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Trick, Treat, Transgress

THE SIMPSONS' TREEHOUSE OF HORROR
as a Popular-Culture History
of the Digital Age

SCHÜREN

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Danksagung

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1 Introduction

This introduction will present my topic, *THE SIMPSONS*, which many scholars and fans call the most exciting U.S.-American TV production of the 1990s if not of all times; among them is the famous TV scholar Jason Mittell in one of his best-known essays, “Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of *THE SIMPSONS*” from 2001 which he begins with the following words: “Few television programs exemplify 1990s media like *THE SIMPSONS* – popular culture sensation, marketing phenomenon, generic mixture, (alleged) embodiment of postmodernism, and representative of the post-Fordist network era.” (15) But whereas the regular *SIMPSONS* series is also one of the most discussed TV shows ever, its *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR (ToH)* annual Halloween cycle so far hasn’t caught the critics’ attention. In this initial chapter I hypothesize that *THE SIMPSONS*’ Halloween special is well worth academic attention because it has established its very own narrative strategies, aesthetic principles, as well as its generic set up; it approaches U.S.-American popular culture and its history in unique ways. The concentration on *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* necessitates the use of different reading strategies and theoretical approaches than the analysis of the main *SIMPSONS* series. I will show that when read closely, the Halloween Special will reveal the distinctive way it works and how it works differently than *THE SIMPSONS*. I consider *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* a most innovative series: For me, it works as no less than a popular-culture history of the digital age. But let’s start at the very beginning.

The Beginnings: Fox & THE SIMPSONS

The beginnings of THE SIMPSONS as a media phenomenon are part of a well-known story. When in 1986 Rupert Murdoch founded the Fox Broadcasting Company (formerly known as FBC) as the subsidiary of the media conglomerate News Corporation, Fox became an innovative media company (see Abelman/Atkin 2011: 81 ff.). Fox was announced as a complement to the U.S. network market of the so-called Big Three of NBC, ABC, and CBS, with Fox as the fourth big cable network. In order to successfully establish Fox on the market, Murdoch hired James L. Brooks, who at that time was an acclaimed Hollywood screenwriter, director, and producer, for example of the awarded TV series THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW (CBS 1970–1977).

Chris Turner, author of the acclaimed SIMPSONS historiography *Planet Simpson* (2004), explains: “According to legend, according to the press, according to the word of its creator, THE SIMPSONS was born in a single fevered moment” (16). Brooks, who had just founded the Gracie Films production company, became Fox’s executive producer of the variety format THE TRACEY ULLMAN SHOW (Fox, 1987–1990) for which he hired 33-year-old underground cartoonist Matt Groening to create a series of animated shorts. Legend has it that during one of their first meetings Brooks wanted to produce Groening’s comic strip *Life in Hell* (since 1977) that starred the one-eared nihilist bunny Binky as Fox, but Groening gave him ‘the Simpsons’ instead (cf. Turner 2004: 17). Brooks asked Groening for the names of the new, crudely sketched characters the cartoonist had just drafted in the waiting room in front of Brooks’ office. For lack of a better idea, Groening spontaneously gave the first names of his own family members. The father was named after Groening’s dad Homer, the mother after his mother Margret, and his sisters stood in for the eight-year-old second-grader Lisa and the one-year-old toddler Maggie. The oldest son of the Simpsons he named Bart, an anagram of ‘brat,’ the character Groening envisioned as America’s nastiest ten-year-old and the most menacing child of the Simpson family. Brooks was thrilled.

What began as rough sketches of a dysfunctional ‘white-trash’ family in the ULLMAN SHOW in 1987, soon was turned into a television program and became one of the first prime-time formats on the infant Fox Network in 1989 (cf. Turner 2004: 18). After 48 shorts had aired on the ULLMAN SHOW, “something unexceptional was happening,” remembers the music journalist Turner (18). Although the ULLMAN shorts were only coarse drafts, the Simpsons introduced audiences to their “somewhat unorthodox but ultimately rudimentary theme” (18) giving a rough idea of where the American family would be going on late 20th-century television. Among the saccharine family sitcoms of THE COSBY SHOW (NBC 1984–1992) and FAMILY TIES (NBC 1982–1989) that dominated the American TV screens in the 1980s, THE SIMPSONS established family life as “loutish and vulgar, a slow-burn

nightmare” that offered viewers “a quick Tpeek into a nasty world where stories didn’t inevitably have morals and Father emphatically did not Know Best. THE SIMPSONS as we know it was about to emerge from the womb.” (Turner 18–19)

THE SIMPSONS: A Non-Affirmative Part of Popular Culture

For people of my generation, i. e. those who were born around 1980, THE SIMPSONS has always been there. When I tell people about what has kept me busy in the last years, I can be sure that, unexceptionally, people of all ages know who the Simpsons are and what THE SIMPSONS is. But THE SIMPSONS is not only familiar to viewers across generations. What *The Guardian* once termed the “trailblazer in TV’s blue-collar renaissance” (2000) has been appealing to popular-culture- and media-studies scholars of the past twenty-five years too. In other words, it will be a crucial question of this project to ask how come THE SIMPSONS is more than an unorthodox part of popular culture and how its Halloween show TREEHOUSE OF HORROR contributed to this success? In which respect does TREEHOUSE stand for a new tradition within popular culture, a tradition that started to question U.S.-American media myths in the late 1980s?

