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## **Implied...or Implode?**

### **The Simpsons' Carnavalesque Treehouse of Horror**

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The popularity and influence of “The Simpsons”—the longest running primetime comedy series in US television history—has drawn much attention in both popular media and animation studies scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Within the series, the annual “Treehouse of Horror” episodes constitute a production sub-context with their own conventions and historical trajectory, which are worthy of critical investigation. The specials, aired each year around Halloween, have been produced since the series’ second season, beginning in October 1990.<sup>2</sup> Each of these specials is composed of three stories of roughly six minutes each, instead of the twenty-two minute narratives of each regular weekly episode.<sup>3</sup> They incorporate horror plots and devices, as well as general references to science fiction, into the series’ base in situation comedy. Part of the great appeal of “The Simpsons” arises from its willingness to pass critical commentary on many aspects of our culture. In breaking from the comparatively realistic social-satire that characterizes the series as a whole, the Halloween specials cast a reflexive gaze back onto “The Simpsons” itself. As a result, the “Treehouse” episodes are valuable as a means of examining the strategies and implications of the series as a whole.

Historically, the live-action sitcom has provided a space in which to investigate the social from an everyday perspective.<sup>4</sup> Relying on central locales and stable environments,<sup>5</sup> the sitcom offers insight into our experience of day-to-day life—cantered, in particular, on the Family. The animated sitcom, being once removed from live-action reality by its form, offers the same function via a parallel world, resulting in a distancing mechanism that allows greater perspective on our relationships with ideological structures. Inasmuch as it is not-quite-real,<sup>6</sup> animation can depict recognizable social realities and relevant contemporary

political issues while only partially belonging to the world it comments on. By satirizing the institutions upon which our social systems are based, “The Simpsons” de-familiarises our relationships with the political ideologies that underpin our social existence.<sup>7</sup>

The ideology of the Family is one of arbitrary social connection: groups of people who may radically disagree about politics, religion, or other subjects, and fundamentally may dislike each other’s company, are required to put differences aside and love each other on the basis that they are related. The sitcom supports the common-sense notion that the Family is the cornerstone of social interaction and, consequently, that unconditional love and unity in the face of adversity are a kind of social bedrock. Sitcom plots typically revolve around social problems that imperil the Family and are then resolved. “The Simpsons” exploits these tensions by exaggerating individual differences and power-balances within its family unit, but ultimately restores the balance, ready for the next episode, in which the family’s tenacity as a group will again be tested.

The Halloween specials disrupt that pattern, and frequently do not resolve those issues— instead, the family (and more broadly the society that situates them) dissolves. In the Treehouse episodes, the social connections of Family and community, which otherwise signal coherent groupings and ability, are exposed as false imperatives (insofar as disparate individuals feign cohesion or forsake their differences in order to get along, whereas in the specials, they may express a desire to kill one another). The average sitcom (and regular episode of “The Simpsons”) explores those tensions, but not to the point where they erupt. The Treehouse episodes attack the core, leaving it exposed. By depicting the Family and community in extreme circumstances, in seeing the horror of ‘how things could be’, the Treehouse episodes, I contend, leave us with hanging questions about the nature of social being that bleed into the regular sitcom-style episodes.

So, despite the apparent resetting of established sitcom mores after Halloween, the Treehouse stories draw attention to structuring elements of the series as a whole. The

sitcom formula usually drives the show in a dominating fashion; it is our familiarity with these generic conventions that primarily shapes our understanding of episodic incidents and their resolutions, rather than the overall schema of the series. The reversal of the sitcom formula in the Treehouse episodes draws greater attention to the politics of the Family and the individual in society than the regular sitcom episodes of the series do, despite the fact that such episodes are predicated on satirizing that genre.

In this light, it is useful to think of the comedy of “The Simpsons” as being related to the laughter of carnival, a powerful, subversive celebration that Mikhail Bakhtin considers to be “gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding,” and centrally “directed at those who laugh.”<sup>8</sup> Michael Tueth proposes that “Animation is . . . television’s version of the carnivalesque,” and that the freedoms offered by the medium have allowed “‘The Simpsons’ . . . to explore darker, subversive aspects of family life.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, the Treehouse episodes of the series share an even more specific relationship with the carnivalesque, being concerned with the grotesque and the excessive, and greatly exacerbating the inversions of hierarchy for which the series is known. The show’s status as popular television comedy is crucial to our understanding of its political potential; as Bakhtin observes, communality is vital in order to fully overturn established hierarchies. The carnival has to take place in “the popular sphere,”<sup>10</sup> and “The Simpsons” does precisely this—appearing in the primetime slot in the U.S. and with distribution worldwide, it engages a broad demographic.<sup>11</sup> Being televised to such wide reception, its commentary bridges the gap between the popular/public/social and the private sphere of the home (where it is viewed).

This paper discusses the ways in which the Halloween specials render or problematize the series’ uses of the sitcom formula, using Bakhtin’s model of the carnivalesque to underscore these traits. It begins with discussion of the context in which the Treehouse episodes appear, and the symbolic resistance they offer as a deviation from the routine of the series. This break comes partly in the form of genre experimentation—namely, forsaking the generic borders that delimit horror and the sitcom.<sup>12</sup> It also stems from the treatment of the

characters and the narratives offered in the Treehouse vignettes, and the extent to which they challenge prevailing social order, including authority figures and the Family. Finally, this paper addresses carnivalesque elements of the grotesque, bodily excesses, and appetites of the flesh, and how the series' context places limitations on the Treehouse episodes, given its original status as primetime comedy on American television.

### **“The Simpsons” as Carnivalesque Disruption**

“The Simpsons” is an American animated primetime comedy series created by Matt Groening. Beginning as a series of sketch sequences included in “The Tracey Ullman Show” in 1987, the format eventually was developed into an autonomous half-hour series for the Fox Network. To date, the show has run for 21 seasons since its first airing in December 1989, spawning a feature film spin-off in 2007. Set in the town of Springfield, the series is focused on its eponymous family unit of father (Homer), mother (Marge), son (Bart, the oldest child), and daughters (Lisa, next in age, and baby (Maggie). Homer, the patriarch of the family, is characterized by his laziness and infantile stupidity. Marge, the home-maker, is the voice of caution in the household. Bart (an anagram for ‘brat’) is the mischievous underacheiver. Lisa is sensible, clever, and morally staid. The family is completed by youngest daughter Maggie, who is about one year old. The Simpsons represent ‘average’ middle-America; a family unit comprising a heterosexual couple and 2.4 children.<sup>13</sup> The comedy arises primarily from the everyday, mundane aspects of their lives, plots being driven by tensions within the family, issues relating to their economic status, the occupations of the adults, and the school lives of the children. The narrative structure thus centralizes institutions that signify civil order: home, family, job, school, community.

