Barthes’ writerly text—and a viewerly text—one which, like readerly texts, “trigger routinized, well rehearsed narrative structures” (Bruner, 1996, p. 138). *The Simpsons* plays with the spaces between convention and interpretation to incite illuminations and laughter. Some of this pleasure is specifically subcultural, rendering the corresponding meanings we generate all the more satisfying. Viewing becomes a correspondingly subversive and pleasurable process of meaning construction or, as Fiske suggested, a subcultural process whereby viewers find their own pleasures “in relationship to the ideology they are evading” (Fiske, 1994, p. 249). The prominent theme of *The Simpsons* of satirization and subversion of institutions is a particular source of pleasure and may account, at least in part, for its worldwide popularity, particularly the appeal of bad boy Bart Simpson.

Cartoon theorist Scott McCloud persuasively argued (using visual techniques that are unfortunately not a possibility here) that because our mind picture of our own face (our self) is merely “a sketchy arrangement . . . a sense of shape . . . a sense of general placement,” cartoons—being of the same imagistical sort—are a means of seeing and experiencing ourselves (McCloud, 1993, p. 36). Likewise, at the dawn of the popularity of television Marshall McLuhan was quick to point out the “depth involvement” made possible by minimal representation (McLuhan, 1964, p. 152). One need only look at the popular smiley face (two dots and a curve in an oval) for a sense of this base reaction to simple forms. This craft aspect suggests yet another source of producerly pleasure. All of the characters in *The Simpsons* are composed of the same small collection of simple shapes and lines; the minor differences in their

appearances speak volumes on how we relate to them. In the case of Principal Skinner, for example, two simple lines around the standard Simpsonian eyes project restrained psychosis; similar lines around Mrs Krabappel's mouth belie a tendency to sadism, and Miss Hoover's tense frown the hardening of disillusionment. We nevertheless persist in experiencing these characters, these sparse collections of lines, as we do all Springfieldians, as human, as ourselves.

Cartoonists use simple lines to tell complex stories and provoke deep emotions. Like the Kabuki theater mien, the Simpsonian face is a page, the writing on which is "reduced to the elementary signifiers of writing (the blank of the page and the indentations of its script)" and are merely "gestures of the idea" (Barthes, 1982, p. 89). Such minimal signification makes entrance into a cartoon world easy and at the same time maximizes the saliency of select shapes, actions, emotions, and reactions. This amplification through simplification of cartoon art reflects our predisposition for filling in missing information, for completing the most basic outline of a concept and is the central force of the medium (McCloud, 1993, p. 30). We've long recognized this natural propensity as a fundamental feature of print literacy and orality—filling in the interstices of symbolic and auditory representation with our knowledge and experiences. In considering the global reach of *The Simpsons* in general, and its depictions of education in the USA in particular, the show's craft, in tandem with both its producerly and viewerly possibilities, are notable.

Memes

The Simpsons challenges audiences to compute the show's "avalanche of allusions" (Matheson, 2001)—complex allusions mostly pertaining to mundane problems of existence. This can represent hard work for the attentive, producerly viewer, as well as a great deal of missed humor for those less versed in viewerly texts. Indeed, the televisually literate, without a fairly extensive grounding in traditional, Western liberal arts, will miss a good number of opportunities for connectivity to the codes of the show's meaning packages. Part of the hard work of producerly viewing also lies in the fact that the themes expressed in this show are not the themes per se (e.g. bullying, nuclear disasters) but are messages about these themes—referred to within the media industry as "memes" (Roshkoff, 1996). These are message packets carrying set ideological interpretations. As such, we laugh because the message either flies in the face of what we believe, reaffirms what we believe, and/or brings a novel perspective to what we thought we believed. The cartoon holds up a mirror where we can examine both the fragmentation and continuity of postmodern life; the fragments reflect continual change that comes with ever increasing options; the continuity comes with our institutions which tend to remain as they are, static and superficially immune.

As we struggle with the deprivileging of traditional print and begin to value alternative forms of representing the world, the artistry of cartoons and the limitless possibilities of the craft suggest a broadening (Purves, 1990) not, as some have suggested, a dumbing down of ways of understanding our world. *The Simpsons*

masterfully provides familiar, enduring images of US schooling “in the very act of satirizing them” (Cantor, 1999, p. 737) and supplies continuous opportunities for pleasure through critical examination of that which we value and that for which we long. As such, the show serves as a window on new forms of producerly knowing and can serve as an essential tool for revisiting perceptions of education through the new meanings it and we construct.