On American TV in the 1980s, myths were braced and intensified by the wise-cracking Bill Cosby and his white-washed approach to African American middle-class family life in THE COSBY SHOW among others. In the sitcom FAMILY TIES, the family’s conservative offspring Alex played by Michael J. Fox educated his liberal, ex-hippie parents Steven and Elyse Keaton with affirmative messages for the Reagan era. As a contrastive alternative, THE SIMPSONS gave its audience burping contests and showed that it was cool to act coarsely and be ordinary and upfront (cf. Turner 18; Bhattacharya 2000). Matt Groening once told a reporter: “We were definitely at the right place at the right time; at the end of a decade of real complacency, a lot of upper-middle-class family comedy. So we gave them a dose of something really crude and unglamorous.” (Qtd. in Bhattacharya 2000) However, THE SIMPSONS are not only crude and unglamorous. And so during my academic journey I not only did research on thirty years of THE SIMPSONS and its untamable corpus of anecdotes in 673 episodes within 31 seasons. I also became involved in roughly thirty years of American popular-culture research which began to appreciate THE SIMPSONS as late as in the mid-1990s.

The Beginning of Thinking Seriously About Television

Long before THE SIMPSONS was developed, already in the 1970s, the American cultural-studies- and media scholar Horace M. Newcomb paved the way for ‘serious’ television programs to enter the academy as he began to “think seriously

about television” (1986: 217). In his numerous publications, Newcomb explores television, firstly, by means of a sociological approach as in his book *TV: The Most Popular Art* from 1974, secondly, by means of a critical journalistic analysis as in *Television: The Critical View* from 1976, and thirdly, by studying the growing significance of television authorship and media convergence as in *The Producer’s Medium* which he published in 1983.

Newcomb’s academic interests were confirmed and further expanded by feminist television scholar Charlotte Brunsdon among others. In the “Introduction to the Second Edition” of her reader on feminist TV criticism from 2008 [1997], Brunsdon notes that TV studies in the humanities roughly developed as an interdisciplinary field from the three branches of the social sciences, critical journalism, and film studies (cf. 2008: 1). This early academic interest in American television criticism and history paved the way for what followed. In the early 1990s, television scholarship was preoccupied with the analysis of audiences in the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s guiding structuralist concept of ‘social habitus’ (see his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 1977) and poststructural theories of ‘everyday life’ (see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984; John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 1987; Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, 1994).

In the “Introduction” to her volume *Television after TV* co-edited with Jan Olsson in 2004, professor of screen cultures Lynn Spigel sees early-television scholars often being at odds with each other. Whereas the Frankfurt School was preoccupied with intellectually deconstructing TV and its criticism with the help of concepts such as “mass society,” popular-culture theorist John Hartley associated the “textual tradition” of TV texts with literary and film theory. Journalistic criticism based its television critique on performance studies and theater criticism, and cultural-studies research showed a major interest in the relationship of television to other media and their audiences (cf. Spigel 2004: 8). Spigel emphasizes that “although these traditions developed differently in different national contexts, they all formed a discourse field – a set of interrelated ways of speaking about TV – that continue to affect the way we frame television as an academic object of study” (8).

TV Studies; or, How to Establish an Independent Discipline

The interrelated ways to speak about TV culminated in a debate that focused on what has become known as “quality TV” in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1996, Robert J. Thompson wrote about ‘quality TV’ as ‘not-conventional TV’ and described contemporary TV as making up television’s *Second Golden Age* in his book of the same name. Thompson remembers that, since the late 1980s, the quality profile of more and more continuity formats “has come to refer more to a generic style than to an aesthetic judgment” (13). Although PICKET FENCES (CBS

1992–1996) or *TWIN PEAKS* (ABC 1990–1991) were unconventional, slow-burn narratives with bittersweet humor labeled as ‘quality drama,’ they were broadly considered far ahead of their time. However, the term quality TV emerged because these series showed a special way to enlighten, enrich, challenge, involve, and confront fans, as well as to appeal to their intellect and touch their emotions (cf. Thompson 13). Based on this, the American film theorist Kristin Thompson extended her research interest from ‘art film’ to what she termed ‘quality television’ in her book *Storytelling in Film and Television* in 2003. Here, Thompson describes *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER* (The WB 1997–2003), *THE SOPRANOS* (HBO 1999–2007), but also *THE SIMPSONS* to have altered the TV landscape and its traditional narrative forms. Slowly but steadily, television was established as an art form both on the screen and in the academy, where scholars in the field of TV studies pushed television’s potential.

One push happened in 2001, when one of America’s most acclaimed TV scholars, Jason Mittell, associate professor of American studies as well as film and media culture at Middlebury College, published an early essay on the complexity and innovation of TV programs such as *THE SIMPSONS*. Mittell’s insights into the cultural life of *THE SIMPSONS* were not only indispensable for his book. His writings also influenced the discussion about quality TV, which he later replaced by the term ‘complex TV’ in his 2015 study *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. Mittell avoided to judge *THE SIMPSONS* by its cinematic or literary qualities only; rather he praised its medial qualities, such as its ‘cartoon realism’ and genre status.

In other words, *THE SIMPSONS* has contributed to the fact that TV studies became acknowledged as an academic discipline independent from film- or other forms of popular-media studies. Early scholars of TV studies such as Robert J. Thompson, Kristin Thompson, or Jason Mittell pointed to the cultural value of television with their critical approaches in the mid-1990s to early 2000s. Based on their texts, this book is dedicated to the cultural value of *THE SIMPSONS*. Chris Turner argued that *THE SIMPSONS* was a “cartoon masterpiece” that “documented an era” and “defined a generation:” now this book wants to investigate what the show has further contributed to the study and reception of American popular culture. How did not only *THE SIMPSONS*, but, more importantly, its Halloween off-shoot *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* teach us to become members of a more thoughtful, actively participating audience, how did it extend our critical view to American pop-culture history? By addressing all those who have been watching *THE SIMPSONS* since their childhood, this text alludes to the fact that nothing about watching *THE SIMPSONS* is simple. I want to show that it is necessary to distinguish *THE SIMPSONS* from its pop-historical archive *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* from which we can learn that watching television can inspire the dialogue between viewers in the digital age and the visual culture of the past.