It is in this respect that “The Simpsons” is akin to the live-action sitcom.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Simone Knox observes, the series appears to aspire to this status, as it was “intended . . . to mimic live-action representation . . . [and] still largely eschews exaggerated grotesquery of style.”<sup>15</sup>

While it remains of the 'everyday', the series is also notable for its ability "to use animation to surpass the narrative capabilities . . . [of] live-action programs and thus to make some radical observations about the status quo."<sup>16</sup> As a sitcom, "The Simpsons" offers images of family relations and the roles of individuals within it,<sup>17</sup> and questions "the universality and normativity of the so-called 'traditional' family values."<sup>18</sup> Like many sitcoms, the series regularly presents "visions of dysfunctional family life . . . insult, anger, irresponsibility, and outrageous behavior."<sup>19</sup> Yet, the show is primarily satirical, and not a deconstructive attack on the Family per se.<sup>20</sup> "The Simpsons," both as sitcom and satire, works in dialogue with ideological discourses surrounding the Family. However, this agenda is amplified in the Treehouse episodes, partly through the addition of horror genre motifs. More than any other episodes of "The Simpsons," the Treehouse specials incorporate a duality, delineating staid character types and revealing their limitations. The disruptions to 'normalcy' found in the Treehouse episodes provide access points for probing quotidian aspects of the series.

Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque, outlined in *Rabelais and his World*,<sup>21</sup> is a theoretical model that prioritizes exactly these inversions of the status quo. The carnivalesque, as Robert Stam observes, is founded on the medieval carnival's "liberating explosion of otherness," which he interprets as a "countermodel of cultural production and desire . . . a symbolic, anticipatory overthrow of oppressive social structures."<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin thus envisages the carnival as a celebration based on the political reality in which it is situated, the motivation being to "build a second world and a second life outside of officialdom."<sup>23</sup> These aspects of the carnivalesque allow us to recognize the political potential of animated social satire, which formally reconstructs the world, and is "organized on the basis of laughter."<sup>24</sup>

The carnival, according to his model, is "always essentially related to time,"<sup>25</sup> and significantly Halloween represents exactly the type of "breaking point in the cycle of nature or in the life of society or man" to which Bakhtin refers, permitting an alternative "festive perception of the world."<sup>26</sup> Carnival is an all-encompassing celebration, involving the entire

community. It is a festival revolving around the inversion of normative social hierarchies and the transgression of boundaries the populace typically adhere to, leading to revelry in disorder and disrespect for authority. During the carnival, behaviour becomes orientated around excess and indulgence; the restraints and social limitations that would otherwise curb appetites (both in terms of consumption and carnal desire) do not apply. As such, the carnival valorises the horrific and the grotesque.

Since their inception in the second season, the “Treehouse of Horror” episodes have signified formally and generically self-conscious carnivalesque moments that break the routine of the everyday, even if the show already represents a temporary escape from our lived political reality. On the one hand, “The Simpsons” is built around a continuing narrative of the characters’ circumstances—their daily life in Springfield. These situations are usually offered to the viewer in episodes of twenty-two minutes that focus on complication and resolution of the status quo, rarely altering the characters’ relationships, or affecting any real change <sup>27</sup> (including aging <sup>28</sup>—Maggie, for instance, has not grown in the two decades the show has been on-air).<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the series is developed around a general desire to debunk, or at least question, the formulaic conventions on which it is based. Matthew Henry contends that ““The Simpsons’ is foremost a satire upon the idealized images of family life depicted by both traditional and contemporary domestic sitcoms.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Jonathan Gray argues, “The Simpsons” frequently challenges the sitcom’s desire to resolve problems raised by the plot of any given episode by employing “illogicality to absurd extremes,” mocking the way in which “the average sitcom rush[es] to tie everything up in the last minute.”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, despite its subversive intent there is a return to a point of balance at the close of each regular weekly “Simpsons” episode.

While the sitcom formula leads us to expect normality or equilibrium to be resolved for Springfield’s inhabitants before the episode finishes, the Halloween specials instead revel in disruption, killing off central figures, failing to restore order, and occasionally forsaking the family dynamic on which “The Simpsons” (even in its title) hinges. The Halloween specials

habitually permit changes that the show otherwise resists, doing so in extremis (in true carnivalesque style). Thus, in the vignette *Stop the World, I Want to Goof Off*, Bart becomes a 25 year-old (causing Marge to question why he is “so tall and shaggy”), while *Life’s a Glitch*, *Then You Die* ends with world destruction.

Indeed, of the sixty segments that currently constitute the twenty “Treehouse of Horror” specials, forty-two fail to offer significant resolution to the tale or reset the action; thirty-three depict the death of significant characters (fifteen of the twenty opening sequences do as well); four stories abandon the expected family dynamic; and seventeen are set, for the most part, away from the familiar locations in/of Springfield that the characters usually inhabit. Framed by generic rules of the sitcom to which “The Simpsons” typically adheres, these radical disruptions reflect the revelry with which conventionalized elements of the series are overturned.

### **Comedy of Terrors: Horror, Genre Parody & Popular Culture**

Bakhtin asserted that a “text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context).”<sup>32</sup> In our case, the television sitcom becomes a more recognizable entity when combined or juxtaposed with another genre (namely, horror) or even the devices of another medium (most of the Treehouse are parodies of feature film narratives). Through combination and interaction, we gain the distance necessary to comprehend significance.

In its usual guise, “The Simpsons” frequently alludes to existing popular culture as a point of reference. For example, David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson appear in character as Mulder and Scully from “The X-Files” for the weekly episode *The Springfield Files*. So, in weekly episodes, such tropes function as an intertextual point of reference within an original narrative; the presence of popular culture (such as “The X-Files”) is subsumed within the overriding logic of the series’ sitcom formula. In the Treehouse episodes, popular

cultural allusions take over the entire plot and constitute the story, to the point that the conventions of the referenced text supersede the sitcom formula. Therefore, the vignette *The Shinning* amounts to the Simpsons starring in a comedic version of Stanley Kubrick's horror film, *The Shining* (1980). Parody is founded on the dual presence of opposing languages or styles that work against each other to create meaning,<sup>33</sup> and is a standard feature of the series as a whole, but the Halloween specials exploit this combinatory aspect much more than the standard "Simpsons" episodes do.

Genre functions according to social agreement of expectation, whereby viewers come to understand character actions and motivations, as well as narrative shifts and cues, from the tropes collected under a genre banner.<sup>34</sup> By blending the 'rules' of genre types so effectively, the Halloween episodes expose the extent to which the Simpsons themselves embody or overturn the generic traits of standard sitcom characters by de-familiarising their roles or by disrupting our expectations regarding their behaviours. In being marked as a carnivalesque moment that both differs from and is in keeping with core elements of "The Simpsons" mythos, the content of the Treehouse episodes takes on an important role. In much the same way that horror is fully interwoven into and becomes the context for the Halloween tales (instead of remaining on the peripheries), the Treehouse episodes are integral to the series as a whole, reflecting and shaping what the series means, rather than being a separate, isolated aspect of "The Simpsons."

The points of dialogue between genres (in this case the television sitcom and the horror film) offer an access point of resistance by highlighting the assumptions we make in predicting the workings of genre,<sup>35</sup> which are subsequently unhinged as part of the comedy. Weekly episodes frequently include a recurring feature, "The Itchy and Scratchy Show," a cartoon series available to Springfield's populace. The televised cat and mouse team represent the carnivalesque clowns/fools year-round for Springfield's inhabitants, regularly enacting a celebration of bloody violence without consequence, offered up as comedy. Typically, Bart and Lisa are shown enjoying a moment of laughter over the 'horror' of the cat

and mouse cartoon. Their laughter is permitted—despite the apparent mismatch between graphic bloodshed and the reaction of hilarity—because Itchy and Scratchy are made safe and ‘knowable’ by their presence as fictional and televised; they are contained by the family’s television. Yet, for the viewer there is fluidity between the aesthetic on and offscreen in the universe of “The Simpsons” (between the “Itchy and Scratchy” world and the family’s world) because both are animated. The carnivalesque elements of “The Itchy and Scratchy Show” thus constantly threaten to erupt from the world of fantasy into the characters’ ‘reality’. Indeed this is precisely what happens in the Treehouse tale *The Terror of Tiny Toon*, in which Bart and Lisa enter the televisual sphere, and Itchy and Scratchy subsequently burst out of the screen into the Simpsons’ home.

