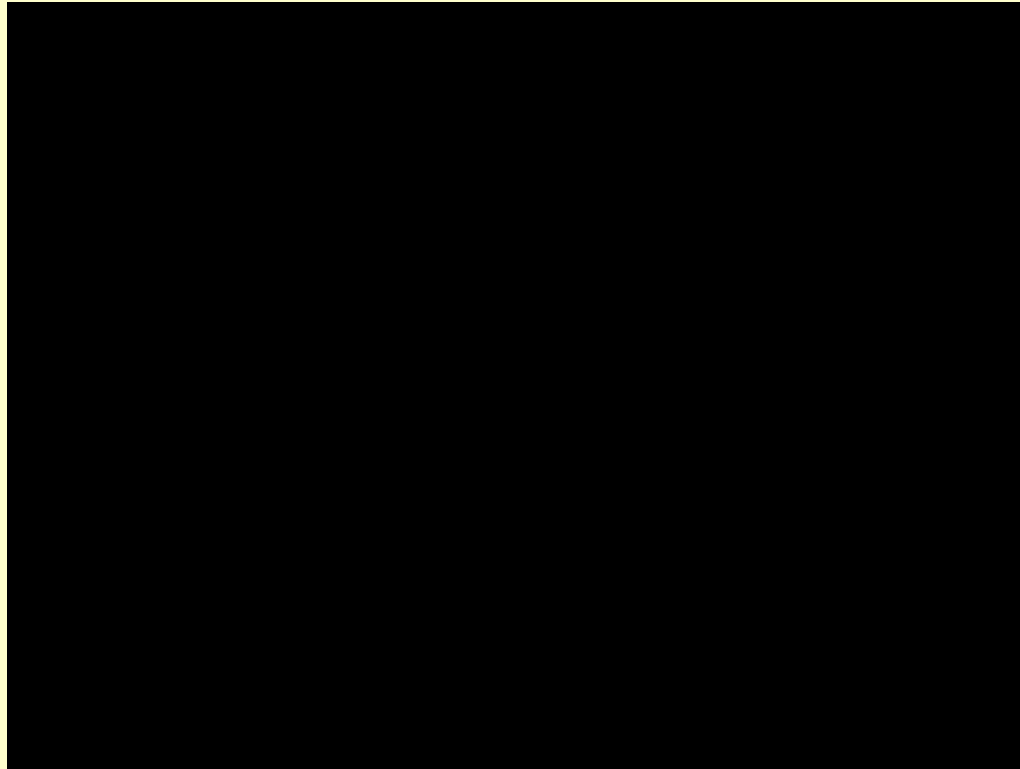


Season 18 – Homerazzi (Evolution Couch Gag)





The Simpsons and American Society

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of the Perfect Donut

Dr. Markus Hünemörder (LMU München)

February 11, 2011

Part I

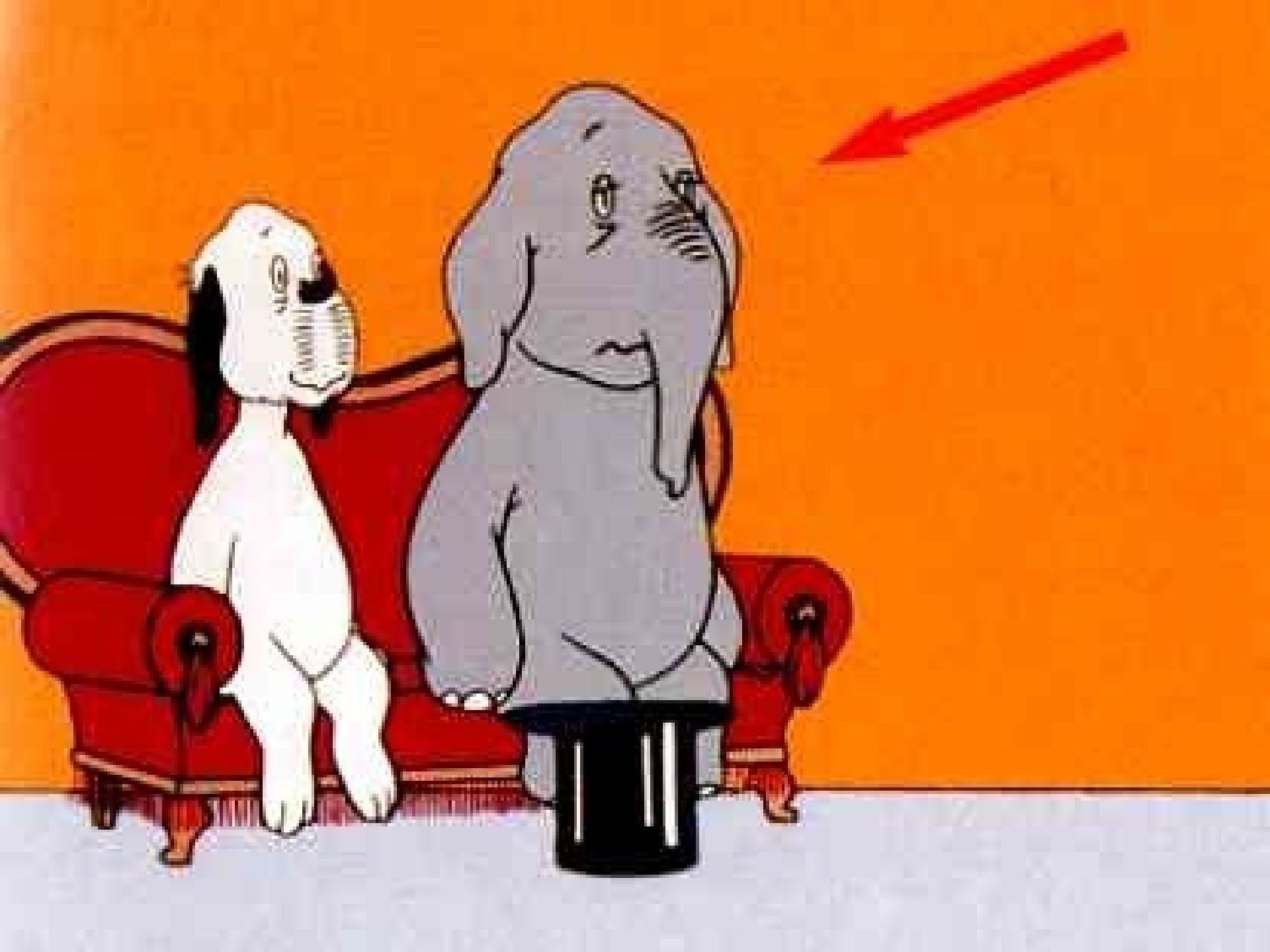
THE SIMPSONS PHENOMENON

The Simpsons: An Overview

- broadcast in some form from 1987/89 to date
- 22st season running
- 48 short clips, 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