THE SIMPSONS IS 'US:' The Early Days of Participatory Culture

Another issue “to emerge from the womb” of American popular television in the 1990s is television’s development from a consumers’ to a users’ medium. Horace M. Newcomb observed that 1980s’ television, “however trivial it might have seemed to some” (1986: 217), trained not only a new generation of researchers, but also a new generation of television viewers, for example by subverting traditional forms of TV storytelling from live-action sitcoms to children’s Saturday-morning cartoons. In addition to that, *THE SIMPSONS* appreciated both the intelligence of its increasing fan audience and the status of popular culture in the world. The show started to reach out to its audience in a new way.

When scholars and critics began “to think seriously about television,” as Newcomb suggested in 1986 (217), they may have felt as ‘fans’ of their favorite TV programs but, according to Henry Jenkins, they were “marginal to the operations of our culture, ridiculed in the media, shrouded with social stigma, pushed underground by legal threats, and often depicted as brainless and inarticulate” (*Fans, Blogger, and Gamers*, 2006a: 1). To fight this traditional contempt for TV and its fans, Henry Jenkins, one of the foremost American communication and media theorists, drew his inspiration from British cultural-studies approaches of the Birmingham School as well as from youth- and subcultures in order to radically change the image of fan cultures in the U.S.

In his first book project about new directions in participatory culture, *Textual Poachers* from 1992, Henry Jenkins aimed to “construct an alternative image of fan cultures, one that saw media consumers as active, critically engaged, and creative” (2006a: 1). In 2006, Jenkins extended the concept in his sequel book *Convergence Culture*. *Convergence Culture* largely builds on the insight that fans are increasingly central to how culture operates as new technologies ‘enable’ the average consumers to “archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” (2006a: 1). At the conjunction between textual poaching and media convergence, Jenkins defines “the terms of our participation in contemporary popular culture,” stressing the “interplay between media industries and their consumers” (2006a: 2). His approach to the participatory quality of late 20th-century popular culture leads to a new, participatory reading of the Simpson family at the end of the opening sequence of their show. The family’s taking a seat on their brown couch and switching on the TV can now be read as a moment of self-reflexivity: In postmodern terms, the Simpsons are ‘us’; they know we are watching them watching television.

In pop-cultural terms, Jenkins argues that “participatory culture is anything but fringe or underground today” (2006a: 2). *THE SIMPSONS* know this. From the start, the show has established a respectful, intimate connection to its fans. In contrast to the practice of lecturing viewers in *THE COSBY SHOW* or *FAMILY TIES*,

THE SIMPSONS actively engaged and addressed its fans and turned them into a group of ‘us.’ As far as I am concerned, the show’s inclusive approach leaves no other option than to feel enabled as an “active, critically engaged, and creative” addressee of the show’s vast field of media content. It seems that before popular-culture studies were able to “formulate and reformulate” (Jenkins 2006a: 2) how television and consumers interact, THE SIMPSONS had already proved that it is possible to take one’s fans and their response seriously. It will be part of this project to investigate how THE SIMPSONS accomplished to establish an intimate and appreciative connection to a new generation of fans.

Why This Book Needs to be Written

At this point readers may question if it is necessary to write yet another book on a television cartoon show which today some may call an old hat and which much has been written about in the past. THE SIMPSONS “made its way to the very heart of mainstream” a long time ago so that the show, compared to more recent animated shows, has become “relatively conventional these days,” as cartoon artist Matt Groening self-critically said about his own invention in 2018 (qtd. in *Newsweek* 2018). However, it should not be ignored that in thirty years of THE SIMPSONS, research largely investigated how the show turned into a mainstream TV institution. The existing academic research on THE SIMPSONS improves our understanding of how the show reflects on Western everyday life by exploring discourses on gender roles or class issues as well as contemporary themes such as politics, religion, digital media, and many more.

But, I argue, it has largely been unnoticed that very early on THE SIMPSONS has started to contribute to a new understanding of popular culture, “however trivial it might have seemed to some” as Horace Newcomb diagnosed for TV in the 1980s (cf. 1986: 217). In other words, this project will discuss in which ways THE SIMPSONS along with other popular shows of the 1980s and 1990s affected the way we frame television as an academic object of study. At the same time, my quest will investigate in how far the comedy series – just like more ‘serious’ shows such as HILL STREET BLUES (NBC 1981–1987) or TWIN PEAKS – contributed to how we study all forms of pop culture, from popular literature across radio and cinema to digital media in the 21st century.

Since THE SIMPSONS premiered as a stand-alone program on Christmas 1989 with “The Simpsons Roasting On an Open Fire,” the show has been raising questions about family and politics, about social equality and racial difference, about issues of gender, class and labor. THE SIMPSONS exemplified how animation as a mode of production much older than digital media was nevertheless able “to combine the aesthetic and the social in a way the old mass media, such as theatre,

movies, TV shows and novels never could”, as Espen J. Aarseth, professor of humanistic informatics at the University of Bergen, said about digital media in 2001, actually indicating not so much the newness of the digital media, but rather the new academic approach to the popular after the scholars’ first encounters with ‘new,’ or rather, newly seen popular media.