When this occurs, the threat Itchy and Scratchy implicitly pose is made real: they brandish weapons and aim to enact bodily harm on the Simpson family. The Simpson children do not find the characters so amusing when they refuse to stay in their ‘proper’ onscreen place and the violence threatens to disturb the offscreen space of the children’s Springfieldian reality. Bart and Lisa usually decode Itchy and Scratchy’s escapades according to the context in which they are presented (television comedy series “The Itchy and Scratchy Show”), but the actions of the cat and mouse are a source of humour for the viewer of “The Simpsons” because they exaggerate a recognizable form (“Tom and Jerry”) and also because the violent action depicted is incongruous with the sitcom setting that Bart and Lisa inhabit. The blending of these tropes underscores how “The Simpsons” plays with genre in an explicit, self-reflexive, and challenging manner, asking the viewer to remain aware of the generic status of the show, and to observe how shifts in genre impact on meaning—an aspect of the series that is significantly augmented in the Treehouse episodes. The treatment of Itchy and Scratchy in the Halloween context is no less playful; given the frequency with which characters are killed off in the Treehouse stories, the horror of Itchy and Scratchy’s threat in *The Terror of Tiny Toon* is palpable. However, when they burst through the screen to attack the family, the Simpsons realize that the duo are rendered in accordance with their new

environment: they are only cat and mouse size, and the danger they embody is rendered as a source of amusement for Homer, who finds them “cute.”

While Itchy and Scratchy’s sphere of influence shifts in the amplified Halloween setting, this vignette is primarily a play on generic fluidity. While we might expect the violence Itchy and Scratchy embody in the weekly “Simpsons” episodes to erupt into carnage when they are released into Springfield itself—implied by the horror-comedy context of the Treehouse specials—instead their central character trait (violent bloodshed) is rendered inert. Of course, this ultimately underlines their function elsewhere in the series as harmless clowns. The events of the “Itchy and Scratchy Show” are chaotic, bloody, and disordered in comparison with the daily running of Springfield. When the two worlds collide in *The Terror of Tiny Toon*, it highlights that both the “Itchy and Scratchy Show” and “The Simpsons” are subject to generic constraints. Violence and cruelty are mostly absent from the series’ family-oriented primetime comedy, excepting the events of “The Itchy and Scratchy Show”—in which violence constitutes its characters’ existence. Moreover, this Treehouse vignette underscores the continuities as well as the contrasts between routine life in Springfield, and the generically framed carnivalesque universe of the “Itchy and Scratchy Show”; between the weekly episodes of “The Simpsons” and the Treehouse episodes; and between onscreen and offscreen representations of reality (for the Simpsons, and for us as viewers).

### **Take that, Washington!<sup>36</sup> Disorder and Disrespect**

The Treehouse episodes’ ab/uses of genre can be read as disrupting such categories in a carnivalesque resistance to established systems of knowledge. But this celebration of disorder extends much further, taking on various ideological institutions as well. Proponents of authority are targets throughout the weekly series, but in this respect too, the Halloween specials go to extremes. Thus in *Nightmare Cafeteria*, Principal Skinner and the other school

staff sanction the killing of students to replace the 'Grade F' luncheon meat and solve detention over-crowding. *Four Beheadings and a Funeral* sees chief of police Chief Wiggum as a Jack the Ripper figure ("the Mutton Chop Murderer") who gives his son Ralphie opium to help him sleep. In *Citizen Kang*, the electoral process comes under attack, as aliens replace candidates Dole and Clinton, inevitably leading to a totalitarian slave-state ("it makes no difference which one of us you vote for"). Disorder and disrespect for hierarchy are traits that typify the carnivalesque, but most interesting is the context in which those institutions come under attack. Because of the nature of "The Simpsons" as domestic sitcom, those broader critiques are intimately connected to the central institution that motivates the series: the Family.

Both the family and the home that binds them are overturned during the carnivalesque Halloween episodes as part of a wider agenda that questions social order, especially the Family (and the individuals who constitute it) as a 'universal' centre of the community.<sup>37</sup> One of the powers of such inversions is that it permits us to reconsider the apparent naturalness of the 'normal' position. If the equilibrium we consider vital for maintenance of the status quo can be so easily overturned, we see that such institutions are superficial, arbitrary, and untenable.<sup>38</sup> Henry observes that "The Simpsons" portrays the Family as a stable institution founded on "mutual respect and deep compassion,"<sup>39</sup> a statement that should be qualified with the caveat that in the carnivalesque space of the Treehouse episodes, such unity comes under attack. In *Bart Simpson's Dracula*, for instance, Marge is revealed to be the head vampire, and the entire vampirific family turns on Lisa (the only member of the family who remains human). In *The Shinning*, Homer attacks his family with an axe. He also assails Bart with an axe in the conclusion of *Fly vs Fly*, and the whole family turns on each other in *Bad Dream House* ("we've never had knife fights before," exclaims Marge).

In other cases, family members are forsaken or replaced with surprising ease. In the pre-credits opening to "Treehouse XIV" (*Keepin' it Kodos*),<sup>40</sup> Bart is taken in by the aliens that

have eaten his family. When he falls into a “deep, deep coma from which he will never emerge” in *Bartificial Intelligence*, Bart is replaced by a robot, returning only to be rejected by Homer, who prefers his new android son. A similar theme is explored in *The Thing and I* where Bart is replaced by Hugo, his supposedly ‘evil’ secret twin. All three stories hinge on the dispossession of Bart’s position as loveable ‘underachiever’ (as the famous t-shirt slogan boasts),<sup>41</sup> thus realizing the fear that his antics could lead to his expulsion from the family. Comparably, Homer is replaced by one of the clones of his own creation in *Send in the Clones*, a difference that Marge shrugs off with an “oh well” as the song “Love the One You’re With” closes the segment.

It is no surprise then that the home itself—the space that signifies familial stability—is granted sinister agency in the very first Treehouse story (*Bad Dream House*), and the sentient house tries to murder and replace Homer in *House of Whacks*. Even in *Omega Man*, the family only survives nuclear attack because of the amount of lead paint contained in the house. Homer re-joins his family, and together they use their home as a sanctuary from the community of mutants. Here, the everyday environment of their home saves the family members, but under normal circumstances those same surroundings would threaten their health, disrupting the function of the home as place of safety signified via familial unity.

### **Why Should I Kill my Family?<sup>42</sup> Individual and Institution**

At the core of the series’ stable community are the recurring characters who constitute it week to week. Across the Treehouse episodes, the communal aspect of Springfieldian life is likewise emphasized by the motif of townsfolk congregating.<sup>43</sup> However, it should come as no surprise that the Treehouse episodes further their profound attack on the status quo by manipulating the stable roles of these characters, and thus the community they constitute. For example, in the context of these horror-based specials, the good neighbour Flanders—

who usually denotes civil restraint in opposition to Homer's voracity<sup>44</sup>—becomes a zombie and a carnivorous werewolf that consumes Homer.<sup>45</sup> Case studies of two characters—Lisa and Homer—further illustrate how the Treehouse episodes' carnivalesque spaces disrupt the status quo at the level of individual roles.

