

The Simpsons.S18E16.Homerazzi





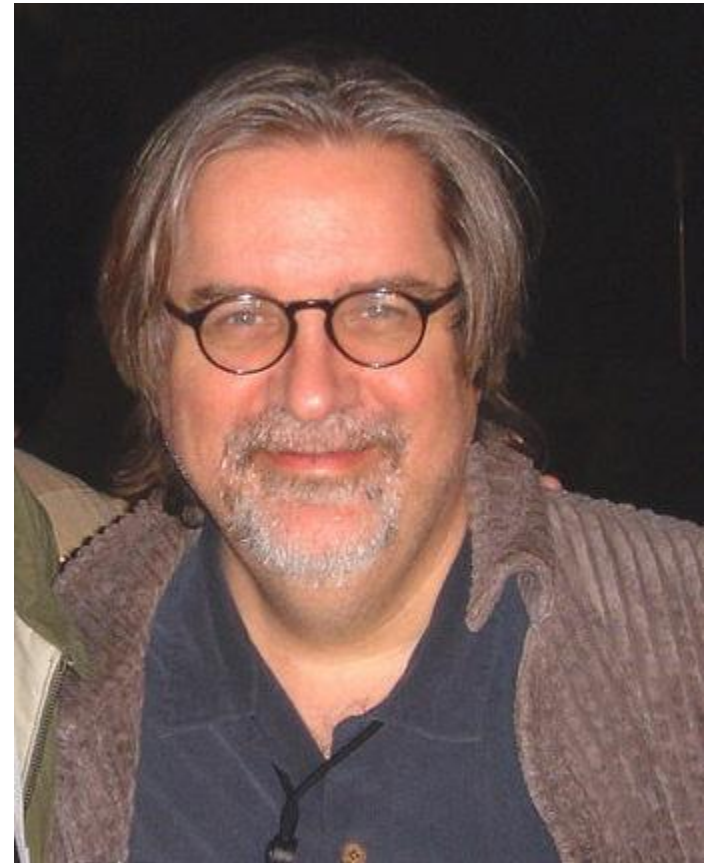
The Simpsons and American Society: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of the Perfect Donut

Dr. Markus Hünemörder
LMU München

The Simpsons Phenomenon

The Simpsons: An Overview

- ▶ broadcast in some form from 1987/89 to date
- ▶ 23 seasons
- ▶ 48 short clips, over 450 episodes, one feature film
- ▶ longest-running American sitcom
- ▶ longest-running American animated program
- ▶ longest-running American primetime television series
- ▶ runs on the FOX network
- ▶ Time magazine's December 31, 1999 issue named it the 20th century's best television series



Matt Groening, creator of the Simpsons

The Simpsons.S00E01.Good.Night



Recurring Aspects

- ▶ Opening sequence
- ▶ Chalkboard gag
- ▶ Couch gag
- ▶ Prank Calls
- ▶ Catchphrases:
 - ▶ “D’Oh!”
 - ▶ “Eat my shorts!”; “Don’t have a cow, man!”; “Ay, caramba!”
 - ▶ “Ha-Ha”; “Excellent...”; “Thank you, come again”
- ▶ Guest voice appearances



The Simpsons.S15E04.The Regina Monologues





Reading the Simpsons

The Simpsons as Satire

- ▶ while the Simpsons follows the format of the American sitcom, it is primarily a social, cultural, and political satire
- ▶ Springfield, a fictional “Middle American” town is clearly meant as a metaphor for American society
- ▶ it satirizes nearly every aspect of American (and human) life, incl. politics, religion, art, morality, philosophy
- ▶ the Simpsons ridicules and subverts political, social, and cultural authority



