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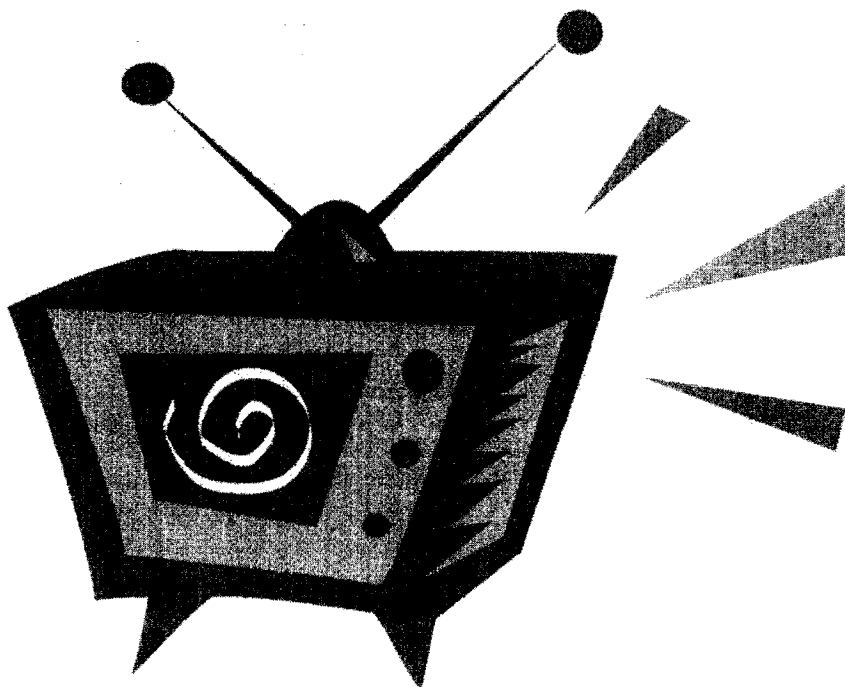
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Creating Television

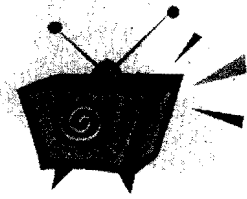
*Conversations with the People
Behind 50 Years of American TV*

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Individual Creativity in a Collaborative Medium

How do television creators do their work? When working under commercial pressures, and within complex systems of production and with scores of other people, how do they remain creative? Can their individual voices and visions be heard and seen? What impact can an individual's work have on the form or content of television? Does their work change television, and does television change society?

In the interviews that follow we learn what creators have to say about their experiences creating television, along with assessments of the industry, their personal impact, and the limits on and opportunities for creativity.

Ultimately, these are questions about television and social change and about the nature and value of art and creativity and their relationship to commerce. As will be seen, asking and answering such questions often involve value judgments about people, social class, art, and society.

Television does change, of course, but often many forces align to keep it the same. The industry relies on continuing series and familiar genres, and routinely feeds off successful shows in its breeding of spin-offs, sequels, and other imitations. In his thick-description study of the industry, *Inside Prime Time*, Todd Gitlin introduced the concepts of "recombinant culture" and the "hybrid pitch." In the hybrid pitch a writer-producer tries to sell a new television series to network executives by telling them, in one breath, that the prospective show is brand new—that no one has ever seen anything like it before—and in the next breath, that it is a blend of two familiar hit shows from the past.

NBC's enormous late-1970s failure, *Battlestar Gallactica*, is just one example of this phenomenon. It was pitched as an absolutely new, breakthrough show that would ably merge the *Star Trek* and *Bonanza* franchises. The program would put "*Bonanza* in outer space," with Lorne Greene holding the reins of the spaceship. Gitlin observed that what network executives were being sold, while new for the pitch session and marketing purposes,

was ultimately a less than brilliant mixing of two tried (tired?) and true genres. I often learned of such pitches in the course of my travels in Hollywood.

Much of television *is*, in essence, novelty packaged in a safe context. TV delivers something very familiar, but just new enough that you haven't seen it before; something that may *seem* novel, but is not really new—at least not so new so as to scare off a potential audience or the advertisers.

In 1978, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting conducted a study of why imported British offerings such as *Masterpiece Theater* weren't watched more frequently by American audiences. Viewers in focus groups told the researchers that they didn't like not knowing the characters from week to week; that it required too much mental effort to watch a new program with so many unfamiliar characters and actors. They preferred continuing series, with familiar characters, sets, and storylines.¹

The TV series became the key building block of commercial television early in the industry's history. A network's schedule, especially in prime time, is built around the episodic series because it reliably brings audiences back week after week, *and* because it permits the programs to be produced—or ground out on an assembly line, depending on your perspective—quickly and economically. There are scores, if not hundreds, of people involved in the production of a television series who help get a new program made each week, and their work has to be organized and systematized.