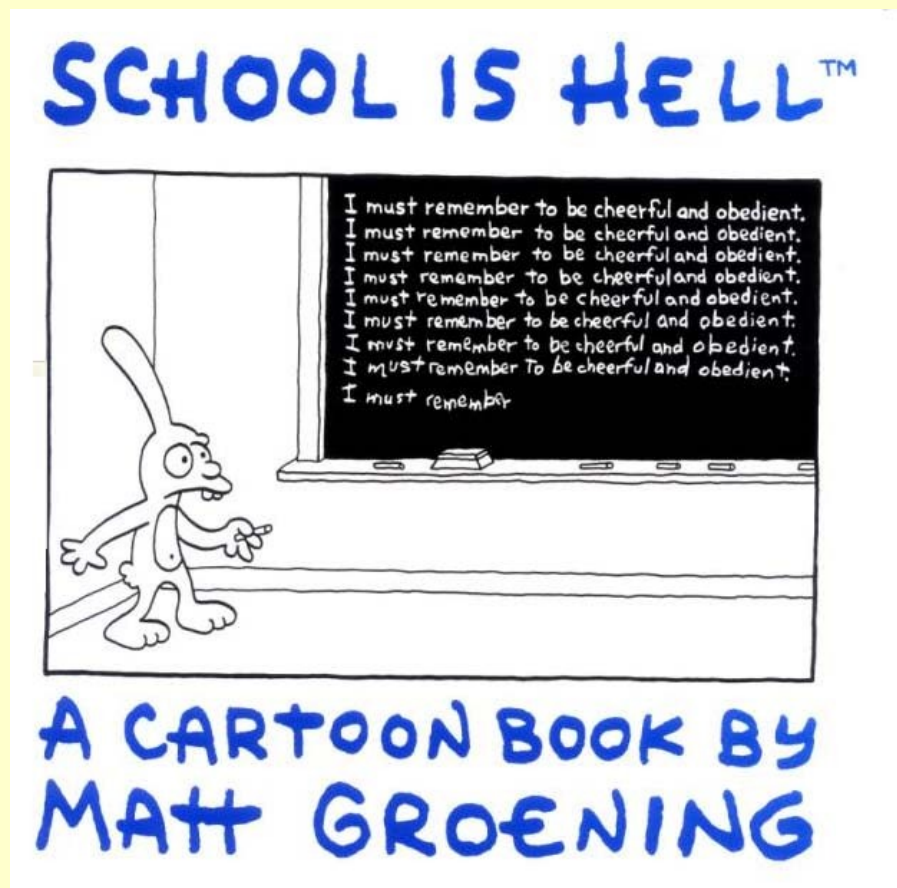


Matt Groening, creator of the Simpsons



The Simpsons: Origins

- Conceived by Matt Groening as a series of animated shorts for the Tracey Ullman Show
- Originally, Groening wanted to animate “Life in Hell”, but created a new set of characters instead
- Named for members of his own family, with Bart replacing Matt
- Although The Tracey Ullman Show was not a big hit, the popularity of the shorts led to a half-hour spin-off in 1989. The success of the Simpsons came as a surprise to both FOX, Groening, and Ullman



Cover of a Life in Hell book, 1987

Shorts Season 01 – “Good Night”



The Simpsons: From Bart to Homer

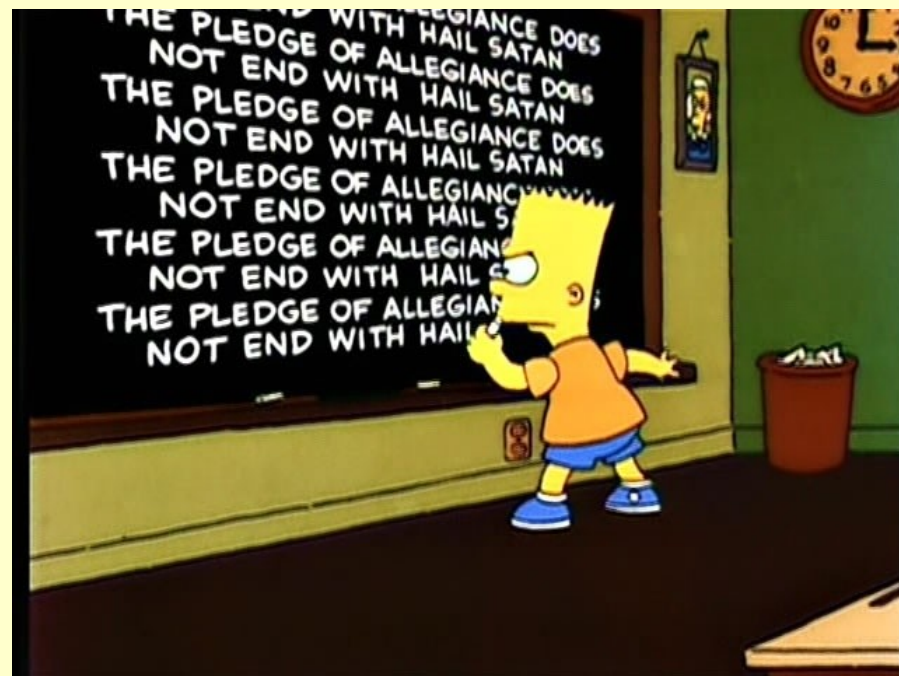
- During the early seasons, Bart was the main character; the show focused on his pranks
- Early “Bartmania” faded
- Roughly from the fifth season onward, the focus shifts from Bart to Homer
- “stupidity” makes for better satire than “rebellion” in the long run
- See also season 5, “Bart’s Inner Child” where everyone emulates Bart’s behavior
- By now, even minor character get their own episodes



