

# Animated 'Worlds'

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# Animated Fathers: Representations of Masculinity in *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*

Suzanne Williams-Rautiola

As one of the central characters in the longest-running sitcom in the history of American television (*The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening, 1989 to present), Homer Simpson is an enduring and controversial male figure. The appeal of the show is varied and is in part explained by clever writing, a socially insightful critique delivered by an excellent voice cast, and an animated visualisation that complements the writing with rich detail in its visual jokes. However, it is the complex personalities of the characters that provide the continuing connection to the audience and the fertile ground for its stories.

When one looks at Homer, he seems to have few of the characteristics that would make him a staple in homes week after week. Unlike Hank Hill of *King of the Hill* (created by Michael Judge and Greg Daniels, 1997), Homer is not the 'culturally idealized form of masculine character' termed by sociologists 'hegemonic masculinity'.<sup>1</sup> He is a character with significant

*Abstract:* In animated television programming where masculine characters are often portrayed as super heroes with easy answers to life's challenges, Homer Simpson and Hank Hill offer two very different and complex animated worlds of masculinity. *The Simpsons* is an example of Roland Barthes' 'writerly text' with a drawing style and open narrative that provide a 'discursive reserve', allowing Homer to recreate himself with each challenge to explore a variety of both positive and negative masculinities. In the 'readerly' text of *King of the Hill* the drawing style and cultural references tie the text to small town Texas where the hegemonic masculine values of Hank Hill meet modern social and ethical dilemmas, often generated by his son, Bobby. The animated text takes the contrasts and dilemmas to their extremes, challenging and interrogating the simplistic answers offered by Hank's hegemonic definition of masculinity.

flaws and appetites who has moments of transcendence that critic Carl Matheson characterises as 'the thirty seconds or so of apparent redemption ... there mainly to allow us to soldier on for twenty-one and a half minutes of maniacal cruelty'.<sup>2</sup> David Arnold argues that although *The Simpsons* could be classified as an example of Roland Barthes' 'writely' text, it is 'an "irresponsible" text, one rich in associations and connotations and per-versely unwilling to have those connotations pinned down'.<sup>3</sup>

This essay takes as its beginning the suggestion by Arnold that *The Simpsons* is a 'writely' text. However, it goes beyond Arnold's discussion of signifiers to suggest how multiple entrances to the open, animated narrative provide a discursive reserve that offers the viewer an expansive rather than irresponsible vision of masculinity. This depiction of expansive masculinities is contrasted with the readerly text of *King of the Hill* – a narrative that allows the hegemonic ideals of masculinity to be taken to their limits through animation in order to expose both their strengths and weaknesses. In the modern world of animation in which masculine characters (particularly in animation developed for children) are often portrayed as super heroes, Homer Simpson and Hank Hill offer two very different and complex animated worlds of masculinity.

### Hank Hill vs. Homer Simpson – hegemonic masculinity meets the buffoon

As is evident in both series, masculinity comes in a variety of forms. Sociologist Michael Kimmel notes:

We think of manhood as eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man ... We think of manhood as innate, residing in the particular biological composition of the human male, the result of androgens or the possession of a penis ... I view masculinity as a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world.<sup>4</sup>

There are several important issues that recur throughout the literature on masculinity. First, masculinity is a process; gender is created and recreated through an internalisation of relationships and ongoing interaction with the external world. Second, masculinity is a 'collection of meanings' that encompasses such a wide range of characteristics and behaviours that it is arguably more accurate to think of *masculinities* rather than *masculinity*.<sup>5</sup>

While recognising the multiplicity of masculinities, sociologists and communication theorists have also identified several cultural ideals related to masculinity. According to Nick Trujillo, 'hegemonic masculinity' is characterised in the literature as (1) 'physical force and control', (2) 'occupational achievement in an industrialized, capitalistic society', (3) 'patriarchy',

which includes being 'breadwinners', 'family protectors', and 'strong father figures'; (4) 'frontiersmanship', including the daring and romance of the past and the outdoorsman of today, and (5) 'heterosexuality'.<sup>6</sup> However, the television representation of the working class American father is often very different. Richard Butsch writes, '[Working class fathers] are dumb, immature, irresponsible or lacking in common sense ... [They are] typically well-intentioned, even lovable, but no one to respect or emulate'.<sup>7</sup>