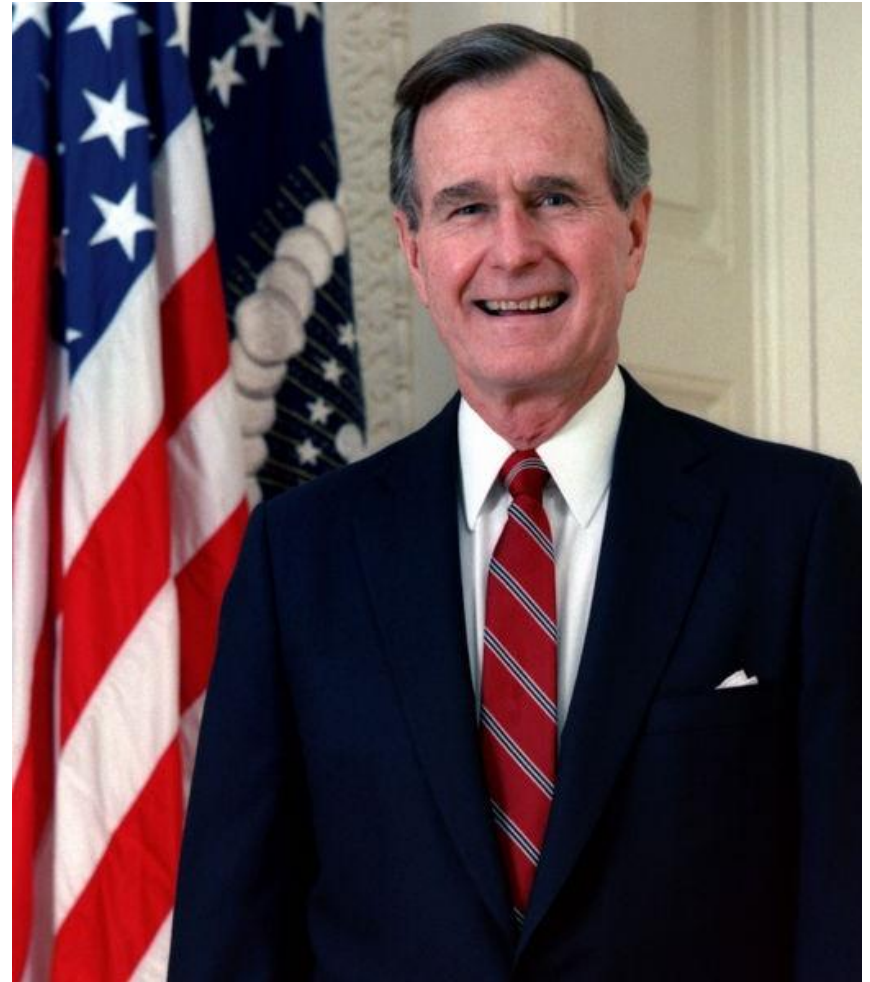
The Simpsons as Satire

- ▶ the Simpsons deals with controversial issues, e.g. gun control, elections, gay marriage, war, patriotism, immigration, etc.
- ▶ the Simpsons (while certainly not conservative) does not pursue a political agenda directly; the show typically satirizes all sides of an issue
- ▶ the Simpsons never leaves the boundaries of decency and political correctness. There is cartoon violence, but no bad language, graphic depiction of sex or racial stereotypes