Within the series, Lisa functions as the most morally staid, intelligent, and aware member of the Simpson family.<sup>46</sup> Being only eight years old, her didactic role clearly undermines the status of the parents (particularly Homer, who is consistently infantile), which is entirely in keeping with the subversion of hierarchy she represents. Yet, the Halloween specials<sup>47</sup> contravene these expectations as much as they rely on them. Lisa's liberal political interventions result in disaster for the community across the Treehouse cycle, as she is responsible for Springfield being taken over by aliens, dolphins, and Billy the Kid's armed zombie gang.<sup>48</sup> The awareness she displays in *Hungry are the Damned*—which would be a saving grace under normal conditions—results in the family's ejection from the idyll of extra-terrestrial Kang's spaceship, Marge declaring Lisa to be “too smart for [her] own good.” Even in *Hell Toupee*, Lisa's explanation of the plot (that Homer's behaviour is being affected by hair transplanted from executed convict Snake) is interrupted by Marge, who again puts the child in her place (“Oh, please Lisa, everybody's already figured that out”). This is striking because it is typically Lisa's function in “The Simpsons” to explain the obvious to her oblivious elders. The inversion in *Hell Toupee* situates the Simpsons within a ‘normal’ family dynamic: young children are usually less knowledgeable than their parents. Because this is not the case in the weekly “Simpsons” episodes, their normalcy here becomes jarring. This inversion thus underscores rather than overturns how the “Simpsons” routinely challenges (rather than conforms to) the idealized, or ideologically stable, family dynamic we find in the majority of sitcoms.

Even more revealing is how Homer's role is scrutinized in the Treehouse episodes. His irresponsibility as a father reaches its logical conclusion here, and it is in the shifting of genre between sitcom and horror that the comedy arising from Homer's laziness, stupidity,

and selfish greed are fully realized. Much of the Treehouse episodes' humour revolves around Homer's adherence to type despite wild changes in circumstance—seventeen of the sixty segments are driven by this motif. Especially worthy of note are episodes *Ned Zone*, in which Homer's carelessness and unwillingness to believe his do-gooding Christian neighbour Ned Flanders' premonitions cause a nuclear meltdown, and *Life's a Glitch, and then You Die* in which Homer's failure as the power-plant's "Y2K Compliance Officer" results in the destruction of the Earth. Throughout the entire series, numerous jokes and situations revolve around Homer's ill-placement as Safety Inspector at the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. In the weekly episode *Homer goes to College*, for instance, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission demands (quite rightly) that Homer must be qualified in nuclear physics to hold his position, and his subsequent enrolment in a college course further exemplifies his inability to understand the science behind his job. Despite his failure (and his interest only in "party[ing] down"), he retains his job at the power-plant, and the issue does not arise again. Because the sitcom aims to restore balance, even when Homer loses his job at the power plant (in the episode *Simpson Tide*) or relocates to a new job with the Globex Corporation, Cypress Creek (*You Only Move Twice*), he returns to his position, threatening to cause Springfield's doom, but never fulfilling that potential. While the plots of these weekly episodes seek to maintain order, the Halloween stories revel in allowing Homer to finally realize that destiny. Indeed, the fulfilment of Ned's prediction that Homer will cause a nuclear meltdown despite all attempts to stop the occurrence (in *Ned Zone*) lends an air of inevitability to the idea that nuclear disaster might occur in one of the weekly episodes due to Homer's ineptitude.

The joke at the centre of Homer's role as breadwinning father (underscored by his name, 'home'-r) is that he is placed in a position of responsibility for the safety/unity of a nuclear power plant and a 'nuclear' family, managing (barely) to maintain both despite his inadequacy in either position. In reifying the threat posed by Homer's occupation, we are asked to consider what the repercussions could be for his failure as a father or husband. In the weekly episodes of "The Simpsons,"<sup>49</sup> we are often treated to storylines that jeopardize

this stability, but the sitcom format calls for resolution. In contrast, the Halloween vignettes can portray the separation of the family without reunification, as is the case in *Easy Bake Coven*, where Marge is revealed to be a witch, forsakes her family, and does not return to them. Indeed, when Homer does destroy his family and the world in *Ned Zone*, he celebrates, declaring “everything’s comin’ up Homer.”

The significance of these subversions should not be overlooked. We recognize that the Halloween specials are marked as playing according to a different set of rules than the regular weekly episodes, and so acknowledge that some types of events (e.g., the supernatural) occur due to the Halloween context and will not appear in weekly episodes. However, it is worth observing that much of the humour arising within the Halloween specials is founded on the same actions and behaviours found elsewhere in “The Simpsons” canon, creating a dialogue between the two that refuses to close off the Halloween specials as wholly separate from other “Simpsons” episodes. When irritated by Bart’s bad behaviour, Homer typically will throttle his son—the comedy arises from our recognition that Homer lacks patience or adequate parenting skills, and defaults to violence as a solution (which is somewhat cathartic, representing a fantasy urge to ‘strangle’ someone that people experience in moments of extreme frustration). In the context of sitcom satire, we apprehend that Homer is a parody of the patriarchal stereotype that is meant to act as moral centre, presiding over his household with measured control. But in the special *Hex and the City*, Homer chokes Bart, irrevocably stretching his neck (Marge observes “you strangle him all the time and that never happens”); here, Homer’s typical over-reaction has hyperbolized consequence. The carnivalesque juncture may offer an extremis depiction, yet the pre-established context of comedy allows us to read the horrors of Homer’s failings in a particular Halloween special as humorous, while the same exaggeration also informs our reading of Homer’s inabilities elsewhere in the series, amplifying our amusement.

Despite the radically altered situations the Treehouse specials offer us, the central character traits and motifs of “The Simpsons” survive, even when their physical forms change; in *King*

*Homer*, for instance, Homer becomes a giant gorilla, but is still clearly himself. In fact, if this were not the case and the characters failed to maintain their status as recognizable, “consciously intended stereotypes,” they would no longer “function as satirical tools”<sup>50</sup> because they would lose their axis of reference. That is to say, despite the radical shift in context (and to some degree tone) of the Halloween episodes, the persistence of character-traits established in a sitcom framework allows us to perceive these special episodes as passing satirical comment on what those types mean. The carnivalesque moment works in conjunction with the overarching ‘norms’ of the series to produce that meaning.

Challenges embodied either by the Halloween specials or the more general “Simpsons” episodes are transitory; they do not significantly alter or amend the (ideological) situation in which the characters are situated, since the series always returns to the stability of the family set-up and Springfield’s structural hierarchies are always restored by the start of the next episode. However, our understanding of the characters—what they signify, the limits of their moralities, and the social pressures that restrain them—does change. This is achieved, as outlined above, by inverting our expectations of character (as is the case with Lisa) or by augmenting character traits already present (as with Homer).

The Treehouse episodes thus reveal and riff upon truths and consequences that are present in the series more generally, but which are not usually made explicit, bringing those underlying tensions to the surface and facilitating our understanding of the characters. For example, Homer’s incompetency as a nuclear safety officer is funny because it does not result in apocalyptic disaster for the community; the tension between his stupidity and his role of responsibility is one of the series’ running jokes. While the Halloween specials are hyperbolic, they often only fulfil a logic set in motion by the characters elsewhere. That Homer should cause nuclear disaster is actually realistic, and to reify this fear in the “safe” space of the Treehouse vignettes means that we are able to laugh at the character’s flaws in a different way—one that “The Simpsons” otherwise resists in order to maintain its status quo.