As a working-class father, Hank Hill embodies all of the identified hegemonic ideals of masculinity with few of the buffoonish characteristics described by Butsch. Although Hank does not have a stereotypically muscular body, he is a man who is defined by his physical abilities, often referring to his high school prowess as a member of the football team and introducing his abusive football coach as a role model for his son, Bobby ('Three Coaches and a Bobby'). Further, his occupation is of paramount importance to Hank. When he introduces himself, he always notes in a somewhat breathy, awe-filled voice that he sells 'propane and propane accessories'. The importance he places on work can be found in the number of times that he attempts to interest Bobby in the propane business ('Snow Job', 'Rodeo Days', and 'Meet the Propaniacs') and his attempts to get Bobby and his niece, Luanne, jobs ('The Buck Stops Here', 'Life in the Fast Lane, Bobby's Saga', and 'Jon Vitti Presents: "Return to La Grunta"'). Although his wife, Peggy, works as a substitute teacher, he is the family protector and breadwinner, eagerly encouraging Peggy to quit her job ('Peggy's Turtle Song'). In addition, he is a strong father to his son, as even his combative father, Cotton, and antagonistic neighbour, Kahn Souphanousinphone, have to agree ('Next of Shim' and 'Aisle 8'). Hank is an accomplished outdoorsman, taking Bobby and his friends camping ('The Order of the Straight Arrow') and Bobby hunting ('Good Hill Hunting'). Thoroughly heterosexual, Hank often worries that Bobby is too effeminate, implying that he fears Bobby is gay ('Bobby Goes Nuts', 'Rodeo Days' and 'Sleight of Hank').

Homer Simpson has few of the characteristics of 'hegemonic masculinity' and all of the buffoonish characteristics enumerated by Butsch. An early critic of *The Simpsons*, Butsch writes, 'While Bart may at first appear refreshingly antiauthoritarian, the contrasting buffoonery of his father repeats an insidious anti-working-class theme ... In [*Good Times*, *All in the Family*, *The Life of Riley*, and *I Remember Mama*] the children outdistance the blue-collar father. At best, father is benign but inferior, at worst, an embarrassment'.<sup>8</sup> Homer is overweight because of his voracious appetite for fattening food and Duff beer. Far from being physically forceful, he is generally found at home on the couch watching television or seated on a barstool at Moe's Tavern. Further, occupational achievement is not a

motivating force for Homer. Although he does not want to lose his job as a safety inspector for the nuclear power plant, he is always pictured as sleeping, eating doughnuts, or loafing on the job – a fact that is regularly observed by his boss, C. Montgomery Burns. Although Homer is the breadwinner and at times the family protector, he cannot be described as a strong father figure. Homer is at a loss to know what to do when wife Marge asks him to take care of their infant daughter, Maggie ('Homer Alone'). He is so self-centered that his eight-year-old daughter, Lisa, has to find ways to relate to him, rather than vice versa ('Lisa the Greek'). And, when he buys a cheap trampoline, Lisa remarks, 'Dad, this one gesture almost makes up for all those years of shaky fathering' ('Bart's Inner Child'). The only hegemonic characteristic he possesses is heterosexuality, regularly ending the show in bed with Marge.

In contrast he possesses all of the buffoonish characteristics observed by Butsch. Homer is not very bright and is often corrected by Lisa or Bart when he makes errors. Although he is 'street wise' and often lucky in his decisions, the only time Homer becomes truly intelligent is after a crayon that is up his nose and lodged in his brain is removed. While his new-found intelligence allows him to communicate meaningfully for the first time with his highly intelligent daughter Lisa, it negatively affects most of his other relationships. Eventually he chooses to have the crayon reinserted into his brain to go back to being dumb again ('HOMR'). His immature behaviour not only gets him into trouble with his family (for example, when he gets drunk and insults their friends at a party in 'The War of the Simpsons'), but his irresponsibility also at times places his family in great jeopardy (such as when he abandons childcare duties to attempt to win a prize offered by a radio station, leaving Bart and Milhouse, who get into trouble in 'The Parent Rap').

Dismissing Homer as another example of buffoonish masculinity or Hank Hill as another example of hegemonic masculinity, however, does not adequately explain the impact of these characters or their role in making their primetime animated programs successful. Both series offer the audience rich expressions of masculinity coupled with striking contradictions. In *The Simpsons*, Homer recreates himself each episode exploring the plurality of masculinities, while the hegemonic masculinity of Hank is interrogated by a changing society and by his son.