By the end of the millennium, *THE SIMPSONS* had become one of the early texts by help of which a new generation of scholars learned to read popular culture and sharpen their eye for its intricacies. Popular-culture scholars Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc call their introductory chapter to *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* from 2002 “The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies.” In this introduction they formulate much the same argument as the game-studies scholar Espen Aarseth shortly before them, but this time with respect to the fundamentally new ways in which a new generation of scholars now defined their relationship to a new generation of pop:

[...] we are interested in the everyday, the intimate, the immediate; we reject the monumentalism of canon formation and the distant authority of traditional academic writing. We engage with popular culture as a culture that “sticks to the skin,” that becomes so much a part of us that it becomes increasingly difficult to examine it from a distance. (2002: 3)

As “defining characteristics” (2002: 6) of popular culture as they understand it, the authors foreground the aspects “immediacy,” “multivalence,” “accessibility,” “particularity,” “contextualism,” and “situationalism” (*ibid.*: 6 ff.) – all characteristics *THE SIMPSONS* have made use of in exemplary ways from its very beginning.

Since 2006, Henry Jenkins has been publishing a blog called “Confessions of an ACA Fan,” and the title in which he refers to himself as an “ACA Fan,” an academic fan, already circumscribes what the relationship between today’s popular culture and its academic scholars is. On October 5, 2012, Jenkins describes one of the many powerful characteristics of *THE SIMPSONS* at the occasion of meeting Moritz Fink, who later authored *THE SIMPSONS: A Cultural History* published in 2019:

[Fink looks at] *THE SIMPSONS* in relation to the larger history of cultural jamming politics, a project which seeks to rethink culture jamming not simply as a disruption or interruption of mass media feeds but also as having the potential to “jam with” popular culture, creating something new out of the raw materials provided us by mass media producers. Anyone who has thought about *THE SIMPSONS* and especially its relationship with Rupert Murdoch’s Fox Network recognize [*sic!*] that there’s something curious going on here: *THE SIMPSONS* both embodies a highly successful commercial franchise,

one which extends across conglomerate media, and at the same time, it often models subversive and resistant relationships to corporate culture, going back to its roots in alternative comics. Early on, Matt Groening embraced the grassroots entrepreneurialism represented by the “Black Bart” T-shirts which transformed the Simpsons [*sic!*] into a vehicle for Afro-centric critique of white culture.

This quote from Jenkins’ blog shows why many ACA fans concentrate on THE SIMPSONS: The series’ producers have always been experts at culture jamming, a guerrilla tactics formerly restricted to anti-consumerist texts, as Mark Dery’s pamphlet title *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* from 1993 demonstrates. But with late-20th-century media and, I would say, with THE SIMPSONS, that changed.

Accordingly, in his book *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, published in 2006, Henry Jenkins looks back on the 1990s as a cultural moment of great importance for “mass media,” or, as we would say today, popular media and popular-culture studies at the same time (cf. 2006b). In the 1990s, consumerist media texts changed: they addressed their formerly passive viewers as participating fans, and, on these grounds, academics started to take them seriously. Thus I claim that, seen from a 21st-century perspective, THE SIMPSONS, from the 1990s onwards, have significantly helped pushing forward not only pop culture, but also U.S.-American popular-culture studies and helped television studies make considerable progress.

Therefore, the question whether it is necessary to write yet another book on THE SIMPSONS has to be answered with a yes. By looking at THE SIMPSONS’ varied incarnations within the special cycle TREEHOUSE OF HORROR, this book will show that THE SIMPSONS practiced media jamming long before the cultural practices of the digital age were hailed by Espen Aarseth in sentences such as: digital media are able “to combine the aesthetic and the social in a way the old mass media, such as theatre, movies, TV shows and novels never could.” With respect to culture-jamming practices of TV among other media, Aarseth is actually proven wrong by the popular-culture scholars of his time, although he is, of course, right when it comes to his media-related analyses of the digital age.

As will be demonstrated at several points in this book, in the late 1980s, THE SIMPSONS were new pop material and thus gave observant readers the opportunity to develop new theories of media convergence and participatory culture (Henry Jenkins), remediation and hypermediality (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin), or mediascapes (Arjun Appadurai), and of Jean Baudrillard’s simulations from 1981 as reformulated in the context of videogames by Espen J. Aarseth in 2001. By way of these new pop-cultural terms I will first be looking at how THE SIMPSONS travels from one medium to another. In a second step, however, I will shift focus

to the ways *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* uses the Simpsons as characters to self-reflexively think about the visual culture from which the series emerged, about other mediascapes as well as about the conditions of their production and perception.

THE SIMPSONS, Postmodernism, and Popular-Culture Studies: Between Fans and the ACADEMY

Existing scholarship on *THE SIMPSONS* can be subdivided into two larger categories. The first category includes, among others, officially ‘licensed’ merchandise such as *THE SIMPSONS* Bongo Comic book series and *SIMPSONS*-creator Matt Groening’s own publications of the *SIMPSONS Forever* books (1997, 1999). These are “color-coded” (1997: 13) episode guide books that chronicle detailed readings of *SIMPSONS*’ “characters, episodes, and secret jokes you might have missed” (cover text, 1997).