It is this shift for the viewer that is significant, and the repetition of the sitcom's problematizing and renewal—especially in the extreme degree to which the Halloween space offers such representations—is a more potentially powerful move than amending the characters otherwise would be. The inversion of character traits (as with the case of Lisa being treated as a normal child instead of the moral superior) provide instances of fracture that more fully reflect our own social world, providing direct continuity between Springfieldian existence and our own socio-ideological position, despite the unrealistic fantasy situations offered by the Treehouse segments.

### **I'd Sell my Soul for a Donut:<sup>51</sup> Grotesque Bodies & Excessive Appetites**

In *The Day the World Looked Stupid*, the populace avoids what it perceives to be an alien attack by congregating in the town square, naked, and behaving like animals (“remove your clothes and wallow in filth”). Here, in Springfield's response to the Orson Welles's “War of the Worlds” broadcast, the order of civility is wholly overturned in a carnivalesque moment par excellence, as they are unable to distinguish between Welles's performance, genuine threat, and the real subsequent invasion. This narrative provides yet another good example of carnivalesque revelry—celebration of the grotesque and indulgence in excessive bodily appetites—that feature prominently in the Treehouse episodes. However, at the same time the episodes explore excesses of bodily appetites, they face constraints due to the ‘real nature’ of what “The Simpsons” is: a family comedy originating in the United States, airing on primetime television and subject to its broadcast regulations.

When the Treehouse episodes make use of bodily freedoms, they do so to great effect, exaggerating appetites that are marginally present in the rest of the series. In *Married to the Blob*, Homer's usual greed and obesity (as seen in the regular episode *King Size Homer*, in which he gains weight in order to claim disability allowance) reach epic proportions. Homer eats everything, including the pet cat and numerous “fat people.” By becoming a “4000 ton

cannibal,” he personifies the desires that underlie carnival excess, where “all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.”<sup>52</sup> Understanding that they cannot curb Homer’s appetite, the town employs Homer to eat the homeless. While order may be somewhat restored, there is no attempt to rein in the desires underpinning the carnivalesque—Mayor Quimby’s management of the situation involves utilizing those desires instead. In other words, Homer’s excursion into the carnival mind-set results in a prospective revision of how the community functions.

Given the institutional and social pressures faced by “The Simpsons” as a mainstream, family-friendly comedy, there are limits to how carnivalesque the depictions can be. Bakhtin envisages relatively grotesque and sexual aspects of corporeality as part of the open and explicit celebration required for a complete carnivalesque subversion of order. On “The Simpsons,” while there is some reference to “those parts of the body that are open to the outside world,”<sup>53</sup> the explicit depiction of sex and genitalia is clearly an impossibility, given that the series is made for broadcast on American network television and is therefore subject to regulation. Yet, in typical style, the narratives draw attention to these limitations. In *In the Belly of the Boss*, for example, Marge questions why her suit is so revealing, and when it is eaten away by white blood cells, she notes how strange it is that they “know just where to stop” so as to not expose ‘too much’. Moreover, in *Survival of the Fattest*, commentator Terry Bradshaw declares it “a disgrace” that the “network will show a dozen gruesome murders” but “will cut to commercial before” Marge and Homer “begin the tender act of love” (the figure of Bradshaw then blocks our view of their tryst). In this respect, while it does not overturn civil order, the vignette draws attention to and questions the motivations of Broadcast Standards and Practices regulations that prohibit such displays, as well as the ideologies underpinning them.

Nonetheless, the specials find many ‘acceptable’ ways to associate the body with excess—often in respect to Homer. For example, Homer’s body is replicated and so becomes a plague in *Send in the Clones*, and he comes to physically share a body space with Mr. Burns

(Homer's miserly employer) in both *Homer's Nightmare* and *In the Belly of the Boss*. Often the excess is depicted through physical transformation; the horrors of the Treehouse episodes exploit the freedoms offered by animation in transforming the bodies of central characters. In *The Devil and Homer Simpson*, when Homer sells his soul for a donut, he is sent to Hell, forced to eat "all the donuts in the world" (which he achieves with ease), and is finally given a donut-shaped head. The traits that signify his character thus overcome his standardized physical presence. Elsewhere, the inversions and excesses of carnival in the Treehouse specials are epitomized when the Simpsons close *Nightmare Cafeteria* with a grotesque song and dance number after their bodies have been turned inside out.

Despite the drastic shifts in character design permitted by animation techniques, characters nonetheless tend to remain in a relatively recognizable state—Homer is still recognizable as a gorilla in *King Homer*, for instance. In another example, *Stop the World, I Want to Goof Off*, family members appear as Marvel superheroes the Fantastic Four, yet they still retain a semblance of their former selves. Bart's spiky hair, Homer's stubble, Marge's necklace and haircut all delineate their presence, despite the elongation of Bart's body, the muscular, orange bulk of Homer's stony figure, and Marge's transformation into the flaming Human Torch.

Less obviously, carnivalesque transposition exposes one of the central horrors of the characters' everyday existence. Similar markers are shared by all members of the Springfield community, delimiting them as a homogeneous grouping: "all the citizens of Springfield have the same bug eyes and overbite as the Simpsons, while all the houses look alike."<sup>54</sup> Formal design draws attention to the horrors of the communal (and the ideologies that bind them)—all of the bodies are horrific in "The Simpsons" because they are all noticeably similar, meaning their appearance seems to aesthetically imply an ordered status quo. Both the exploration of bodily grotesque in the Halloween specials and their everyday manifestation in weekly episodes reflect the realities of the Springfieldian body is in its

mundane form, particularly in terms of negating individuality: that is, assigning the characters facial features that emphasize their continuity as a social group.

Moreover, aesthetic style is used to impose radical shifts in the resistant space of the Treehouse shows. Such alterations are employed in *The Day the World Looked Stupid*'s sepia-toned 1938 setting, the Hitchcockian black and white *Dial 'M' for Murder*, and the aesthetic of *It's the Great Pumpkin, Mr. Simpson*, which is rendered to match the "Peanuts" theme of the vignette. Particularly worthy of note is the story *Homer<sup>3</sup>*, which leaves Homer disgusted at how "bulgy" his body is especially how his "stomach sticks way out in front"—when he enters a three-dimensional, computer-generated space. This radical disruption of form is perhaps one of the Treehouse specials' most direct attacks on the normalcy of "The Simpsons," undermining the aesthetic and physical foundations on which the series establishes its social relations. The revolution of carnival is so thorough that it disturbs even physical laws and environmental space.