### Homer Simpson: a multiplicity of masculinities in a writerly text

Homer escapes easy categorisation through what Roland Barthes has characterised as a writerly text. For Barthes 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a

producer of the text ... the writerly text is *ousselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world'. The model of the writerly text is 'a productive (and no longer a representative) one'.<sup>9</sup> The writerly text is juxtaposed against what Barthes calls a readerly text. He states, 'As we might expect, the readerly is controlled by the principle of non-contradiction, by multiplying solidarities, by stressing at every opportunity the *compatible* nature of circumstances, by attaching narrated events together with a kind of logical "paste"'.<sup>10</sup> According to Kaja Silverman, 'the readerly approach stresses all of the values implicit in the paradigmatic classic text – unity, realism, and transparency'.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, John Fiske characterises the writerly text as 'multiple and full of contradictions; it foregrounds its own nature as discourse and resists coherence or unity'.<sup>12</sup> According to Barthes, the ideal writerly text is made of networks which

are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one ... the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed ... it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all in-difference, of asserting the very existence of plurality.<sup>13</sup>

Since the segmentation of the television text by commercials works to disrupt textual unity and foregrounds its inherent discourse, Fiske suggests that television could be writerly, except for the fact that the writerly texts that Barthes was addressing were typically avant-garde with a minority appeal. Fiske wishes to call the television text 'producerly' because it 'combines the televisual characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly'.<sup>14</sup>

If the model for a writerly text is one that is productive and encourages the audience to share in its creation, then the writerly text is not necessarily avant-garde for a minority audience. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes notes,

There are those who want a text ... without a shadow, without 'the dominant ideology'; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text ... The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit of ideology, a bit of representation, a bit of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro*.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, a text that is productive and by extension writerly can be connected to the dominant ideology and representation through its galaxy of signifiers and multilevel narrative.

Also, as noted by Alex Ben Block, *The Simpsons* was created to be 'alternative' television, something very different from the mainstream in order to attract

young, urban viewers to the fledgling FOX network.<sup>16</sup> The most noticeable of the differences was the development of sitcom content in animated form, what Jason Mittell calls 'genre mixing'.<sup>17</sup> When it first aired, critics contrasted *The Simpsons* with sitcom ancestors such as *Father Knows Best* because of its 'anti-family' stance and compared it to other anti-family sitcoms of the early 1990s (such as *Married ... with Children* or *Roseanne*).<sup>18</sup> As noted by Vincent Brook, *The Simpsons* ... is both parody and homage. It preserves the blue-collar setting of *The Flintstones* and the family constellations are similar, but the "warmedy" *Flintstone* world is turned on its ear.<sup>19</sup> Critics also lauded its reinvention of the 'cartoon' genre, although as noted by Mittell 'the cartoon's pejorative qualities and low cultural status are never far from the surface'.<sup>20</sup> As noted by Paul Wells:

The very language of comedy, like animation, is an intrinsically alternative one, speaking to a revisionist engagement with the 'taken-for-granted'. In the American context, it is especially the case that animation in all its forms, not merely those played for laughs, has served to operate as a distorting and re-positioning parallel genre both to established live-action film and television texts (and their predominantly conservative codes of representation), but more importantly, to society in general.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, *The Simpsons* was immediately recognised as different from other television comedies as the first primetime animated sitcom since *The Flintstones* and utilised the subversive qualities of animation to challenge the 'taken-for-granted' representation of the family and masculinity to capture a young audience.

In discussing *The Simpsons* as a writerly text, Arnold notes, *The Simpsons* gets its energy precisely from the conflict between our recognition of the signifiers as highly mediated, as un-realistic, and our understanding that they nonetheless resemble a reality we recognize.<sup>22</sup> *The Simpsons* is populated with an idealised, intact family, including father (Homer), mother (Marge), and two-and-a-half children – Bart, Lisa, and Maggie (who is an infant). While the Simpson family is human in its appearance, the show's creator Matt Groening also employs signifiers in the characters' animated design to bring to the forefront their constructed nature. Their skin is bright yellow, because as Groening has stated, he wants the viewers to think that their television needs adjusting when watching the show.<sup>23</sup> In addition, some of their features are more symbolic than realistic – particularly their eyes which are bulging, round orbs and the representations of their heads and hair. For example the hair on Homer's oversized head is represented by only a few lines. Further, the characters have three fingers and a thumb – an animation standard for human and anthropomorphic characters. Finally, most of the characters on *The Simpsons* are stylistically similar, with little to no chin, a recessed lower jaw, and a large protruding upper lip. Thus, while the characters are definitely human, they resist easy connec-

tions to real world people, bringing to the forefront their constructed nature and establishing a world of characters that is identifiable but set apart from the real and from other cartoon or live action worlds.