In addition, the first category also comprises the broad creative output by fans including ‘unlicensed’ (also online) articles and books. Significant sources are fashion journalist John Ortved’s *SIMPSONS Confidential: The uncensored, totally unauthorized history of the world’s greatest TV show by the people that made it* (2009), music journalist Chris Turner’s bulky volume *Planet Simpson* (2012 [2004]), and stand-up comedienne Allie Goertz’s and Julia Prescott’s (*Totally Unofficial*) *100 Things THE SIMPSONS Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die* (2018). Chris Turner, for example, justifies his almost 500-pages *SIMPSONS* manifesto by the fact that, in contemporary culture, *THE SIMPSONS* is probably cited more often than the Bible or Shakespeare (cf. 55). The recent retrospective ‘*THE SIMPSONS*’: *A Cultural History* by the librarian and scholar Moritz Fink from 2019 offers an affectionate look back on thirty years of “lasting influence of the show” (Bosky 2019). All of these texts offer erudite tongue-in-cheek explorations of and much background stories on *THE SIMPSONS* and those who stand behind the show.

The second group of *SIMPSONS* research comprises texts which not only better the academic understanding of *THE SIMPSONS* as a cultural and media phenomenon. These texts also improve the understanding of contemporary American popular culture by means of *THE SIMPSONS*. Noteworthy sources are the two books by the self-proclaimed ‘Simpsonologists’ and popular-culture experts Carma Waltonen and Denise Du Vernay. In 2010, they co-authored their collection *THE SIMPSONS in the Classroom: Embiggening the Learning Experience with the Wisdom of Springfield* (2010). Waltonen and Du Vernay demonstrate how *THE SIMPSONS* has become a great asset to the learning experience across a variety of different disciplines, from American cultural studies across linguistics to literary- and media studies. Their second book from 2019 is dedicated to *THE SIMPSONS*’ *Beloved Springfield: Essays on the TV Series and Town that Are a Part of Us All*.

In cooperation with a range of different contributors, Waltonen and Du Vernay base their essay collection on the belief that it is not the show that has changed so much since its heyday, but ‘us.’ Not only would the show have changed popular culture, but, more importantly, its viewers’ ability *to look at* popular culture. From this point of departure, the essays in the volume shed a quite intimate light on THE SIMPSONS’ everyday culture that is part of us all, on Springfield’s “rhetorics of death,” on “commercials and consumerism,” or on “banal environmentalism.” The essays offer an advanced, elaborate, sometimes polemic perspective of ‘fan academics’ who work in a variety of different fields and who justifiably can define themselves as Simpsonian natives. A review in the *Library Journal* writes that the book is a “fun read” both for SIMPSONS’ fans “who will appreciate academics geeking out,” but also for scholars who “will benefit from this embiggening of Simpson-ology” (Bosky 2019).

With regard to THE SIMPSONS’ educational value, it should be noted that already some years earlier Jonathan Gray, a communication and media-studies scholar at the Jesuit Fordham University in New York, referred to the social role of THE SIMPSONS’ comedy for teaching purposes. In 2006, Gray published the reception study *Watching With ‘THE SIMPSONS’: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* that was preceded by his article “Television Teaching: Parody, THE SIMPSONS, and Media Literacy Education” he had published in 2005. In both texts Gray examines to what extent THE SIMPSONS’ use of intertextual parody can function as a “media literacy educator” (2005: 223), for example of rhetorical techniques that are genuine to television. However, Gray does not open THE SIMPSONS’ scope towards other areas of media. Instead, he limits the show to a “parodic sitcom” that offers “a playful critique of television from within the television frame” (2005: 223).

Further research between fandom and academic interest in THE SIMPSONS was done within a range of niche disciplines; ‘niche’ at least in relation to a popular animated-television show. THE SIMPSONS was read through the lens of behavioral psychology, for example, in *The Psychology of THE SIMPSONS’ D’oh!* (Brown/Logan 2009). But the show also raised the attention of contemporary philosophers who looked at *THE SIMPSONS and Philosophy* (Irwin/Conard/Skoble 2010), or of mathematicians as proved by the German publication *Homers letzter Satz: DIE SIMPSONS und die Mathematik* (Singh 2013). Both categories of literature on THE SIMPSONS helped to open what Spigel terms a “discourse field,” (8) reducing the formerly insurmountable distance between fan response and academic analysis. However, within both fan-centered- and ACA-fan categories no research was conducted on TREEHOUSE OF HORROR, THE SIMPSONS’ annual Halloween special cycle.

In the following two subchapters, I will discuss three SIMPSONS-focused secondary sources in greater detail that had an essential influence on American popular culture as dominated by postmodern theories: firstly, by former Fulbright professor of American literature Matthew A. Henry, secondly, by John Alberti,

popular-culture and television scholar at Northern Kentucky University, as well as, thirdly, by television scholar Jason Mittell from Middlebury College. Those scholars were among the first to spawn a new way of thinking about popular culture and television and a reading of *THE SIMPSONS* in line with postmodern thought. I will use their approaches to non-affirmative, postmodern storytelling in order to proceed to *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* and its relation to American popular-culture history in the digital age.

THE SIMPSONS, Popular Culture, and Postmodern Theory: Matthew A. Henry and John Alberti

As one of the first *SIMPSONS* scholars, Matthew A. Henry established a connection between postmodern cultural theories and the study of pop-culture representations in his 1994 essay “The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism, and *THE SIMPSONS*”. In comparison, the already mentioned ‘Simpsonologists’ Carma Waltonen and Denise Du Vernay belong to the group of more recent scholars who look back at *THE SIMPSONS*’ history from a current point of view. Matthew Henry, however, was one of the first academics who used *THE SIMPSONS* in the mid-1990s to speculate about the difference *THE SIMPSONS* would make in the future of U.S.-American culture.