Even more remarkable is the shift that occurs when the computer-generated Homer of *Homer<sup>3</sup>* is brought into the live-action world (though he remains animated). This collapse between animation and live-action bridges the gap between the universe of the animated comedy and the real world it draws upon and parodies. This is especially pertinent as it brings Homer into contact with our dimensionality, exposing how strange our world and physical expectations of being are.<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion: Limits of the Carnavalesque**

Bakhtin has asserted that the carnival "belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to certain patterns of play."<sup>56</sup> These playful elements are no clearer than in the Treehouse specials, which exploit the freedoms offered by animation to overturn our expectations of format, narrative resolution, and depictions of

the characters' bodies, while retaining a recognizable relation to our live-action world. The Halloween episodes are transient breaks in the normative running of the series,<sup>57</sup> but while they reflect the subversive stance of the carnivalesque, they do not upset the overarching narrative of the series, and can be deployed without challenging the uber-text of the Simpson family life. However, the persistence of these episodes and the dialogue formed between these and the 'normal' weekly episodes of the show asks us to treat the Treehouse special not as an entirely separate entity, but an integral part of what "The Simpsons" is and means.<sup>58</sup> The persistence of the Halloween episodes in playing out a pessimistic logic to its extreme—not only literally killing off members of the community who are usually framed as unifying elements, but also offering those disruptions as instances of jovial pleasure—allows "The Simpsons" to more saliently debunk instances of familial cohesion that it ultimately relies on in order to maintain itself. There would be no "The Simpsons," of course, without the Simpsons. While the carnival space we find in the Treehouse specials offers "an escape from the usual official way of life,"<sup>59</sup> it does so with the proviso that it is not a full or permanent break. In the case of "The Simpsons" Halloween specials, the playful retention of character tropes despite the altered situation is potentially the crux of the show's political power.

As a regular feature of "The Simpsons" context, the Treehouse episode becomes a locus of dissent and unpredictability that, because of its playful nature, implicitly asks us to distance ourselves from the instances of predictable sitcom resolution we find elsewhere in the series. The Treehouse episodes' focus on death, for example, should be read as more than just a symptom of the Halloween theme; in the carnival, as Bakhtin envisages it, "degradation...is not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one."<sup>60</sup> Change is a subject of morbid celebration rather than mourning here, as part of breaking free from the restrictions of the sitcom's resolutionism. The violence and destruction of the familiar (characters, home, family, form) without narrative resolution provides a space in which the events are exposed as having ideologically regenerative potential. Such deconstruction does not aim to wholly overturn ideologies so much as expose and elucidate

their workings. The Treehouse specials' playful carnival establishes a distance between "The Simpsons" and the sitcom genre conventions that it otherwise adheres to, or even the conception of family values more broadly supported in wider culture. "The Simpsons" may re-establish order in its routine episodes, but the audience's understanding of how the series is situated in relation to ideology is re-generated by these Treehouse tales. That order is also threatened by the carnivalesque eruptions of the special episodes' annual recurrence.

The show's ability to flaunt the disruptive dangers it offers is testament to its apparent status as harmless. In the specials I, II, III and IV, Marge and Homer even warn the viewer of the program's threatening potential,<sup>61</sup> and "Treehouse VIII" opens with a Fox censor complaining about the prospective content. With a return to equilibrium in weekly episodes, the series appears to support the prevailing ideologies of the television sitcom, albeit with a satirical take. This works in its favour, because as Jonathan Gray contends, "Fool-like, 'The Simpsons' can be seen as harmless, and hence gain access to a wider audience than would more overtly 'threatening' shows."<sup>62</sup>

The paradigm of carnival can be usefully applied to future study in the field of animation, especially in the generally under-theorized realm of televised animation. While my analysis here has been limited to a discussion of "The Simpsons" within the primetime sitcom framework, many of the show's contemporary counterparts certainly are carnivalesque in nature. Series such as "South Park," "Robot Chicken," and "Family Guy" have benefitted from the great success of "The Simpsons," which opened the doors for more 'extreme' carnivalesque sensibilities, pushing the envelope of social acceptability in terms of language, sexuality, violence, and drug use, among other subjects.

Another significant but under-theorized area of animation studies concerns narrative form—the aesthetics of content delivery. In "The Simpsons," the Treehouse specials represent intensively carnivalesque moments, breaking rules of narrative in a series that is

otherwise relatively conventional (in respect to narrative design). Adult Swim's "Robot Chicken" utilizes a 'sketch' format of unrelated, short sequences and jokes based on bizarre situations and parodies of popular film and television (especially from the 1980s).<sup>63</sup> Its rapid-fire fragmented format entirely eschews the narrative limitations that mean each weekly "Simpsons" episode must end in family unity with a return to the status quo. In that sense, each sketch in "Robot Chicken" becomes a carnivalesque moment, which uses the freedom of animation to depict events that are not contingent on recognizable routine social situations as such. "Family Guy" combines elements of both approaches, blending the overarching narrative structure of the sitcom with irrational elements such as the inclusion of Death as a recurring character, or the inexplicable presence and vanishing of a giant squid at the family dinner table.<sup>64</sup> One of the primary sources of humour in "Family Guy" is the cutaway sequence, whereby the narrative action is stalled to present a flashback or other divergent cut to happenings unrelated to the plot.<sup>65</sup> These cutaways become central carnivalesque moments within each episode of the series, meaning the whole becomes disruptive, continually resisting the sitcom normalcy that underpins the episode structure.

The two series used as examples, "Robot Chicken" and "Family Guy," are quite different in context from "The Simpsons," in that they are not primetime (they are adult oriented, scheduled in late-night slots) and they are shown on cable, rather than a broadcast network. As a result, they are granted more freedom. "Family Guy", for example, depicts excessive indulgence in alcohol and drug use,<sup>66</sup> 'improper' bodily functions,<sup>67</sup> and narrative arcs that are dependent on candid discussion of sex and genitalia.<sup>68</sup>

The carnivalesque is a celebration of the marginal, raising the undervalued to the forefront in order to scrutinize hierarchies or classifications, as well as the values that are utilized in the act of categorization. This sensibility makes it well-suited for studying the liminal—be it aspects of a popular series that do not 'fit' (such as the Treehouse episodes of "The Simpsons"), shows that are marginalized from primetime network broadcast, themes that are deemed socially 'unacceptable', or forms that are undervalued (such as animation

itself). Since the advent and popularity of “The Simpsons,” animation has become increasingly popular as a mode, particularly in the field of adult comedy. These expressions frequently court controversy (as is the case with “South Park” and “Family Guy,” for example), arguably relishing the marginal status that allows them to more freely critique social mores. The carnivalesque permits us to explore the political aspects of such series in a powerful way, but one that remains attuned to the grotesque playfulness on which the comedy is frequently founded.

Many thanks to Maureen Furniss for her advice during the construction of this article, and to Andy Medhurst who inspired my interest in the carnivalesque in the first instance.

<sup>1</sup> The majority of academic responses to “The Simpsons” center on particular aspects of the series. For its uses of intertextuality, parody, and satire, see Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Terrance Lindvall and Matthew Melton, “Towards a Post-Modern Animated Discourse: Bakhtin, Intertextuality and the Cartoon Carnival,” *Animation Journal* 3:1 (Fall 1994): 44-63. For its role as a primetime animated phenomenon, see Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, ed., *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003); Megan Mullen, “The Simpsons and Hanna-Barbera’s Animation Legacy,” in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, ed. John Alberti (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004), 63-84; and John Ortved, *Simpsons Confidential* (London: Ebury, 2009). For the politics of representation based on the show’s relationship with ideologies of the ‘everyday’, see Simone Knox, “Reading the Ungraspable Double-Codedness of The Simpsons,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 34:2 (2006): 72-81; and John Alberti, *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State UP). Little attention has been paid to the Treehouse specials, and the ways in which they deviate from Springfield’s routine happenings.