How do individual creators operate in such a system? If art requires an artist, can television be an art form if it is created by so many different people? Dwight MacDonald, reflecting the views of the Frankfurt School, had little doubt that the “Lords of Kitsch,” as he called them, were technicians rather than creative artists:

Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers, their participation is limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of *kitsch*, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule. (1957, p. 60)

In summarizing this critique in *Popular Culture and High Culture*, Herbert Gans distilled three closely related, factual sounding statements on the process by which mass culture is created:

That mass culture is an industry organized by profit; that in order for this industry to be profitable, it must create a homogeneous and standardized product that appeals to a mass audience; and that this requires a process in which the industry transforms the creator into a worker on a mass production assembly line, requiring him or her to give up the individual expression of his own skills and values. (1974, p. 20)

¹ The importance of the series, and “the familiar,” to the success of television is explored further in the introductions to Chapters 3, 4, and 8.

There can be little question but that the first two assessments are on target. Just see the interviews with Lee Rich, David Levy, and Jean Rouverol among others. Television creators do unquestionably hone and accommodate their talent, skills, and vision to the commercial realities and constraints of the industry. But there are also creative ideas and storytelling innovations that creators bring to the small screen and that bring change to television content and form. Gans writes: "Popular culture creators fight as intensely for their own ideas as high culture creators, and thinking of the former as opportunistic hacks out to give an audience what it wants is an unfair and inaccurate surrender to a facile stereotype (p. 27)."

AUDIENCE SIZE AND THE HIGH VS. POPULAR CULTURE DEBATE

In understanding television and our attitudes toward popular culture, audience size should rarely be far from mind. I have long wished that a greater number of television creators—and ultimately the networks and cable channels they serve—could be satisfied with just one-third less audience. HBO understands the problem. It has revolutionized what is possible in American television by eliminating commercials and offering repeat showings of its programs, thereby reducing the necessary size of the audience at any given time. By producing just 13 episodes in each season of *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos*, or *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, HBO gives its creators the necessary breathing room.

It boggles the mind that programs offered by the traditional networks can be cancelled if they fall short of attracting an audience of 15 million viewers. (Not long ago, programs viewed by audiences of 20 to 25 million would sometimes be deemed ratings failures.) Consider for a moment, a Broadway play—a hit—that packs in a full house of 1,500 theatergoers each performance for six nights and one matinee every week. The audience of 15 million is 10,000 times larger than the one of 1,500. Put another way, the play would require over 27 years of nonstop, daily sell-outs to equal a single evening's television audience of 15 million.

But a television series doesn't have to draw millions of viewers just *one* night; it has to attract these huge audiences for each of its 22 annual episodes (30 to 40 episodes in the 1950s and 1960s). To appeal to such massive audiences, widely understood themes and tropes must be employed; as a result, mass audience television programs often steer down the middle in terms of taste, intelligence, and sensibility. Hence the repetitive, standardized quality of much television and the frequent criticism of the medium as a vast wasteland of bubble gum for the eyes. Because of its commercialism and its huge audiences, because of the sameness, the stereotyping, the exploitive tricks and plot twists, the action rising before each ad, there has long been a good deal of criticism of television and its creators, and by extension, its worthiness for analysis or study as art.

Though similar concerns and criticisms of mass culture arose well before the advent of television, especially by the Frankfurt School theorists in the 1930s, there was a resurgence in concern about mass culture among American intellectuals just a few years after television became widely popular. One such view is expressed here by Leo Lowenthal:

The decline of the individual in the mechanized working processes of modern civilization brings about the emergence of mass culture, which replaces folk or "high" art. A product of popular culture has none of the features of genuine art, but in all its media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotypy, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods. (1957, p. 55)

In the same period, Edward Shils (1959) offered a similar but more revealing commentary on mass culture:

I think we are not confronting the real problem: why we don't like mass culture. This seems to be the issue. We don't like it. It is repulsive to us. Is it partly because we don't like the working classes and the middle classes? . . . But the real fact is that from an aesthetic and moral standpoint, the objects of mass culture are repulsive to us. This ought to be admitted. To do so would help us select an aesthetic viewpoint, a system of moral judgments which would be applicable to the products of mass culture; but I think it would also relieve our minds from the necessity of making up fictions about the empirical consequences of mass culture. (pp. 198–99)

To be sure, the elitism associated with high culture and the high culture critique of popular culture are each inescapably tied to issues of class, how we think about commercialism and its aims, and what we believe constitutes art. And, of course, commercialism and class are inescapably tied to audience size and television's sheer popularity. The popular arts are just that: popular and art. But that doesn't make the status issues disappear. They were clearly apparent in the 1950s and they remain today in numerous conflicts over what should be taught in the English curriculum at the university, in clashes over cultural studies and, as we will see, in some assessments of the auteur approach.