The essay is based on a quote by *The New Yorker* journalist Tad Friend about popular culture and the “conceptual crisis” of art in 1993 (Henry 1994: 85). Friend suggests that in the late 20th century, “good art that reaches millions and makes them feel connected may have more to offer us than great art that reaches three thousand and makes them feel more or less alone” (qtd. in Henry 1994: 85). That said, Friend claims that in 1993 the standards for what is perceived as ‘good art’ are determined by popular culture, i. e. by millions of television viewers and internet users, and that “the future belongs to Bart Simpson” (qtd. in Henry 85). In 2012, Henry published his essay as part of his monograph *The Simpsons, Satire, and American Culture* which he dedicates to the question what makes *THE SIMPSONS* so significant. Already in his 1994 essay, he celebrates *THE SIMPSONS* for disputing “the need for critical distance” which “makes people feel connected in society” (cf. Henry 1994: 85). Henry confirms that the show’s animation, its humor, satire, and ‘realistic’ approach to everyday culture encourages its fans to feel as members of a group when they refer to their fandom.

Building on Henry’s notions about *THE SIMPSONS*’ influence on American postmodern pop culture, I suggest to now take a closer look at *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* and to investigate whether the show offers a take on popular culture that exceeds the scope of *THE SIMPSONS*. Whereas the secondary literature on *THE SIMPSONS* inquires how the series broadens people’s view on American culture, I will ask if

TREEHOUSE OF HORROR further improves our understanding of U.S.-America's popular narratives, its art, and media history. If THE SIMPSONS has taught its fans how to watch postmodern television, I argue that TREEHOUSE OF HORROR has taught us fans how to make sense of American popular media culture in general.

Postmodernism & Popular Satire

In 2004, John Alberti from Northern Kentucky University invited contributors to realize a book project in celebration of THE SIMPSONS series. The essays in the collection *Leaving Springfield: THE SIMPSONS and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* read the show as political, and its writers, show runners, and animators as activists. In his introduction, Alberti explains that, from the beginning, the show's key attraction has been "the sense of 'getting away with something'" (Alberti xii). The editor insists that THE SIMPSONS has managed to become a highly popular prime-time program while, at the same time, promoting "the subversive and the transgressive" (*ibid.*: xii). He describes THE SIMPSONS as subversive because it consciously undermines the of the upper-middle-class television shows that dominated the TV screens in the 1980s. Groening's animated series transgressed the moral standards of traditional television comedy. Alberti suggests that THE SIMPSONS defined new standards for biting satirical comedy on prime-time network television. He regards THE SIMPSONS as pioneers of political satire long before 'satire TV' conquered the airwaves in the post-network era with the hugely successful THE DAILY SHOW that premiered in 1996 on Comedy Central. The essays hold the opinion that THE SIMPSONS taught Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and Rick Mercer how to do TV satire. According to them, everybody who wants to have a lasting impact on their audience should live up to Matt Groening's central and oft-cited motto: be entertaining and subversive (cf. Bhattacharya 2000).

From THE SIMPSONS to TREEHOUSE OF HORROR: Popular Genre Mixing & Adult Animation

Television scholar Jason Mittell published texts "in formal academic publications and informally on blogs" (2015: 4) on the changing landscape of television storytelling around the turn of the millennium, a landscape to which THE SIMPSONS had decisively contributed. Most of Mittell's writings represent his attempt "to engage with television's formal dimensions in concert with a broader approach to television as a cultural phenomenon" (2015: 4). THE SIMPSONS has been a central object in his scrutiny of today's television. In his article "Cartoon Realism" from 2001, Mittell analyzes THE SIMPSONS' 'cartoon realism,' the way THE SIMPSONS

set the standard for a new type of adult-animation programs. Then Mittell related animation to ‘genre mixing,’ i. e. to the way the show made ample use of different genres to establish *THE SIMPSONS* as something totally new, as a genre that was directed at adults.

In his article “Making Fun of Genres” from 2004, Mittell further extends the strategy of genre mixing. He examines whether *THE SIMPSONS*’ politics of (post-modern) parody has an influence on American culture in general. Mittell later includes *THE SIMPSONS* in his various considerations about seriality and television genres, and refers to it in his much-acclaimed article “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television” from 2006. The TV scholar also uses *THE SIMPSONS* to define the transition to a new TV culture in *Television and American Culture* (2010). In *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television* from 2015 he elaborates on why the notion of ‘quality TV’ needs a re-evaluation and should be measured by the poetics of narrative complexity rather than by its politics.

Mittell reads *THE SIMPSONS*’ “postmodern textual aesthetic” as having revolutionized the sitcom’s formulaic limits (2004: 180). His enthusiasm towards the animated series encouraged me in my quest of finding a proper category for *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*. Mittell’s most recent study on *Complex TV* also inspired me to investigate whether *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* is even more innovative than *THE SIMPSONS*, if it adds up to the complex forms of television storytelling by mixing different popular-culture languages that far exceed the frame of 20th-century television. Does *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* use different, new ways to appeal to fans than its main series? What effects does the Halloween Special create with its unusual narrative approach, its constant remediation of different media, and its genre mixing when compared to other complex-TV formats and to *THE SIMPSONS*? Do the *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* episodes mix genres in the same way as *THE SIMPSONS* which mix sitcom with children’s cartoon? Or does *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* offer us even more innovate techniques and aesthetics that anticipated digital media layering and other complex forms of blending genres which predominated in later animation shows of the digital age?