T-Shirts with this image were worn – and banned – in many American schools in the early 1990s

Recurring Aspects of Simpsons Episodes

- 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”; “Worst (noun) ever”
- Guest voice appearances



Season 15 – “The Regina Monologues”

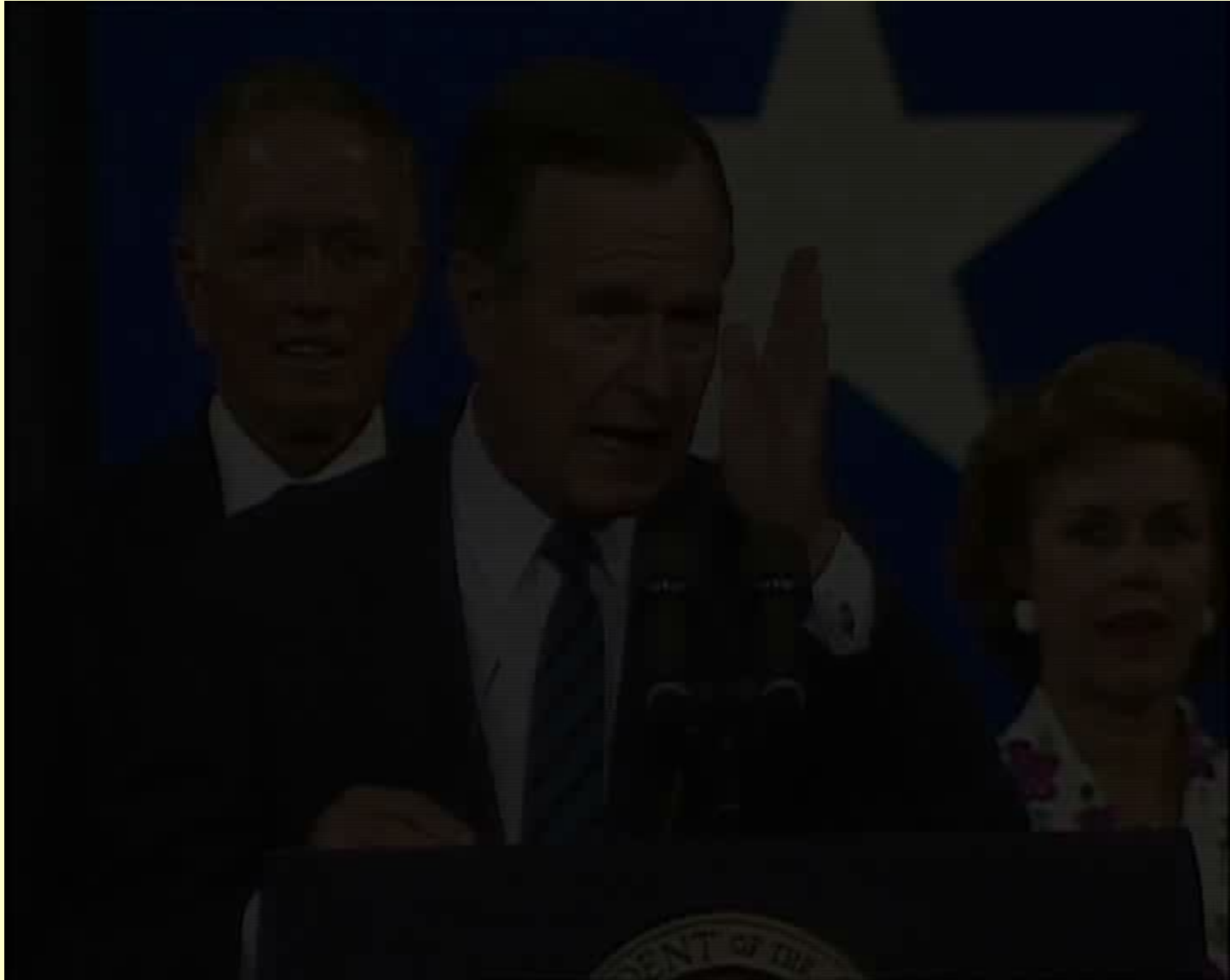


The Simpsons and Conservative Criticism

- 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...
- in reality, the Simpsons is an extremely pro-family show; the family is the very center of the Simpsons’ universe



George H.W. Bush, the Waltons, and the Simpsons



Season 07 – “Two Bad Neighbors”



The Simpsons vs. Die Simpsons

- The Simpsons is translated into German, French, and even Arabic
- However, much is “lost in translation,” many cultural references do not carry over well
- German TV has never seemed to fully realize that some cartoons are not for children
- The Simpsons is an excellent reason to watch TV in English! Try running the English soundtrack with English subtitles.
- DVDs of season 1-13 & 20 are available.



Part II

READING THE SIMPSONS

The Simpsons as Satire

- While the Simpsons follows the format of the American sit-com, 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 questions 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
- Some critics feel that the Simpsons subverts the foundations of society, others feel that the Simpsons fails to attack social wrongs decisively