Viewers and Institutions

Along with enacting producerly behaviors, contemporary television viewers are skilled media theorists. This fact is one of the principal *raison d’être* of the *The Simpsons*. “By deconstructing and reframing the images in our media, they [media authors] allow us to see them more objectively, or at least with more ironic distance” (Roshkoff, 1996, p. 114). The distance *The Simpsons* permits us is, however, not the complete story. There is also the self-reflective angle of the distance associated with the ironic and our impulses to both experience and traverse this conceptual stretch, which we do, predictably. Moreover, the disassociations we experience are fleeting, ephemeral. We ultimately come full circle back to the familiar, back to our original sense of relationship with our institutions—the irony of institutions themselves—having benefited from the rewards of critical distance. As such, this form of social commentary is unobviously provocative in its most salient guise. Presidents’ wives and right-wing anti-media militia aim their weapons at the show’s surface distractions—slapstick, visual humor—that constitute mildly irreverent takes on the most superficial of issues, e.g. Bart’s disrespectful behavior to his school principal, his “bad language,” etc. True subversion happens sub-surface, where the complexity of our relationship with our institutions throbs. This includes the irony of self-referentiality, an aspect of television that *The Simpsons* rarely misses a chance to nudge.

Ultimately *The Simpsons* undercuts both institutional attachments and detachments, thus holding forth for appraisal viewers’ own fickleness as social agents, institutional critics, and media consumers. This laying bare is what ultimately tickles our media-nurtured psyches and makes us laugh, and now more than ever *The Simpsons* is a healthy means of catharsis in its mocking of authority. We derive pleasure from the unearthing, the connecting, and the hilarity in the moment of recognition. Moreover, after 18 years you can still hear 10-year-old boys say “That sucks” and “Don’t have a cow,” but so do their fathers and mothers and, perhaps, even their teachers. These peeps of anarchic longings are in keeping with television’s history of depicting childhood innocence as it encounters and ultimately undermines and even vanquishes the evils of larger adult systems of control. Indeed, in television’s short history the wise yet innocent child who exposes and thwarts the evils of the System has been a ubiquitous theme. In film also a precocious child is often cast in the role of knower in an ignorant adult world. Unlike film, though, television tells little stories, stories that can capture the imagination in fragments

between commercials while playing to as wide an audience as possible. Thus, from *Spanky and our Gang* to *Rugrats* television has given us that satisfying mélange of playful pleasure, purity in innocence, and sage methods of beating on and beating back authority. It is the ultimate in wish fulfillment—our desire for liberation in cute, easily digestible bundles; the innocent, by proxy resistance to institutions. There is pleasure in making this meaning through the surrogacy of 8-year-old Lisa Simpson, for example, who is a seer and a knower either alongside knowing adults or, more often, in juxtaposition to those who are blatantly not. Lisa is a parody of what Matheson (2001) called “the cult of knowingness.” She is more than a caricature of young female asexual precocious prodigy. Indeed, as knower she is the site where the hyper-irony of the key issues of contemporary existence are examined. This is in contrast to Bart’s point of view—the raw, the immediate, and primeval. As bad as Bart can be, when he laments, we lament. When Lisa is saddened by the world’s idiocies and hypocrisies our senses sharpen.

Conclusion

What we learn from selective and reflective television viewing is vast and important. The role the medium plays in shaping and reflecting and refracting back civilization cannot be overemphasized (Bianculli, 1992). There is much to be learned from our producerly interaction with televised parodies of our lives, specifically in terms of education, and for both producerly and viewerly readings there is no better primer than *The Simpsons*. Nearly all episodes take a poke at US education in ways that are rattling, disturbing, and sufficiently reflective of real life that we have to laugh to relieve the force of realization. Where other forms of popular media have alternately held education in a pose of reverence and/or reviled its social reproduction of inequity (e.g. *Clueless*, *Saved by the Bell*), *The Simpsons* does all this and then some in far more sublime ways. It is pure, undistracted satire.

The satirical, albeit redemptive portrayal of schools in the *The Simpsons*—teaching, learning, administrating, failing, overachieving, succumbing to societal/political/economic pressures—is no less than brilliant in the deftly suggested conflicts it portrays and provokes. Its artifice, the cartoon genre, moreover, allows ready entrance, identification, and examination. While these contradictions can produce uneasy laughter, if we are attentive they can also illuminate the humanistic side of the society in which we live and the work we do to improve its institutions.

Notes

1. The Springfield Knowledgeum is full of loud exhibits that shake, shoot fire, and/or demonstrate the human reproductive process. The Knowledgeum excites children about various “-ologies” by disorienting them and making science their only path back to sanity. Current exhibits include “From seed to sausage: The curious journey of mustard” and “The vacuum of space surprisingly sucks”. (Gimple, 1998, p. 41)
2. Real life, according to Lévy (2001), is that which is not experienced electronically.

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