Although the signifiers are unrealistic, simplified, and representative, the text develops what Robert Ferguson calls a large 'discursive reserve' through an open setting, large cast of characters, and intertextual connections. In writing about representations of race, Ferguson has drawn upon the work of Teun Van Dijk, who uses the pyramid as a metaphor for the way complex issues are represented in the press. Complex issues such as those involving race and gender, are often represented by abbreviated means such as captions or headlines (the tip of the pyramid), 'discursive reserve' remaining below the surface (the base of the pyramid), providing a galaxy of signifiers and additional entrances to the text.<sup>24</sup>

The setting for *The Simpsons* has generated fan debate over the long run of the show, because it is also more open than is that of *King of the Hill*. The Simpsons inhabit the town of Springfield; however, the exact state in which the town is located is never identified. Springfield was the setting of the 1950s sitcom *Father Knows Best*; however, there are numerous cities and towns named Springfield throughout the United States. Also, the geographical references that might identify the location of the town are contradictory. Thus, though the physical space is suggestive of 'small-town America', where people know each other and kids freely move about the town, *The Simpsons* is not tied to a cultural tradition in a particular area of the country. Also, as reported by critic Tom Shales, Executive Producer James L. Brooks has exploited the flexibility of the animated form to change locations as well as to add characters (which for a live-action sitcom is very costly).<sup>25</sup> Thus, the Simpson family has packed up and moved to a new locale on numerous occasions only to return to Springfield by the next episode.

Discursive reserve is also developed by numerous references to other texts (films, television shows, books, cartoons, personalities, etc.), making *The Simpsons* what many critics define as a postmodern text. The narrative space shifts from such widely divergent connections as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* to singer Michael Jackson to the movie *Psycho*. As noted by Matthew Henry, *The Simpsons* 'operates like a "mobile game of trivia" for its adult fans'.<sup>26</sup> There is so much textual complexity that recording the show in order to watch it again or to catch cultural references that go by too quickly has been part of the pleasure in watching from the beginning.<sup>27</sup> These references serve not only to pluralise the narrative but also to allow Homer Simpson to occupy a much more pluralistic stance within the text than does Hank Hill.

Unlike Hank and the Marketplace Man described by Kimmel, who derives

his identity from success in the capitalist marketplace – 'a male-only world in which he pits himself against other men'<sup>28</sup> – Homer does not define himself by his job as a safety inspector at the nuclear power plant. He rarely refers to his work life, other than plotting to get out of work. In addition to his primary job, Homer has often inexplicably taken on other full-time jobs with no mention of being fired from or quitting his job at the power plant, and he returns to work at the power plant without formally being rehired. Some of the different jobs that Homer has had over the years include voice talent in a cartoon ('The Itchy and Scratchy and Poochie Show'), head of a security company ('Poppa's Got a Brand New Badge'), a music promoter ('Colonel Homer'), a Hollywood producer ('Beyond Blunderdome'), and many more. Through the writerly text, Homer continually reinvents himself through his work.

While males still maintain the greatest share of power in American society, according to Kimmel they do not feel powerful. He notes that they are bossed around at work, but they also feel bossed around at home.<sup>29</sup> Although by most standards Homer is not powerful, he does not wait for others to empower him nor does he rely on traditional cultural values. When motivated, his responses to the problems of life are inventive and action-oriented. In 'Homer the Vigilante', he states, 'We don't need a thinker, we need a doer. Someone who will act without thinking'. For example, Homer leads his neighbours in a revolt against the phone company ('A Tale of Two Springfield'), helps to form a neighbourhood security force when burglary is rampant in Springfield ('Homer, the Vigilante'), and is elected President of the union when he stands up to Mr Burns who wants to cut their dental plan ('Last Exit to Springfield').

Further, sociologist Vicki Nobel notes that when asked what they feared most, men reported that their greatest fear was being laughed at.<sup>30</sup> Homer spends little time worrying about what others think and much of the humour in the show results from Homer's running into trouble because he also spends little time planning his actions or choosing his words. Whether from lack of social awareness or stupidity, he generally speaks his mind and often other characters respond positively to his honesty. For example, when Homer writes a scathing review of Mel Gibson's film on an audience survey card, Gibson hires Homer to help correct the problems he has identified with the film. Unfortunately, the movie that results from the Simpson-Gibson collaboration is panned by the premiere audience. Undaunted, Homer optimistically suggests other films that they might do together, before Gibson pushes him out the door ('Beyond Blunderdome').

Homer's optimism generally does not follow from past success. Unlike Hank Hill, who is the family protector and generally saves his family and neighbours from their follies, most of Homer's schemes turn out disas-

trously as did the Gibson-Simpson movie. For example, Homer discovers he has a half brother, Herb, who owns an automobile manufacturing plant that is losing market share to the Japanese. When they meet, Homer makes some design suggestions, and Herb hires him to design a new car for the common man. Homer's outlandish ideas result in a car that costs \$82,000, causing Herb to declare bankruptcy and lose his business, home, and all his possessions. Lisa remarks, 'His life was an unbridled success until he found out he was a Simpson'. When told the news, Homer's dad adds, 'I knew you'd blow it'. However, Homer is only momentarily slowed by this failure and immediately brightens when Bart tells him that he thought his car was 'really cool' ('Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?').