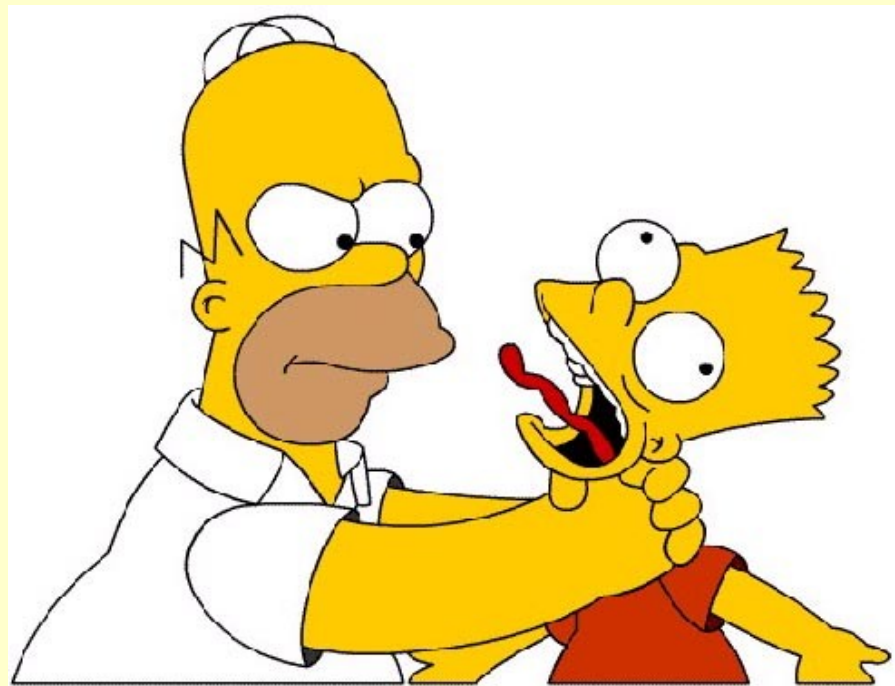
The Simpsons as Satire

- The Simpsons never leaves the boundaries of decency and political correctness. There is no bad language, graphic depiction of sex or racial stereotypes
- At the same time, the show has never dealt seriously with the issue of race. Other shows, like Family Guy, have more “bite” on this issue
- Also, while the Simpsons does cover gender issues in many episodes, one critic has noted that roughly 75% of Springfield seems to be male