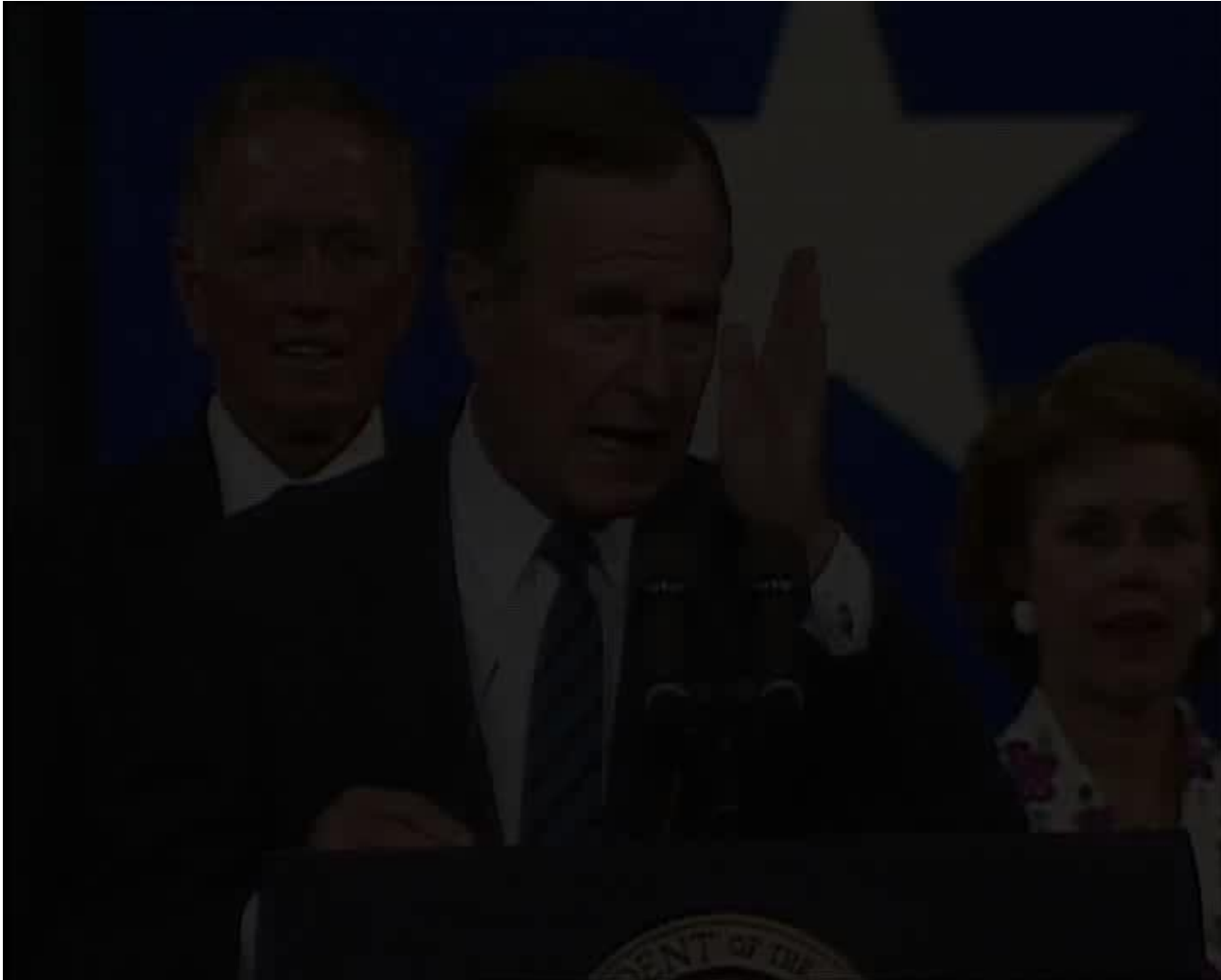


The Simpsons and Conservative Criticism

- ▶ esp. the early seasons were attacked by conservatives as destructive and anti-family
- ▶ during his re-election campaign in 1992, president George H.W. Bush called for “a nation closer to the Waltons than the Simpsons” and a focus on “family values”
- ▶ the Simpsons got even...twice
- ▶ in reality, the Simpsons is an extremely pro-family show; the family is the very center of the Simpsons’ universe