In *The Simpsons*, animation is also utilised to tap into the discursive reserve of emotional expression that would be unacceptable in a live-action sitcom. Communication theorist Muriel Cantor notes that no sitcom on television would portray child abuse.<sup>31</sup> She is correct in that no *live-action* sitcom does; however, when Homer is frustrated, he strangles Bart. This reaches its zenith in 'I'm Furious Yellow' as the frequency and intensity of Homer's emotional outbursts increases each time Bart goads him into getting angry. Why is it that a viewer might accept such an immoral action and even consider it humorous? One could read Homer's strangling Bart as child abuse and object to the family dynamics depicted on the show (and some do).<sup>32</sup> However, one might see this action as symbolic of parents' extreme inner frustrations with their children, and this interpretation is encouraged because the cartoony actions of the Simpsons are not very different from the slapstick actions of the animated characters of the past.

Brian Ott notes, 'since he has no real history, Homer can be radically multiple and contradictory ... No matter how traumatic his experiences, Homer never learns anything, in part, because he is not a distinct, thinking subject ... and exemplifies a radical postmodern multiplicity – [quoting James M. Glass] "an extreme rejection of boundary, stability, historicity, and any concept of cohesive self".<sup>33</sup> Whereas Ott suggests that this results in a decentered subject that is 'simply another product of the culture industry', this essay argues that as a writerly text, it opens the doors to a variety of entrances to masculinity without any one authoritatively being the main one.

What keeps the text from being lost in endless pluralities is what Mittell calls the 'paradox of animated realism'. While *The Simpsons* is representative in its depiction of characters and setting, Mittell argues that when compared to *The Cosby Show*, critics have found it to be more real.<sup>34</sup> Critic Laurel Shaper Walters quotes a street vendor who sells boot-legged Bart T-shirts as saying, 'Cosby is the way it is supposed to be. *The Simpsons* is the way it really is – that's life'.<sup>35</sup> As noted by critic Joanna Elin, 'The lives of the

Conners and Bundys and Simpsons reflect the grimmer realities facing many families today. Family members often find themselves at the mercy of stronger, more powerful figures: like the bully who makes Bart's life miserable or the boss at the nuclear plant who decides on a whim to do away with the annual Christmas bonus.<sup>36</sup> She notes that this is particularly true as the gap widens between rich and poor, citing Ella Taylor, author of *Prime-Time Families*, who states 'The Simpsons goes further in articulating these difficulties than *Roseanne*. But because it's a cartoon it's safer. It seems less real.'<sup>37</sup>

As specialised, technical knowledge becomes the key to unlock the American Dream, Homer worries briefly that he is falling behind. He says, 'The saddest day of my life was when I realised I could beat my dad at most things, and Bart experienced that at the age of four' ('Moaning Lisa'). Further, he worries about whether his family is normal and even pawns their beloved TV in order to pay for counselling for them ('There's No Disgrace Like Home'). Thus, Homer's frustrations with his children, his inability to keep up with the changes in everyday life, his desire to have and give his family the advantages of life such as cable TV even if he has to get it illegally ('Homer Vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment'), and his worries over the over the normalcy of his family provide the 'shadow of ideology' that links *The Simpsons* to their audience.

In addition to articulating some of the concerns of the audience, Homer is a likable character. Philosopher Raja Halwani believes that the best assessment of Homer is articulated by Marge in 'Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield' in which she states that the quality she likes most about Homer is his 'in-your-face humanity'. Halwani does not want to claim that Homer is an admirable person, only that he possesses an ethically admirable trait.

Homer's love of life stands out as an important quality *especially* in our age, an age in which political correctness, over-politeness, lack of willingness to judge others, inflated obsession with physical health, and pessimism about what is good and enjoyable about life reign more or less supreme.<sup>38</sup>

Homer's thoughtless pursuit of the American dream has resulted in a great deal of criticism. Critic Harry Waters accuses the show of shamelessly pandering 'to a kid's-eye view of the world: parents dispense dopey advice, school is a drag and happiness can be attained only by subverting the system'.<sup>39</sup> One could view Homer as an attractive character because he does not spend a great deal of time obsessing (as does Hank Hill) over what others think or the negative things that happen in his life. Waters quotes Matt Groening as observing, 'The world kicks Homer in the ass but he doesn't resent it'.<sup>40</sup> However, some viewers see him as irresponsible and

self-centred.<sup>41</sup> For Brook the 'true subversive potential' resides in the show's 'open-ended disruption', part of which he identifies as the 'punishment not fitting the crime' – for example Homer on numerous occasions trying to cheat the system only to be caught, and let off with a 'slap on the wrist' ('Bart Gets Hit by a Car').<sup>42</sup>

Theorists Michael Billig et al suggest that ideology is not a unified system of beliefs that operates in a linear fashion without contradiction nor do they view individuals as unthinking followers of ideological schemata. They suggest that a better way of conceptualising ideology is to stress its 'dilemmatic nature'.