Mittell argues that complexity in TV series depends on narrative special effects, i. e. on aesthetics which a television narrative employs to “flex its storytelling muscles” in order to “confound and amaze a viewer” (2015: 43). Yet, neither Jason Mittell nor any other scholar so far has realized that *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* does not need any explosive pyro techniques to leave its viewers awestruck. I have always been most impressed by the way *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* references media and genres from across history. It does this differently than *THE SIMPSONS*, or the action-oriented television series *ALIAS* (ABC 2001–2006), the cinephile thriller anthology *FARGO* (Netflix 2014–2017), or *LOST* (ABC 2004–2010) with its fast oscillation between different temporal levels. But so far no one has written about the specific techniques *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* makes use of to, for example, fore-

ground all kinds of different readings that Edgar Allen Poe's classic 19th-century Gothic poem "The Raven" can evoke.

TREEHOUSE OF HORROR's "The Raven" (1990) raises attention to the changing interpretations of literary texts across time. Lisa begins to solemnly read out the poem to her brother from a school book, while Bart sarcastically comments on the canon text from a 20th-century perspective in return. Another reading is given in James Earl Jones' voice-over interpretation (he lent his voice to Darth Vader in the STAR WARS prequel trilogy, 1977–1983) of Poe's text while the animation takes up the perspectives and aesthetics of the poem's late-19th-century illustrator, Gustave Doré. His engravings obviously influenced the *mise-en-scène* of TREEHOUSE OF HORROR's animated segment, an early moment of TREEHOUSE OF HORROR's spectacular storytelling.

TREEHOUSE's "The Raven" introduced innovative techniques that appealed not only to cine aficionados, but also to avid readers of 19th-century literature, to cartoon- and comedy fans, historians, sound designers, and many more. Beginning with the first Halloween episode from 1990, I will investigate the techniques and aesthetics TREEHOUSE OF HORROR has been working with to shame conventional television. I ask how TREEHOUSE OF HORROR managed to sharpen many viewers' senses for popular culture. How is it different from any animation series following the lead of THE SIMPSONS, from SOUTH PARK (Comedy Central, since 1997) to FAMILY GUY (Fox, since 1999). TREEHOUSE OF HORROR is much more than an audacious half-hour obscene-comedy program for adults. Does it suffice, then, to define the Halloween series as a one-off seasonal special or an anthology series for adults? As the first scholar to concentrate on TREEHOUSE OF HORROR as a cycle with its own history, aesthetic standards, genre parameters, and 'narrative special effects' I aim at finding a category for this anthology series.

THE SIMPSONS' Halloween Special Cycle

It is a well-established tradition on American television that the Big Four networks, Fox, ABC, NBC, and CBS, but also streaming- and other broadcasting services offer special programs for special occasions. Special occasions are, of course, public holidays, days when a large amount of American households is assumed to have considerable time to spend in front of the television. Thus, the networks seek to sell season-relevant products especially through special programming that is supposed to get consumers in the right mood for Christmas, Thanksgiving, or Halloween. I have, of course, always had special appreciation for the Halloween episodes of my favorite sitcoms. Even today, ROSEANNE's "Boo" (ABC 1989) or HOME IMPROVEMENT's "Haunting of Taylor House" (ABC 1992) give me fond memories of their one-off seasonal take on Halloween with their exciting cos-

tumes, the scary make-up, and the excessive Halloween decoration inside and outside the families' home. Therefore, it doesn't come as a surprise that these episodes commonly are the most watched and thus best-rated episodes of a sitcom season.

Of course *THE SIMPSONS* also has 'special' episodes that center on traditional American holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, but none of these are as noteworthy as the annual Halloween attraction of *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*. One crucial distinguishing factor that sets *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* apart from the 'normal' sitcom special is that *THE SIMPSONS*' Halloween series is the only holiday special with an uninterrupted continuity of thirty episodes between 1990 and 2020. In comparison, ABC produced eight Halloween episodes altogether in ten seasons of *ROSEANNE* between 1988 and 1997; and *HOME IMPROVEMENT* comprises seven Halloween specials in eight seasons between 1991 and 1999.

A second determining characteristic of *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*'s non-canonical continuity is the segments' focus on a plot-based structure. This narrative pattern sets it apart from those of the Connors and the Taylors; their traditional character-centered plots about loyalty and bonding are simply set among Halloween decoration. Metaphorically speaking, *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* episodes uproot their characters, tear them from their regular roles and positions in order to replace the protective safety of the 'family' and the 'home' by the wonky and draughty 'treehouse' in which the horror stories are assumedly told. The series' mini-horror stories revolve around the most familiar narratives from different media and varying forms of genre-horror. For thirty years, *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* has been paying animated homage to genre texts from Gothic, fantasy, horror, and science fiction. In these episodes, the Simpson characters can die (see "Wanted Dead, Then Alive," 2015), and play varying roles (e.g. Marge and her sisters act as witches in "Easy-Bake Coven," 1997), mutate to monsters (see "Married to the Blob," 2006), or turn all kinds of familiar film horror scenarios into a family matter as in "The Shinning" and "Bad Dream House" (both 1990).