<sup>2</sup> While they are titled onscreen as “Simpsons Halloween Special” until part XIII (when the Treehouse moniker takes over), and only the first of the specials makes use of the Treehouse locale, I follow the convention employed by all episode guides I have found (including <http://sky1.sky.com/the-simpsons-episode-guides> [Accessed 01/12/2009]) that refer to all the episodes under the title “Treehouse of Horror.”

<sup>3</sup> Like weekly episodes, the Halloween specials also typically contain brief pre-credits action presenting a gag of some sort.

<sup>4</sup> See Hamamoto, Darrell, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (London: Praeger, 1991), 2. The comedy of a sitcom format is founded on a stable environment and group of central characters (Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom* [Jefferson: McFarland, 2010], 21) and it is “center[ed] around relationships in the family, workplace and [an established] community” (Joanne Morreale, ed., *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*. [Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2003]: xi), thereby exploring the characters’ relationships with ‘dominant social codes’ (David Pierson, “American Situation Comedies and the Modern Comedy of Manners,” in Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, ed., *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* [Albany: SUNY, 2005], 35-46, 36).

<sup>5</sup> Savorelli, 24-30.

<sup>6</sup> Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), 181-82.

<sup>7</sup> Other sitcoms also have offered political comment or highlighted their own conventionality. According to Darrell Hamamoto, the sitcom has consistently “remarked upon almost every major development of postwar American history...offer[ing] oppositional ideas, depict[ing] oppression and struggle, and reflect[ing] a critical consciousness,” despite the confines of the commercial systems that facilitate and situate the genre (Hamamoto, 2). Yet, it was not until the mid-1980s and early 1990s that viewers’ familiarity with the format gave way to “challenges to the prevailing values and social norms” and satire as part of primetime viewing (Michael V. Tueth, “Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy,” in Stabile and Harrison, 133-46, 133, 138; see also Mullen, 2004: 63). These challenges were felt most saliently in the success of animated sitcoms including “South Park” and “King of the Hill,” both of which followed “The Simpsons.” The animated form itself allowed greater freedoms to explore the questioning of social structures already occurring in live-action sitcoms.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1968). Bloomington: Midland Indiana UP, 1984), 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Tueth, 141. Lindvall and Melton similarly propose that the animated comedy is a carnivalesque mode.

<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Mittell, 178.

<sup>12</sup> Note that the flow is not one-way: Rachel Talalay, director of *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (USA, 1991), claims that they modelled their cartoonish version of child murderer Freddy Krueger after "bad child" Bart Simpson. *Freddy's Dead: The Making of the Final Nightmare*. USA, 1991. Dir. Jeff Weinstock.

<sup>13</sup> Halbert B. Robinson, *Early Child Care in the United States of America* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1973), 51. While this figure may have changed by the mid-1990s (Tom W. Smith, "Changes in Family Structure, Family Values and Politics, 1972-2006," in ed. Ruy A. Teixeira, *Red, Blue, and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics* [Washington: Brookings Institution, 2008]:147-93, 149), it persists as a cultural stereotype, as observed by a number of child care books aiming to debunk the nuclear 'ideal'. See Andrea Engber and Leah Klungness, *The Complete Single Mother* (Avon: Adams Media, (2006), 51, and Kate Wall, *Autism and Early Years Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2009), 29. The statistic also was referred to in the title of the British sitcom "Two Point Four Children," which ran from 1991 to 1999.

<sup>14</sup> For discussion of the series in relation to the sitcom, see Gray, Mullen, and Tueth. Morreale's edited collection *Critiquing the Sitcom* also provides a wealth of perspectives on the traits and functions of the genre, as do Hamamoto, Pierson, and Savorelli.

<sup>15</sup> Knox, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Mullen, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Gray, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry, "Looking for Amanda Hugginkiss: Gay Life on The Simpsons," in Alberti, 225-43, 225.

<sup>19</sup> Tueth, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Satire cannot "aim to destroy neutralized, closed systems of authority, because it is both dependent on the capitalist system for its existence as a commercial product and the dominant order for its critical enterprise." Knox, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin, 1984.

<sup>22</sup> Stam cited in Tueth, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Christmas specials are part of the vocabulary of “The Simpsons” and the sitcom in general, yet neither type of special presents a challenge to the everyday reality of the characters. The holiday is actually the subject of some Halloween episodes: two of the stories in “Treehouse XIX” are set at Christmas, “Treehouse IV” ends with an incongruous yuletide song, and Treehouse XIV and XVIII draw attention to the fact that they are airing in November (that is, the week after Halloween), meaning the language of the seasonal special slips in its playful use of designated festive spaces. The only other episode to my knowledge that uses the ‘special’ format in a manner that disrupts the narrative reality of the series is the 138th Episode Spectacular (season seven), which employs the arbitrary point of celebration to draw attention to the formulaic routines of sitcom seasonal specials and clip shows (Knox, 74).

<sup>26</sup> Historically, Halloween has been a celebration of “death and revival, of change and renewal,” which correlates exactly to Bakhtin’s observations regarding the medieval carnival. Bakhtin (1984), 9. For a discussion of the meanings of Halloween specifically, see Nicholas Rogers, *Halloween: From Pagan Ritual to Party Night* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> Gray, 50.

<sup>28</sup> One of the only examples is the episode where Lisa is grown up and gets married (“Lisa’s Wedding”), and this is a flash-forward framed by the contemporary Lisa’s visit to a fortune teller.

<sup>29</sup> See Tueth, 144. In this sense, the animated form allows it to become a sitcom par excellence, refusing changes such as aging that would otherwise alter the live-action sitcom setting.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew Henry, “‘Don’t ask me, I’m just a girl’: Feminism, Female Identity, and The Simpsons,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:2 (2007): 272-303, 275.

<sup>31</sup> Gray, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin cited in Gray, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 76.

<sup>34</sup> See Neale, cited in Gray, 28-29.

<sup>35</sup> See Gray, 45-47.

<sup>36</sup> Homer in *Dial 'Z' for Zombies*.

<sup>37</sup> The bridging of the individual and the communal is emphasized through congregation of the public in a number of the vignettes: *King Homer, Attack of the 50ft Eyesores, Nightmare on Evergreen Terrace, The Genesis Tub, Citizen Kang, Homega Man, Easy Bake Coven, Night of the Dolphin, Fright to Creep and Scare Harms, Island of Dr. Hibbert, I've Grown a Costume on your Face, The Day the World Looked Stupid, Heck House, Don't have a Cow, Mankind, There's no Business like Moe Business*.

<sup>38</sup> This is precisely what Bakhtin refers to when stating "carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions . . . the feats of becoming, change, and renewal." Bakhtin (1984), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Henry (2007), 279.

<sup>40</sup> While most of the Treehouse episodes have a pre-credits sequence, this is the only one that is titled.

<sup>41</sup> Ortvéd, 112.

<sup>42</sup> Homer in *The Shinning*.

<sup>43</sup> In *King Homer, Attack of the 50ft Eyesores, Nightmare on Evergreen Terrace, The Genesis Tub, Citizen Kang, Homega Man, Easy Bake Coven, Night of the Dolphin, Fright to Creep and Scare Harms, Island of Dr. Hibbert, I've Grown a Costume on Your Face, The Day the World Looked Stupid, Heck House, Don't Have a Cow, Mankind, There's No Business like Moe Business*. The carnivalesque, it should be observed, is an all-

encompassing form of celebration, in which all participate—it is thus crucial that the Halloween episodes so frequently emphasize community congregation.