President George H.W. Bush on the Simpsons

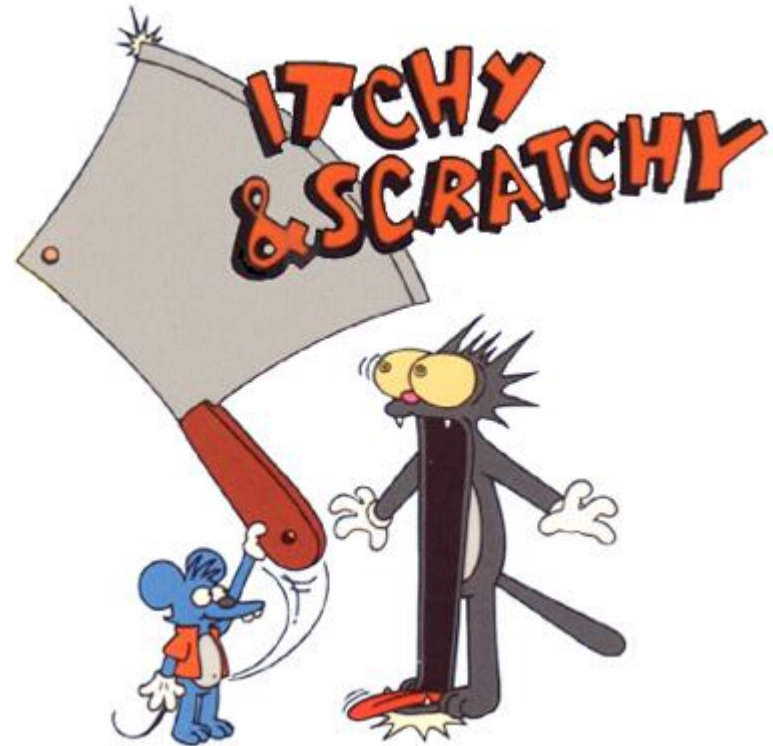


The Simpsons.S07E13.Two Bad Neighbors



The Many Layers of the Simpsons

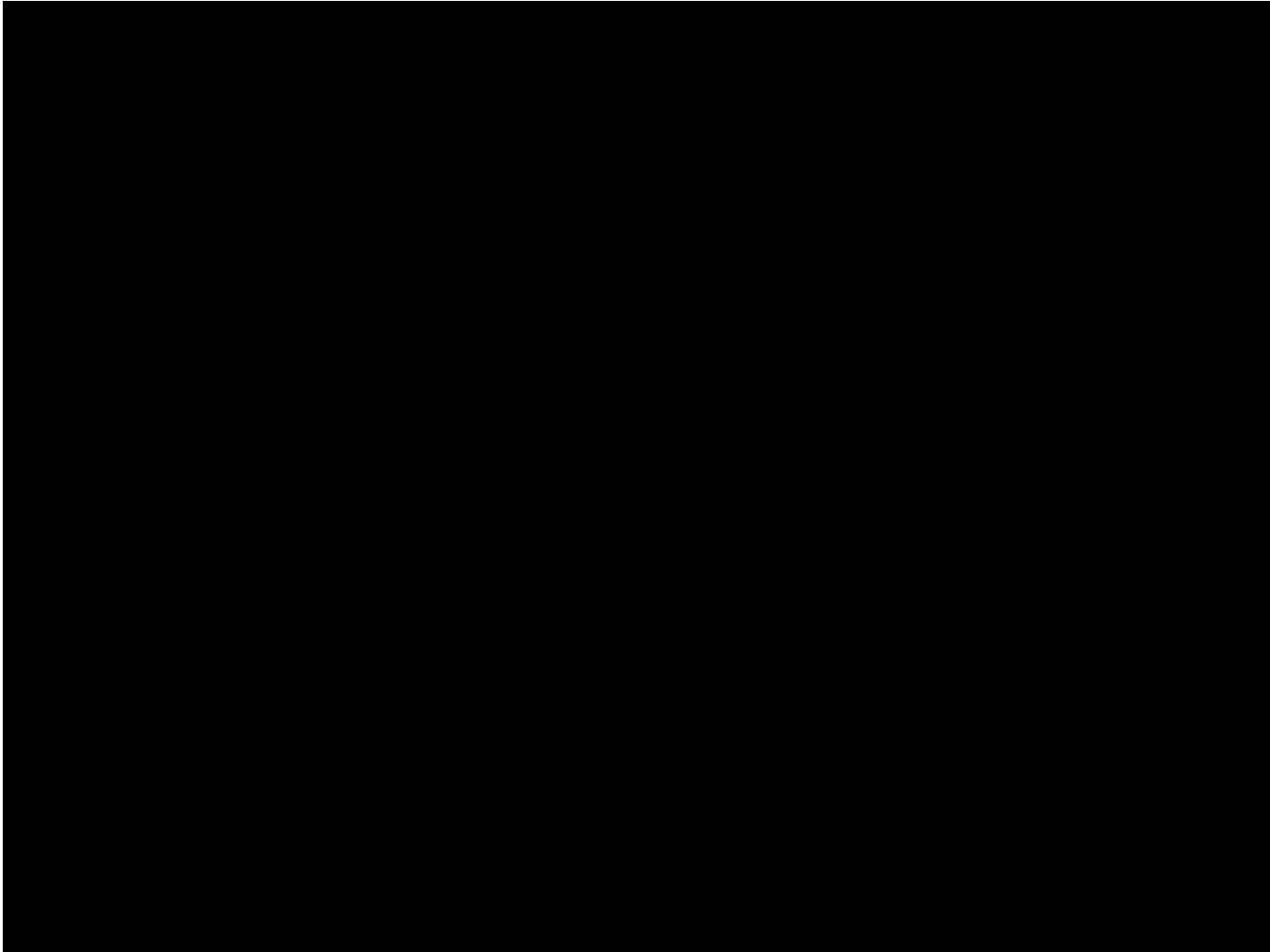
- ▶ the Simpsons episodes nearly require repeated watching due to several layers of humor and meaning
- ▶ first level: slapstick and sitcom
- ▶ second level: openly satirical topics, i.e. gun control or political corruption
- ▶ third level: fairly obvious to very hidden references to (pop) culture; hidden jokes
- ▶ fourth level: jokes about the role and impact of television and the media, and the commercialization of culture