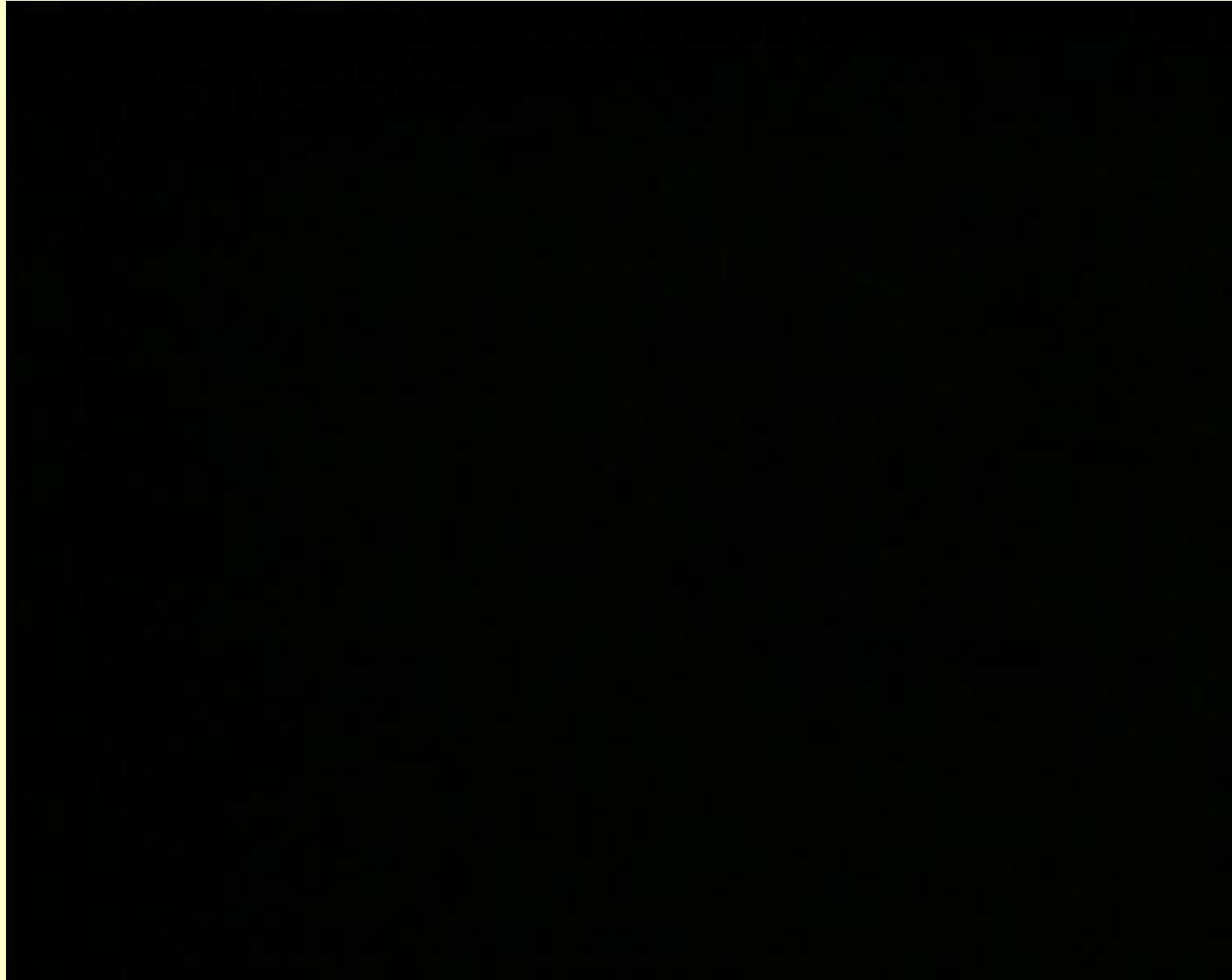


The Many Layers of the Simpsons

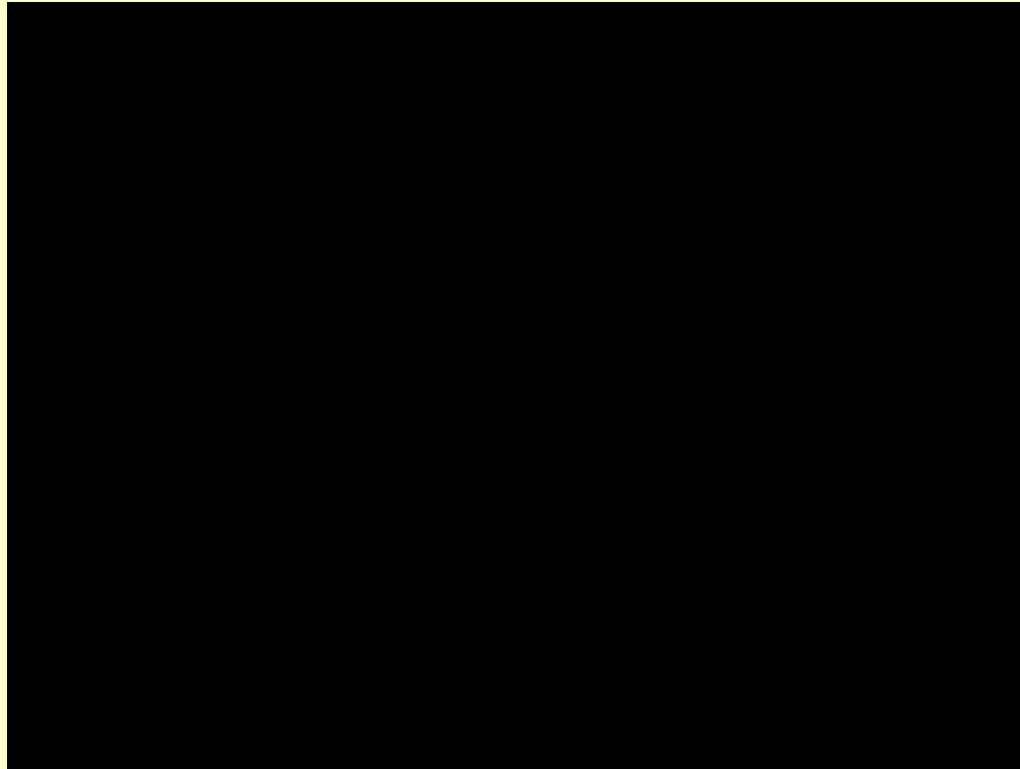
- The Simpsons episodes bear / require frequent re-watching due to several layers of humor and meaning
- First level: slapstick and sitcom comedy, i.e. Homer choking Bart
- Second level: openly satirical topics, i.e. gun control or political corruption
- Third level: fairly obvious to very hidden references to (pop) culture; hidden jokes
- Fourth level: Innuendos about the role and impact of television and the media, and the commercialization of culture



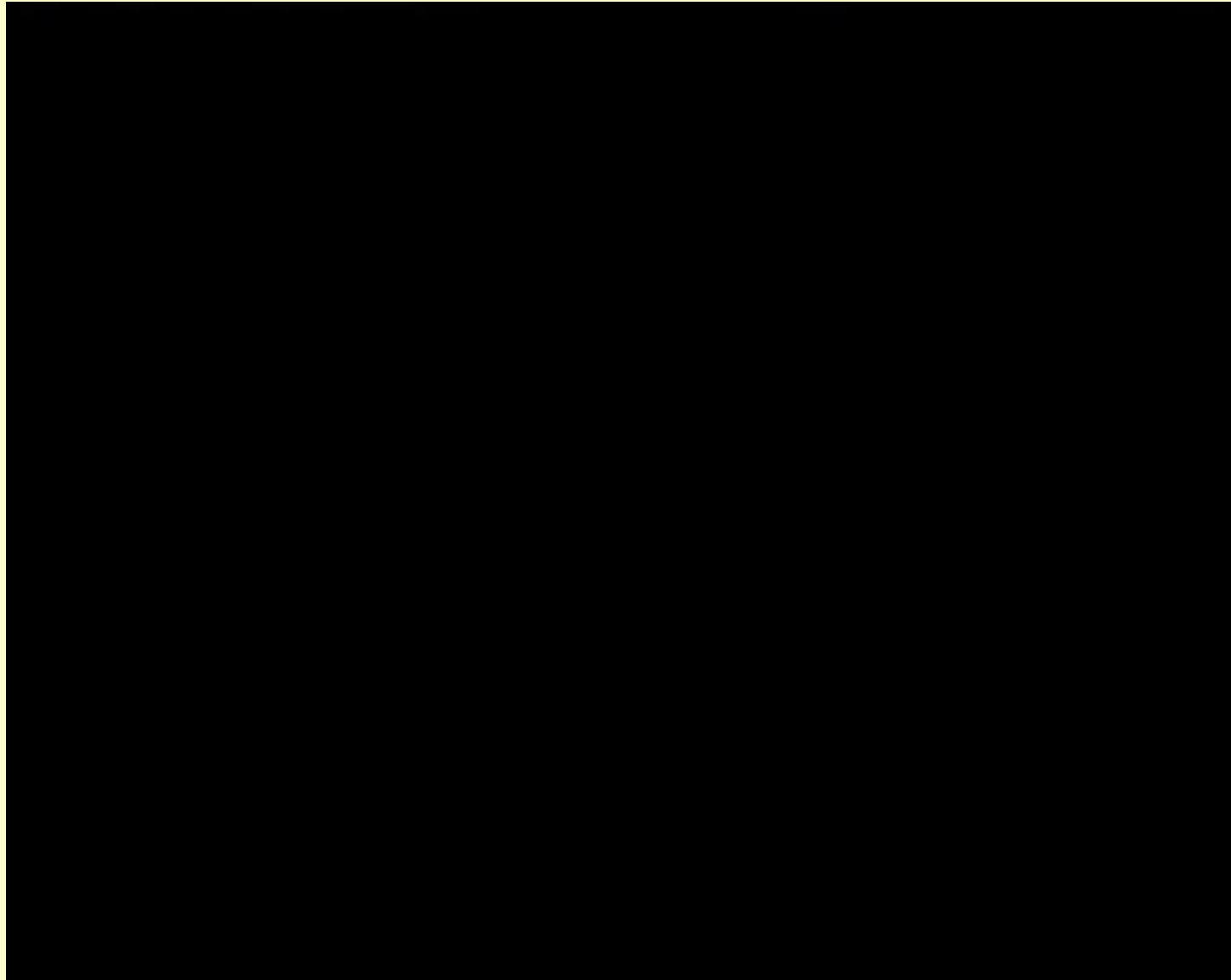
Season 03 – “Bart's Friend Falls in Love”



Cheers Season 08 – “A Bar is Born”