<sup>44</sup> Ned envisages Homer as literally personifying gluttony in *Heck House*.

<sup>45</sup> In *Dial 'Z' for Zombies*, *Homega Man*, and *I Know What You Diddly-iddly-did*.

<sup>46</sup> Ortvéd, 80-1; Henry (2007), 295.

<sup>47</sup> In *Bart Simpson's Dracula*, *Attack of the 50ft Eyesores*, *The Genesis Tub*, *Fly vs Fly*, *Easy Bake Coven*, *G-G-G-Ghost D-D-Dad*, *Frinkenstein*, *Four Beheadings and a Funeral*, *Bartificial Intelligence*, *I've Grown a Costume on your Face*, *The Day the World Looked Stupid*, *Untitled Robot Parody*, *It's the Grand Pumpkin*, *Milhouse*, and *Dial 'M' for Murder*.

<sup>48</sup> In *Lisa's Nightmare*, *Night of the Dolphin*, and *Fright to Creep and Scare Harms*, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Such as the episodes *The Last Temptation of Homer* and *Life on the Fast Lane*.

<sup>50</sup> Duncan Stuart Beard, "Local Satire with a Global Reach: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*," in Alberti, 273-91, 274.

<sup>51</sup> Homer in *The Devil and Homer Simpson*.

<sup>52</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 19.

<sup>53</sup> He refers to areas such as the anus or vagina—body parts that are considered 'improper'. Bakhtin (1984), 26.

<sup>54</sup> Tueth, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Mullen, 66.

<sup>56</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 7.

<sup>57</sup> However, since they are marked as "special," the Treehouse episodes do not threaten the series' adherence to "pressures of often non-chronological syndication" whereby "any given episode must be able to follow any other." Gray, 50.

<sup>58</sup> As a one-off, the Halloween special would fail in offering us a significant challenge to the sentimentalized rendition of family unity we find elsewhere in the series. Gray, 59.

<sup>59</sup> Bakhtin (1984), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, (1984), 21.

<sup>61</sup> As in the case of Treehouse episodes I, II, III, and V.

<sup>62</sup> Gray, 68.

<sup>63</sup> As observed by co-creator Seth Green in the 'making of' featurette accompanying the 2006 Revolver Entertainment DVD release of "Robot Chicken, Season One."

<sup>64</sup> Both of which feature in the episode *Death's a Bitch*.

<sup>65</sup> This trait was derided by the makers of "South Park" in the *Cartoon Wars* episodes, in season ten.

<sup>66</sup> Peter's unalloyed drinking in *Peter's Two Dads* and *Death's a Bitch*, and Brian's cocaine abuse in *The Thin White Line*.

<sup>67</sup> One notable example is the ninety second vomiting sequence in *8 Simple Rules for Buying My Teenage Daughter*.

<sup>68</sup> Brian becomes a porn director in *Brian Does Hollywood*, and becomes uncontrollably aroused in *Screwed the Pooch*, while Peter becomes daunted by the size of his son's penis in *And the Wiener is...* The episode *Sibling Rivalry* is entirely based around Peter and Lois's sex life.

<b>Treehouse number</b> [Episode Ref, Air date]	<b>Chapter title</b>
<b>I</b> [7F04, 25 Oct 1990]	<i>a) Bad Dream House</i>
	<i>b) Hungry are the Damned</i>
	<i>c) The Raven</i>
<b>II</b> [8F02, 31 Oct 1991]	<i>a) Lisa's Nightmare</i>
	<i>b) Bart's Nightmare</i>
	<i>c) Homer's Nightmare</i>
<b>III</b> [9F04, 29 Oct 1992]	<i>a) Clown without Pity</i>
	<i>b) King Homer</i>
	<i>c) Dial 'Z' for Zombies</i>
<b>IV</b> [1F04, 28 Oct 1993]	<i>a) The Devil and Homer Simpson</i>
	<i>b) Terror at 5 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> Feet</i>
	<i>c) Bart Simpson's Dracula</i>
<b>V</b> [2F03, 30 Oct 1994]	<i>a) The Shinning</i>
	<i>b) Time and Punishment</i>
	<i>c) Nightmare Cafeteria</i>
<b>VI</b> [3F04, 29 Oct 1995]	<i>a) Attack of the 50ft Eyesores</i>
	<i>b) Nightmare on Evergreen Terrace</i>
	<i>c) Homer<sup>3</sup></i>
<b>VII</b> [4F02, 27 Oct 1996]	<i>a) The Thing and I</i>
	<i>b) The Genesis Tub</i>
	<i>c) Citizen Kang</i>
<b>VIII</b> [5F02, 26 Oct 1997]	<i>a) Homega Man</i>
	<i>b) Fly vs Fly</i>
	<i>c) Easy Bake Coven</i>

<b>IX</b> [AABF01, 25 Oct 1998]	<i>a) Hell Toupee</i>
	<i>b) Terror of Tiny Toon</i>
	<i>c) Starship Poopers</i>
<b>X</b> [BABF01, 31 Oct 1999]	<i>a) I Know what you Diddly-iddly-did</i>
	<i>b) Desperately Xeeking Xena</i>
	<i>c) Life's a Glitch, Then You Die</i>
<b>XI</b> [BABF21, 01 Nov 2000]	<i>a) G-G-G-Ghost D-D-Dad</i>
	<i>b) Scary Tales can Come True</i>
	<i>c) Night of the Dolphin</i>
<b>XII</b> [CABF19, 06 Nov 2001]	<i>a) Hex and the City</i>
	<i>b) House of Whacks</i>
	<i>c) Wiz Kids</i>
<b>XIII</b> [DABF19, 03 Nov 2002]	<i>a) Send in the Clones</i>
	<i>b) Fright to creep and Scare Harms</i>
	<i>c) Island of Dr. Hibbert</i>
	<i>a) Reaper Madness</i>
	<i>b) Frinkenstein</i>
	<i>c) Stop the World, I Want to Goof Off</i>
<b>XV</b> [FABF23, 07 Nov 2004]	<i>a) Ned Zone</i>
	<i>b) Four Beheadings and a Funeral</i>
	<i>c) In the Belly of the Boss</i>
<b>XVI</b> [GABF17, 06 Nov 2005]	<i>a) Bartificial Intelligence</i>
	<i>b) Survival of the Fattest</i>
	<i>c) I've Grown a Costume on your Face</i>
<b>XVII</b> [HABF17, 05 Nov 2006]	<i>a) Married to the Blob</i>
	<i>b) You Gotta Know When to Golem</i>
	<i>c) The Day the World Looked Stupid</i>
<b>XVIII</b> [JABF16, 04 Nov 2007]	<i>a) E.T. Go Home</i>

	<i>b) Mr and Mrs Simpson</i>
	<i>c) Heck House</i>
<b>XIX</b> [KABF16, 02 Nov 2008]	<i>a) Untitled Robot Parody</i>
	<i>b) How to get Ahead in Dead-vertizing</i>
	<i>c) It's the Grand Pumpkin, Milhouse</i>
<b>XX</b> [LABF14, 25 Oct 2009]	<i>a) Dial 'M' for Murder</i>
	<i>b) Don't have a Cow, Mankind</i>
	<i>c) There's no Business like Moe Business</i>