By assuming that there are contrary themes, a different image of the thinker can emerge. The person is not necessarily pushed into an unthinking obedience, in which conformity to ritual has replaced deliberation. Ideology may produce such conformity, but it can also provide the dilemmatic elements which enable deliberation to occur.<sup>43</sup>

As noted by Ferguson, 'This is an important conceptualisation because it suggests that audiences have to negotiate meaning in the face of often contradictory evidence or contradictory personal perceptions of a given situation'.<sup>44</sup> And, as Paul Wells suggests,

Fundamentally ... animation in the United States has been characterized by a desire to express *difference* and otherness ... it has engaged with the contradictory conditions of American mores, reflected the anxieties within American culture, and offered insight into the mytho-political, and, indeed, mytho-poetic zeitgeist of a nation.<sup>45</sup>

Homer is emblematic of the process through which gender is created in an ongoing interaction with the external world that at times results in contradictions. Homer confronts many of the issues that sociologists have found modern males face – 'the reflected anxieties within the American culture'<sup>46</sup> – and he *acts* to overcome them. In the plural writerly text that is developed through the character of Homer, various masculinities are explored – both the good and the bad. He is the caring father, the angry father, the self-centred father, the anxious father. He is the thoughtless husband, and the tender, loving husband. He is the slovenly employee and the tireless entrepreneur. Through multiple entrances to the text the audience is introduced to the possible masculinities and left to discover what we will make of them. The evidence that such dilemmatic assessment occurs was reported by Brook. In a study of one episode ('Lisa the Iconoclast') he found that while participants in the study agreed on '*what* happened', there was marked disagreement in '*why* it happened and what should be *made* of it'.<sup>47</sup>



### Hank Hill: interrogating hegemonic masculinity through a readerly text

Although *The Simpsons* has been called realistic in its depiction of the issues and contradictions surrounding the modern family, *King of the Hill* offers a readerly text that is very different. In its structure, it is an example of Barthes' readerly text as we see only an occasional example of contradiction within the character of Hank. Instead the narrative is controlled by 'multiplying solidarities' with events which are linked together 'with a kind of logical "paste"'.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike *The Simpsons*, the entry into the text is well defined. *King of the Hill* has been described by co-creator Mike Judge as 'very simple and realistic, not showing off'.<sup>49</sup> The characters are much closer to a human look and proportion, with few cartoony characteristics to separate them from live-action actors (including having all their fingers). Their eyes are normal size and shape for their faces, and their body proportions and hair styles are easily identifiable as characteristics that could be duplicated with live actors. The conventions of animation add little to the characterisation of the Hill family or to Hank. Also, in the development of the setting and the narrative, *King of the Hill* is closer to live-action sitcoms than the more symbolic world developed in *The Simpsons*. In *King of the Hill* what executive producers Mike Judge and Greg Daniels have created is, in the experience of this Texas native, a fairly realistic depiction of life in a Texas town which they call Arlen. Arlen is not clearly established as a suburban part of the Dallas Metroplex as its purported inspiration Garland, Texas; however, its tie to small-town Texan culture is unmistakable with numerous references to Texas traditions – for example the yearly game between the University of Texas at Austin and University of Oklahoma – its use of colloquial phrases by Hank and the other characters, and numerous connections to Texas locations.

As with the Simpsons, the Hills are a nuclear family and include father (Hank), mother (Peggy), and son (Bobby) – although their niece (Luanne) lives with them at varying times throughout the series. Both Homer and Hank have extended families that appear throughout the show, jobs that they have held for the duration of the show, and male friends with whom they regularly meet to drink beer. However, this is where the structural similarities end. According to Daniels, 'The idea of the show is that common-sense Americans are smarter than people who live on the coasts'.<sup>50</sup> Thus, a contrast is established between a clearly defined, working-class man from Texas and the forces of change within the society – chief of which are educated liberals from the coasts.