The Simpsons.S03E23.Bart's Friend Falls in Love



Cheers Opening Sequence



The Simpsons.S03E10.Flaming Moe's



The Simpsons.S12E18.Trilogy of Error



The Simpsons and Politics

The Simpsons and Politics

- ▶ the Simpsons is a highly political show
- ▶ frequent political elements:
 - ▶ Mayor Quimby, the corrupt and womanizing politician
 - ▶ the Springfield Republican and Democratic parties
 - ▶ election campaigns, i.e. by Montgomery Burns, Krusty the Clown, and even Ralph Wiggum
- ▶ the hopes, fears, corruption and sheer craziness of American politics are frequent topics



The Simpsons.S19E10.E Pluribus Wiggum



The Simpsons.S19E10.E Pluribus Wiggum



The Simpsons.S20E04.Treehouse of Horror XIX



The Simpsons and Gun Control

- ▶ gun control is among the most divisive issues in American politics
- ▶ gun ownership is seen as a fundamental right by many Americans
- ▶ many others want to restrict gun ownership for safety reasons
- ▶ some gun control laws exist, but their effectiveness is limited



The Simpsons.S09E05.The Cartridge Family



The Simpsons and Patriotism

- ▶ several episodes deal with patriotism, especially in a post 9/11 society
- ▶ in all cases, love of country is upheld as an important value, but its excesses are satirized
- ▶ the show clearly criticized the politics of fear after September 11, 2001, esp. the logic of “you’re either with us or against us”
- ▶ in “Bart-Mangled Banner”, Bart accidentally insults the American flag, which eventually leads to imprisonment in Guantanamo



The Simpsons.S15E21.Bart-Mangled Banner



The Simpsons.S15E21.Bart-Mangled Banner



The Simpsons.S15E21.Bart-Mangled Banner



The Simpsons and the Media

The Simpsons and Fox

- ▶ the Fox network is owned by conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch. Fox News strongly supports conservative politics
- ▶ every once in a while, the Simpsons pokes fun at its own network and owner
- ▶ at one point, Fox news was ready to sue the Simpsons. Murdoch did not let that happen...



The Simpsons.S15E22.Fraudcast News



The Simpsons.S14E14.Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington



The Simpsons.S22E03.MoneyBART





Conclusion

The Simpsons and Other Shows

- ▶ several other shows take a similar, but often cruder or more offensive approach than the Simpsons:
 - ▶ Family Guy
 - ▶ American Dad
 - ▶ South Park
- ▶ in recent years, the Simpsons have lost some of their punch. Only a few episodes per season seem to have satirical wit
- ▶ still, the Simpsons invented cartoon satire and continue to define it



The Simpsons.S20E12.No Loan Again, Naturally





Thank You for Your Attention!

you can download this presentation (no videos, sorry)
and a bibliography for further reading
at www.amerikahaus.de/simpsons