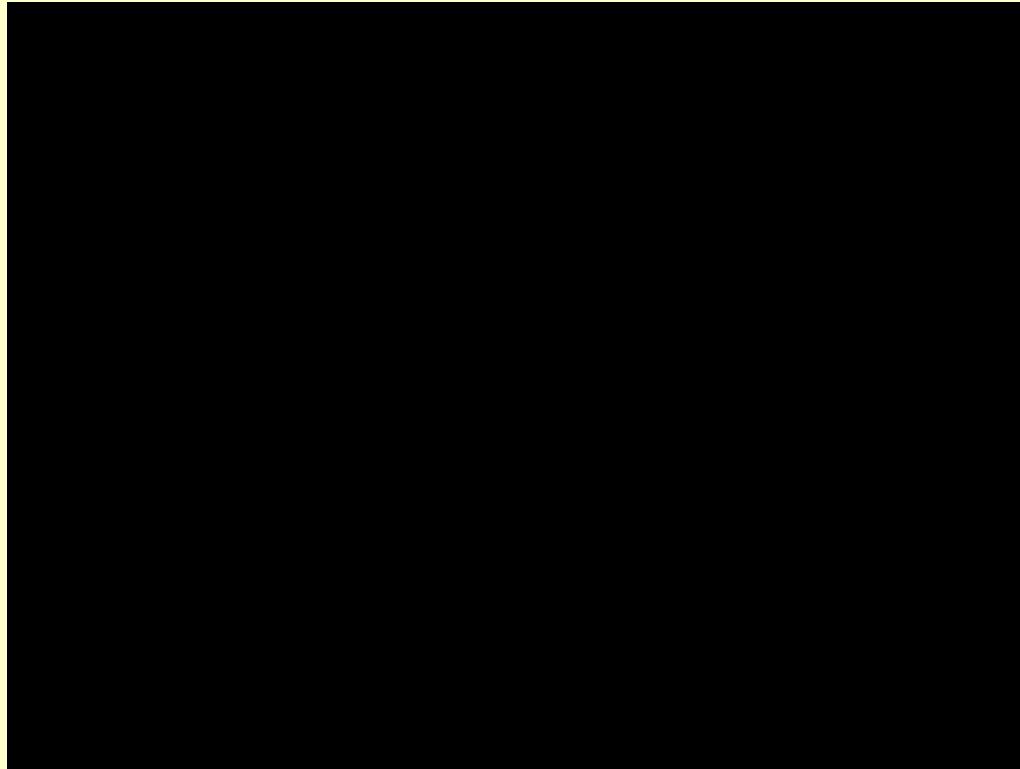
Season 03 – “Flaming Moe’s”



Apple Computers: “1984”



Season 20 – “Mypods and Boomsticks”



Season 12 – “Trilogy of Error”





A Selection of Episodes based on Films, Theater, TV

- Season 01 – “The Telltale Head”: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Telltale Heart”
- Season 02 – “Treehouse of Horror”: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”
- Season 03 – “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington”: Frank Capra, “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”
- Season 03 – “Bart the Murderer”: Martin Scorsese, “Goodfellas”
- Season 04 – “A Streetcar Named Marge”: Tennessee Williams, “A Streetcar Named Desire”
- Season 05 – “Cape Feare”: J. Lee Thompson, “Cape Fear”
- Season 05 – “Rosebud”: Orson Welles, “Citizen Kane”
- Season 05 – “Deep Space Homer”: Philip Kaufman, “The Right Stuff”
- Season 05 – “Lady Bouvier’s Lover”: Mike Nichols, “The Graduate”
- Season 06 – “Bart of Darkness”: Alfred Hitchcock, “The Rear Window”

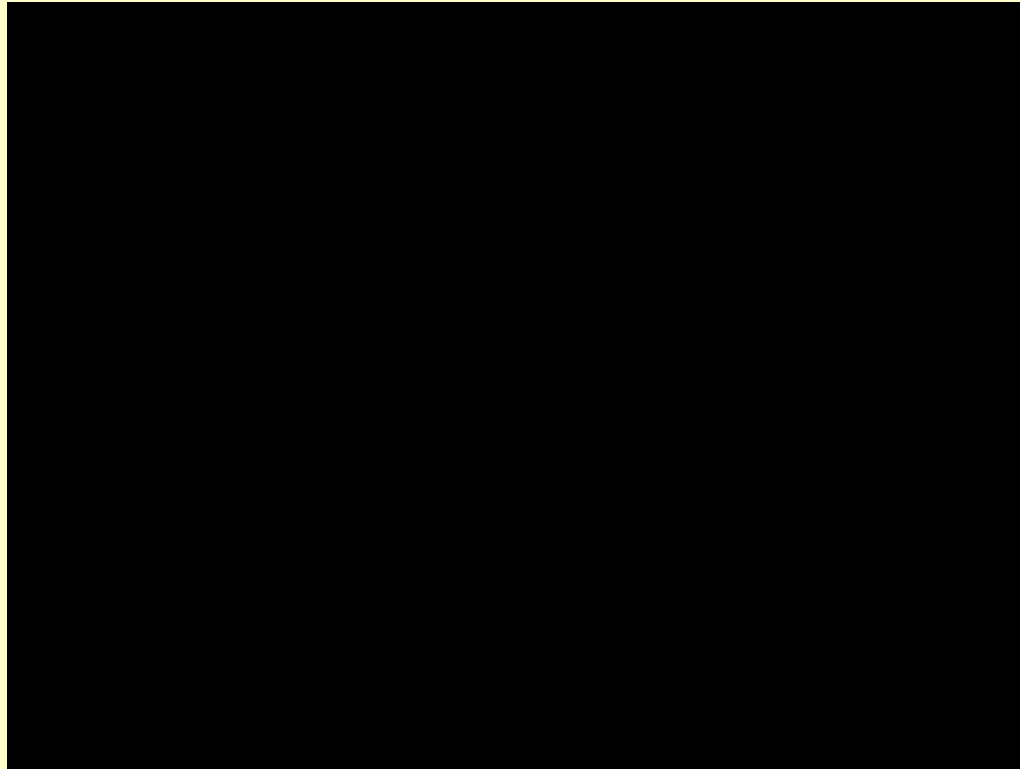
A Selection of Episodes based on Films, Theater, TV

- Season 05 – “Two Dozen and One Greyhounds”: Walt Disney, “101 Dalmatians”
- Season 07 – “22 Short Films about Springfield”: Quentin Tarantino, “Pulp Fiction”
- Season 08 – “The Springfield Files”: Chris Carter, “The X-Files”
- Season 08 – “Simpsoncalifragilisticexpiala(ANNOYED GRUNT)cious”: P.L. Travers, “Mary Poppins”
- Season 12 – “Trilogy of Error”: Tom Tykwer, “Lola Rennt”
- Season 13 – “Tales from the Public Domain”: Homer, “The Odyssey”; William Shakespeare, “Hamlet”
- Season 14 – “Helter Shelter”: Various Big Brother / Survivor reality shows
- Season 18 – “24 Minutes”: “24”