Much of the humour in *King of the Hill* comes from Hank Hill's struggle to

adjust to modern American life. Hank clings to traditional, hegemonic male values and traits identified by Trujillo, including resistance to all things deemed to be feminine, highlighting his clear definitions of gender based upon hegemonic values. Hank is supremely confident in his knowledge of and ability to use tools, regularly fixing his son's and his friends' mistakes ('The Buck Stops Here' and 'A Firefighting We Will Go'). He is a man who loves his family, friends, home, job, lawn, and Lady Bird, his hunting dog, however not necessarily in that order. Always in control of himself, Hank is only flustered when he attempts to deal with his emotions (such as telling his son that he loves him). Hank is a modest man, who is easily embarrassed by his niece's presence in his home (Pilot Episode) and by any medical condition that marks him as different – his narrow urethra ('Hank's Unmentionable Problem'), low sperm count ('Next of Shim'), or back trouble ('Hank's Back Story'). Hank so completely identifies himself with his job as a propane salesman that he believes it is sacrilege to use anything else but propane in his home and in his barbecue pit. His devotion to the company is so strong that when the owner, Buck Strickland, has a heart attack and chooses MBA-educated Lloyd Vickers to run the company, while relegating Hank to feed the dogs, he becomes depressed. He is further disillusioned when he finds out that Mr. Strickland uses electricity instead of propane in his home. While one can understand his frustration at being passed over in favour of a younger, less experienced employee; however, instead of seizing other opportunities, a very traditional answer comes to Hank in a small country store – go back to basics and deliver 'service with a smile'. Hank returns to work with a smile and finds that Vickers has so enraged the drivers with his business methods that they have all walked off the job. Hank saves their customers from freezing and the company from going bankrupt as he figures out a way to deliver the propane to those who need it ('Snow Job').

On the rare occasions when Hank acts outside of hegemonic values, his actions are often in service to a higher value. For example, when Hank's friend, Bill Dauterive, who is distraught over the break-up of his marriage to Lenore, arrives at a party wearing women's clothing, in order to save his friend from physical harm from the other men at the party Hank also dons a dress. By pretending to be Lenore, Hank is able to bring Bill back to reality ('Pretty, Pretty Dresses').

Within the readerly text with its multiplying solidarities, according to Barthes, the reader is 'left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum'.<sup>51</sup> This might be true for *King of the Hill* if it were not for the other males on the show. His three friends – Dale Gribble, the paranoid, incompetent exterminator; Bill Dauterive, the overweight, naïve Armed Forces barber; and Boomhauer the self-absorbed ladies' man – combine to represent Butsch's

male buffoon. Since he is surrounded by incompetence, Hank's careful attention to detail and slow methodical actions seem very prudent. And, indeed, in the Hill's world Hank's emotional development is a definite improvement over that of his father, Cotton, who is emotionally abusive and distant from his second wife, Didi, and from other members of his family, including his son, Hank. Further, the series' critique of the hyper-educated, condescending liberal while at times strident strikes a chord. As noted by critic Kevin Michael Grace, *'King of the Hill'* provokes a shock of recognition—it was only two generations ago that most American men were just like Hank. After four decades of unrelieved "progress", who would argue that our "sophistication" is healthier than Hank's prudery?<sup>52</sup>

What allows this readerly text to interrogate hegemonic masculinity is Bobby's exploration of non-traditional forms of masculinity. Bobby who is in middle school is different from Hank in almost every way. He is overweight but is unwilling to curb his appetite. His ambition is to be an entertainer, an occupation to which Hank feels no 'real man' should aspire. Undeterred, Bobby practices magic, pursues comedy, etc., while Hank gets him part-time jobs as a caddy at the local country club ('The Buck Stops Here') and a soda vendor at the racetrack ('Life in the Fast Lane, Bobby's Saga'). While Hank often relives the glory days of his football career, Bobby has little interest in sports. Although Hank loves Bobby, it is clear that Hank views Bobby's overweight physique, his desire to be an entertainer, and his lack of ability at sports as failures. Although Homer is an experimenter and a doer without regard for the consequences, Hank is driven and limited by hegemonic concerns and his fear of what others will think. Hank so often worries about Bobby's feminine characteristics that one might be tempted to read him as homophobic. However, he does not appear upset when he and Dale Gribble discover that Dale's father is gay ('My Own Private Rodeo'). There is no overt homophobia, rather Bobby's interest in what Hank deems to be feminine is a threat to Hank's definition of masculinity.

The Hills are hard working, God-fearing, church-going people, who live by most of the moral guidelines that Homer eschews. It is Hank's steadfast avowal of these platitudes in the face of a changing society and the inability of these rules to provide his son, Bobby, an adequate guide by which to live that marks much of the humour in the show and begins to open the text. Most of the time, one can see the error of these simplistic platitudes, because the dogmatic adherence to traditional principles rarely turns out as positively for Hank as it did for Jim Anderson in *Father Knows Best*, and Hank is forced to adjust. Thus, when Bobby gets a job selling soft drinks at the racetrack, Hank urges him to give it 110%. Hank is so proud that his son is following his advice that he fails to detect the abuse by Bobby's boss until Bobby's life is placed in jeopardy ('Life in the Fast Lane, Bobby's Saga').

The effect of *King of the Hill* is often to walk a fine line between comedy and tragedy. For example, as Bobby tries to give 110%, he is urged by his boss to cross a racetrack to deliver some sodas while the race is in progress. While it would be very uncomfortable for an audience to see a real child in that situation, animation allows the multiplying solidarities to continue to their extreme conclusion, so that the true consequences of the mindless adherence to cultural platitudes are explored.