TREEHOUSE OF HORROR: Time Travel through American Pop-Culture History

The overall ninety segments of the thirty *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* episodes plus couch gag (i. e. opening sequence plus three segments per episode) take you out of your TV comfort zone in order to abduct you to a completely different time and place. When I noticed that *THE SIMPSONS*' Halloween episodes send their fans on time travels through American popular-culture history, I knew that the moment had come to devote my book entirely to *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*. In a collaborative effort, the show's various writers, show runners, and executive producers

make careful use of popular texts and media from the past and thus create a “rich, primary-colour dystopia,” as Sanjiv Bhattacharya writes in *The Guardian* in 2000. And it became my aim to explore these rich dystopias. My questions are: Why does TREEHOUSE take up such diverse texts as E. A. Poe’s Gothic poem *The Raven* from 1845, Stuart Rosenberg’s horror movie AMITYVILLE HORROR from 1979, or Rod Serling’s TWILIGHT ZONE episode “To Serve Man” from 1962? Which texts were privileged and how were they dealt with? What were the show’s creators trying to tell present-day fans about the past?

One of my colleagues at university once told me that when she was younger she didn’t like the TREEHOUSE OF HORROR show, although she was a fan of the regular THE SIMPSONS series; she was terrified because she simply didn’t understand the Halloween special. Her example illustrates that TREEHOUSE OF HORROR obviously follows a different strategy than the seasonal episodes of my beloved sitcoms ROSEANNE or HOME IMPROVEMENT. TREEHOUSE OF HORROR in fact doesn’t have much to do with regular television programming or other one-off seasonal sitcom specials. Thus a large part of my investigation will be dedicated to finding out which traditions of television storytelling TREEHOUSE OF HORROR can be attributed to. If THE SIMPSONS is dealing with current events in American culture such as television shows, politics, or everyday phenomena like Black Friday shopping, what is the prime concern of TREEHOUSE OF HORROR? What are its functions?

Popular-Culture History of the Digital Age: Theory, History, Analysis

Now, at the end of my introduction, I will introduce the structure of the following text. The book is divided into three larger parts; in accordance with the introduction, the second part consists of a theoretical and the third part of an analytical section. Whereas part two, “THE SIMPSONS & Postmodern Theory,” introduces the foundation of my thinking about THE SIMPSONS, the analytical part three is subsequently preoccupied with negotiating theory and history in four close readings exploring the genres of TREEHOUSE OF HORROR. The four different analyses are introduced in 3.1. This subchapter equips the reader with the necessary background to understand TREEHOUSE’s conceptual framework of lessons to remember, that help to make sense of the ways historical bits and textual pieces were used to create something entirely new.

The existing research on THE SIMPSONS led me to believe that the show arouses the fan in the academic scholar, but frequently also evokes the academic scholar in the fan. Based on this observation, the following chapter two discusses four highly influential postmodern theories closely read through the lenses of THE SIMPSONS and TREEHOUSE OF HORROR: Umberto Eco’s notions of popular art (2.1), Angela

McRobbie's contributions to representations within popular culture (2.2), Linda Hutcheon's emphasis on the significance of postmodern parody (2.3), and lastly, Michel Foucault's view on the concept of the archive which I will contextualize as a popular-culture archive (2.4). These approaches will help me to examine how the perspectives on the digital age that the Halloween series offers to its fans are different from those of *THE SIMPSONS*.

As mentioned above, part three is introduced by how the show "teaches lessons to remember" and then continues with detailed analyses of the four individual sections which make up a typical *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* episode. The first Halloween episode from 1990, for example, begins with the opening sequence also known as the 'couch gag.' What follows are three mini-stories, one of which (to stick to a chronological order of artistic development in the first episode) deals with a literary example from 19th-century Gothic fiction, another continues with a cinematic example, in this case a horror-movie mash-up of films from the 1980s, and the last one ends with an adaptation of the television anthology *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* from the 1960s. These genre markers provide the basic structure for my close reading of more than one hundred years of pop-culture media content. The frame of reference given in 3.1 splits *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR* into its typical components from which the show was assembled during different 'golden ages of horror' that once were defined for the radio and for cinema, had their respective heydays in comics culture and Gothic literature, and even on television. In chapter 3.2, I will discuss the couch gag as a prototypical example of participatory culture by means of what I define as the 'cartoon auteur.' Subchapter 3.3 invites a look at the literary legacy of *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*; the show teaches the audience not only about European and American Gothic fiction, but also about performative media literacy and the popular-culture practice of transmedia adaptation. Part 3.4 puts *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*'s filmic archive under the microscope and discusses the relationship between television and cinema as an example of media convergence. My final analysis in 3.5 explores the lasting influence of the broadcasting tradition of the radio play and more specifically *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*'s repurposing of Rod Serling's TV anthology *THE TWILIGHT ZONE* from the 1960s.

Exploring my appendix is worthwhile for those who find pleasure in comprehensive contexts of *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*. I give hitherto new overviews of the show's complex setup in "TREEHOUSE OF HORROR Episode Guide" (5.1) and "TREEHOUSE OF HORROR Reference Guide" (5.2) as well as a "List of Guest-Animated Couch Gags" (5.3) from *THE SIMPSONS* and *TREEHOUSE OF HORROR*. The appendices provide interesting information, for example, on the titles and original airdates, shed light on the themes, motifs, and sources of each segment, and give information on the who-is-who of guest animators who have submitted contributions to both shows.

To Be Continued?

This book will fill a gap that still exists in SIMPSONS criticism and cultural-studies analysis. After having watched THE SIMPSONS on television for thirty years, I consider myself one of the “Simpsonian natives,” as Michael Gruteser and his co-editors call us in *Subversion zur Prime-Time* (2013: 11). I am an ACA fan whose mission is to document what lessons about popular-culture history and -theory we have learned from TREEHOUSE OF HORROR in particular. My strategic focus on TREEHOUSE OF HORROR will open a chapter of THE SIMPSONS that was long overdue to be written.