Part III

THE SIMPSONS AND POLITICS

Season 20 – “Treehouse of Horror XIX”



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
 - Springfield town hall meetings that come up with crazy solutions to crazy problems
 - 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



A Selection of Episodes with Political Topics

- Season 03 – “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington”: American Democracy
- Season 04 – “Last Exit to Springfield”: Labor Relations
- Season 06 – “Sideshow Bob Roberts”: Congressional Campaign
- Season 07 – “Much Apu About Nothing”: Immigration
- Season 07 – Two Bad Neighbors: President George H.W. Bush
- Season 09 – “The Cartridge Family”: Gun Control
- Season 14 – “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington”: Congressional Campaign
- Season 14 – “New Kids on the Blecch”: Aggressive Military Recruiting
- Season 15 – “Bart-Mangled Banner”: Patriotism
- Season 16 – “There's Something About Marrying”: Gay Marriage
- Season 17 – “The Monkey Suit”: Evolution v. Creationism
- Season 19 – “E Pluribus Wiggum”: Presidential Campaign of 2008

Political Parties in Springfield

- Springfield has both the Republican and the Democratic Party
- the Springfield Republicans: rich people meeting at a vampire's castle
- the Springfield Democrats: women, gay people and immigrants meeting at a salad bar
- both are common clichés about the parties: Republicans as scheming, heartless capitalists, Democrats as an out-of-touch, disorganized collection of minorities
- neither cliché is true, but there is enough (exaggerated) truth to them to be satirically funny



Springfield's top Republicans

Season 19 – “E Pluribus Wiggum”



Season 19 – “E Pluribus Wiggum”



Season 19 – “E Pluribus Wiggum”



The Simpsons and Guns

- gun control is among the most divisive issues in American politics
- second amendment to the Constitution: “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”
- 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



Season 09 – “The Cartridge Family”



Season 16 – “There’s Something About Marrying”

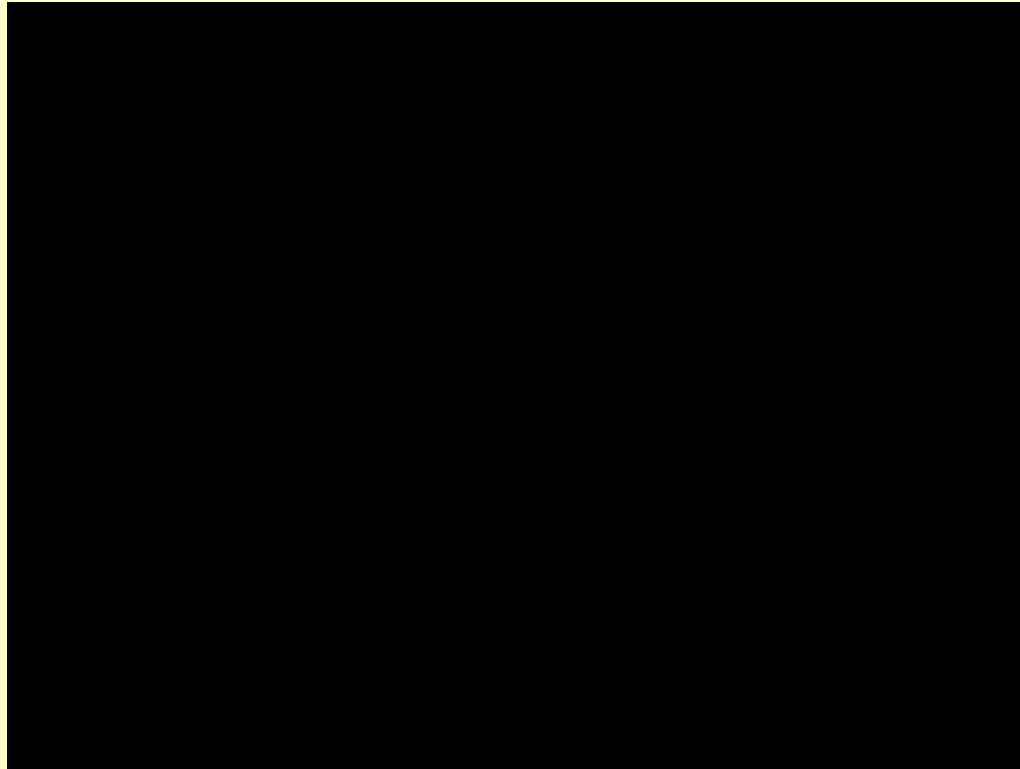
- Gay Marriage is another hot topic in American politics
- Resistance by many churches
- Springfield legalizes gay marriage for profit; Homer becomes a reverend
- Marge, a liberal, is all in favor – until her own sister wants to marry a woman (actually a man disguised as a woman)
- Hypocrisy of conservatives and liberals alike
- See also Season 08, “Homer’s Phobia”



Season 16 – “There’s Something About Marrying”



Season 08 – “Homer’s Phobia”

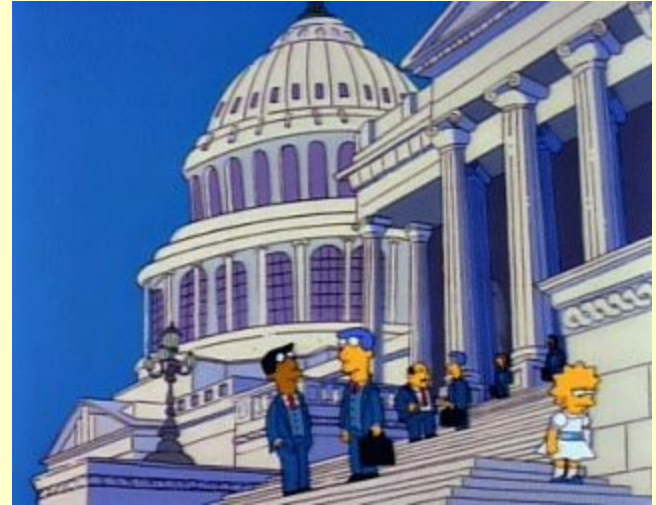


Part IV

SAMPLE EPISODES

“Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington” (S03E02)