Finally, *King of the Hill* also unflinchingly explores the dilemmatic nature of some of the modern issues. A good example is in the episode entitled 'Husky Bobby'. Although Bobby does not control his eating, he also does not feel good about his body until Peggy discovers a new store that carries clothes for 'husky' children. Bobby is so delighted that he cannot contain himself, wearing the clothes with such flair that the store's owner asks him to be a model in the store's next advertisement. Bobby is thrilled, gets an agent, rises to the top as a model, and is invited to participate in a fashion show at a local mall. However, Hank is appalled. Although he does not tell anyone, his major objection arises from the fact that in his youth, Hank made fun of overweight kids. He also views modelling as a feminine activity, particularly when he goes to a photo session in which the photographer is depicted as stereotypically and flamboyantly gay. Bobby defies Hank and goes to the show, but as Hank fears, the show is disrupted by a gang of youths who throw food at the kids on stage. Hank arrives on the scene, and 'rescues' Bobby by carrying him to safety from the stage. So while Bobby reaches out toward new definitions of masculinity and self-worth, this is contrasted to Hank's narrow outlook, which prevails in the end. Rather than continue to resist Hank's narrow-minded assessment of the situation, Bobby responds by thanking him, stating that he realises that Hank was right all along. While one might be disappointed with this hegemonic conclusion and be tempted to evaluate this as the multiplying solidarities of the readerly text, the narrative offers another explanation. Hank is acting in part from an understanding of his own prejudices. He understands his son's tormentors and perhaps may still understand their point of view, because the reality is that his son is overweight. Hank saves the day, and Bobby is grateful; however, the dilemma is not neatly solved. It is up to the audience to decide 'what it means'.

### Conclusion

Barthes suggests:

[The text] produces, in me, the best pleasure if it manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am led to look up often, to listen to something else. In the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural.<sup>53</sup>

Both shows invite the audience to interact with the text but in very different ways.

While *The Simpsons* maintains a shadow of the dominant ideology in the traditional structure of the nuclear family, it discards most of the traditional ideals of the how members of a family should relate to each other, other than to care about one another. It opens a space where a father's fears are articulated without easy, simplistic, or always appealing answers but provides ambiguous role models, opening moral and ethical dilemmas that the audience must then negotiate. What Homer unequivocally demonstrates is an enjoyment of life and an enthusiasm for what he decides to do however difficult it might be to predict what he will do. In *The Simpsons*' open animated world, we find possibilities for masculinities that are far different from the limitations of live-action sitcoms, and the enjoyment is seeing how Homer will react to and expand these possibilities week to week.

With *King of the Hill* we return to the idyllic family of the 1950s only to find that the simplistic answers that did not work back then truly do not work in the new millennium. Through the 'multiplying solidarities' of Hank's work ethic, his religious faith, his articulated value structure about what it is to be a man, and his confrontation with the forces of change in modern life, the audience sees the limitations of hegemonic ideology. However, in the animated world of *King of the Hill*, contrasts can be sharply drawn and taken to their extreme, so that the viewer moves beyond a simple referendum to consider some of the dilemmas we all face in modern life.

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## Chapter 8

# Animated Interactions: Animation Aesthetics and the World of the 'Interactive' Documentary

Paul Ward

## Introduction

In this essay, I wish to explore what might be called a sub-genre of both animation and documentary. These films take a real-life interview and then animate it by creatively interpreting the recorded sound of the interview with imaginative animated visuals. But films like the computer-rotoscoped film *Snack and Drink* (Bob Sabiston, USA 1999), or the Aardman clay animation film *Going Equipped* (Peter Lord, UK 1989) are actually playing with profound philosophical categories, and they make us think about animation and documentary's ability to represent things in a very important way. They exist on a boundary, a liminal space, between modes of representation. My discussion will offer a reading of these two exemplary films and how they mobilise a number of key debates for both

**Abstract:** This essay explores the relationship between two animated films – *Snack and Drink* (Bob Sabiston, 1999) and *Going Equipped* (Peter Lord, 1989) – and the real 'pro-filmic' interviews they re-present. With animated films there is a tension or contradiction between an attempt to represent a pre-existing reality (the autistic teenager in *Snack and Drink* for example) and the aesthetic and technological 'intervention' that animation techniques produce. Therefore, the construction of a world via animation techniques in order to re-present a real person from the world of actuality is the contradiction at the centre of these two films. The notion of an animated 'world' suggests one that is completely divorced from the indexical connection that is supposed to obtain in documentary representations. Yet these films demonstrate that animated documentaries are perfectly capable of re-presenting and 'embodying' knowledge about the real world.