- classic episode on American politics
- spoof on Frank Capra’s classic “Mr. Smith goes to Washington” with James Stewart, essentially a patriotic fairy-tale with great inspirational power
- good episode to discuss political system, checks and balances, role of Washington DC in American political culture



“Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington” (S03E02)

Political Topics:

- patriotism and its rituals (speech contest, graded for “jingoism”)
 - the political process: from bill to law
 - political corruption scandals
 - environmentalism (timber industry, spotted owl controversy)
 - women’s rights (Winnifred Beecher Howe memorial, Susan B. Anthony dollar, number of female senators)
 - ambivalent perception of the federal government: source of patriotic pride and target of cynical scorn at the same time
 - miraculous and ridiculously speedy punishment of the corrupt politician
 - “I can’t believe it, the system works!”
 - rejection or celebration of the Am. political system?
 - (satire of) powerful myth of corruption and redemption
-

“Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington” (S03E02)

Portrayal of Washington, DC

- the Watergate
 - Lincoln Memorial: role of Abraham Lincoln in American political culture and civil religion
 - Jefferson Memorial: physically more remote, historically more ambivalent
 - Washington Memorial
 - role of memorials on the National Mall
 - the White House (with Barbara Bush in the bathtub)
 - National Air and Space Museum; role of museums on the National Mall (current debate: National Black Museum)
 - Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
-

“Much Apu About Nothing” (S07E23)

- classic episode on (illegal) immigration and its politics
- as topical today as it was in 1996
- immigration is not only a central aspect of American history, but also a hot political topic, esp. illegal immigration
- US as a destination of both legal and illegal immigrants
- repeated failure to develop an equitable immigration policy that would effectively shape the immigration the US needs without driving millions into illegal status



“Much Apu About Nothing” (S07E23)

Immigration issues

- illegal immigrants as scapegoats, repeated waves of anti-illegal immigrant sentiment
 - repeated amnesties for illegal immigrants
 - the naturalization process and the citizenship test
 - Apu’s struggle to balance his American and Indian identities
 - immigration background of all Americans
 - diversity of immigration: 50% of Indian immigrants have college degrees (like Apu)
 - fear of illegal immigrants taking advantage of US social services
 - Apu’s patriotism but also refusal to do jury duty
 - quote on the statue of liberty (“give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free)
 - neither party in the US is anti-immigrant, but both have somewhat anti-immigrant wings
 - US is not “Fortress America”: ca. 700.000-1.000.000 legal immigrants to US per year are largely uncontroversial
-

“Much Apu About Nothing” (S07E23)

California Issues

- bears in gardens
 - controversial Proposition 187 (1994) to exclude illegal immigrants from schools, services
 - passed, but was declared mostly unconstitutional by federal courts
 - career of Republican governor Pete Wilson: at first successful, but hurt California Republicans in the long run
 - role of plebiscites in California
 - close current parallel: Arizona law making it a *state* crime to be an illegal immigrant and requiring police to check residence status
 - also stopped by federal court
 - big controversy: many Americans support such a law
 - result of political deadlock on immigration reform that can only agree on tightening border security, but not on what to do with ca. 12 million illegal immigrants and how to shape future immigration
-

Part V

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 satirizes its own network and owner
- at one point, Fox news was ready to sue the Simpsons. Murdoch did not let that happen...
- season 15 – “Fraudcast News” is a commentary on the kind of media power concentration Murdoch is pursuing



Season 15 – “Fraudcast News”



Season 15 – “Fraudcast News”



Season 14 – “Mr. Spritz Goes to Washington”



Season 22 – “MoneyBART”

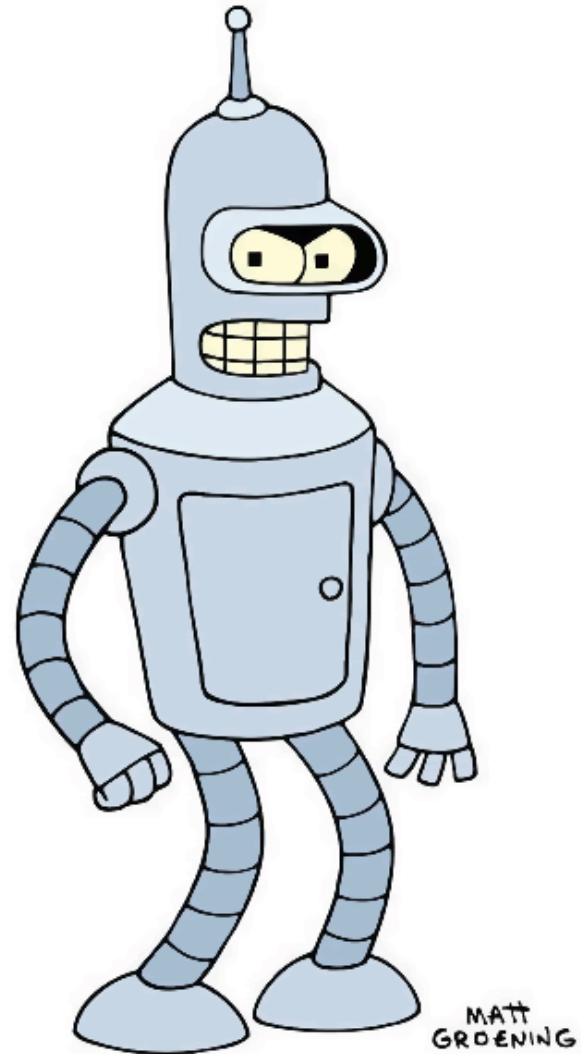


Part VI

CONCLUSION

The Simpsons and Other Shows

- Matt Groening's next big project after the Simpsons: Futurama
- 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, considerable criticism against the Simpsons. In fact, only a few episodes per season seem to have satirical wit
- Still, the Simpsons invented cartoon satire and continue to define it



Bender from Futurama

Season 20 – “No Loan Again, Naturally”



Thank you for your attention!

You can download

- This presentation (no videos, sorry)
- Links to episode guides, etc.
- Tips on further reading

www.amerikahaus.de/simpsons