In some quarters, there still exists the belief that only high culture is guided by true aesthetic standards (Bloom, 1988; Epstein, 2002), and by extension, that the creators and audiences of high culture merit superior cultural status owing to their artistry, taste and knowledge; what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) critiqued as "cultural capital." Indeed, according to Gans, popular culture is anathema to the high culture enthusiast because there is a fear that the high culture audience will eventually be wooed away and won over by kitsch, user-oriented culture. The fear isn't ungrounded. As we have seen, television *is* user oriented, audiences *do* like and seek out familiar programs that in the eyes of some are simply hackneyed and escapist. At the same time, for 30 years now, the fact that audiences actively seek out and

enjoy popular culture has been seen by cultural studies advocates as an important phenomenon to understand from the point of view of the audience (or the interpretive community of readers, listeners, or viewers) and a critical feature of popular culture to champion (Hall, 1973, 1980).

But there are also false dichotomies and erroneous assumptions at play in the high culture critique of popular culture, all of which have been with us since before the beginning of television.² First, high culture also has its sponsors and markets to which artists respond. Leonardo da Vinci rarely stayed in one city for very long, constantly moving in response to changing market conditions. Mozart and Michelangelo similarly followed the predilections of *their* sponsors. Much of Dickens' and Twain's work was first published episodically in commercial publications. Second, the pantheon is never static. Just a century ago it would have been an outrage to see Dickens or Twain listed in the same English literature reading list with Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Popular culture is sometimes given short shrift because it is in the realm of leisure but also because the material under scrutiny is commercial, contemporary, and seemingly ephemeral. By contrast, the study of how the ancient Greeks and Romans spent their leisure time and entertained themselves, and what was written in their plays and how they were performed, has long been seen as having significant intellectual import.³ Yet all that was created in the ancient world, or in the Renaissance for that matter, was once every bit as contemporary as were Twain or Dickens in their time, or the latest episode of *The Simpsons* in ours. This isn't to say that commerciality or contemporaneity put all art on a par. It is only to say that popular culture ought not be dismissed merely because it is commercial or contemporary, or because of class bias. After all, the patina of age is slowly and surely accreting on popular culture products; this factor alone is gradually making their study more acceptable to educational traditionalists. This is also why I believe that we can expect media education to become commonplace in schools by the middle of the twenty-first century, if not well before (Kubey, 1991). By the year 2050, film will have just celebrated its 150th birthday and television will be 100 years old.

But popular culture needs to be taken seriously even if the high culture stance *was* somehow thoroughly grounded in a widely agreed upon and perfectly enunciated aesthetic standard, such that one could authoritatively say that popular culture absolutely lacked a legitimate aesthetic. Social scientists and humanists would still be interested in television and popular culture,

² Speaking of false dichotomies, it's not as if television *never* presents dance, classical music, opera, or theater. For a comprehensive, historical review, see Brian G. Rose's 1986 handbook and reference guide to *Television and the Performing Arts*.

³ Of course, many famous Roman leisure pursuits were especially debauched. The theater also suffered. Cicero was writing bitter criticism of the excesses and "ghastly horrors" of the theater as early as 50 B.C. By the 5th century, the church abolished the Roman theater as an art form because it was seen as so debased by commercial exploitation as to have lost any relevance to the good of society (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 15).

and how they are created, if only for the reason that the audiences *are* so large, and because these widely experienced cultural products express and document the shifting psychological and sociological states—the hopes, dreams, concerns and nightmares—of the people and the societies in which they are produced (Arnheim, 1957; Cawelti, 1976; Munsterberg, 1916; Powdermaker, 1950; Wolfenstein & Leites, 1950).

As David Desser (2000) put it, television and filmic stories are “popular precisely because they answer, within structured fantasy, social, historical, psychological, or cultural issues within the culture that produces and consumes them” (p. 103). Or as Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (1983) have written:

Television is both a part of this cultural pluralism and currently its central component in American life. In its role as central cultural medium it presents us with its own multiplicity of meanings rather than with a monolithic presentation of a dominant point of view. Because it is, to a great extent, culturally written, television presents us with our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those which are repressive and reactionary, as well as those which are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed.

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING QUALITY TELEVISION

Some critics of popular culture may fail to appreciate what is involved in its production. To understand how challenging it can be to make a single popular entertainment, consider Moss Hart’s classic memoir, *Act One* (1959), about the mounting of his first successful Broadway play, *Once in a Lifetime*. Even with the expert help of George S. Kaufman, the most successful Broadway comedy playwright of the day, Hart worked intensely for years on this light, 90-minute comedy before it finally opened on Broadway and where it still might have failed. By comparison, some television creators hit their targets successfully each week for 22 weeks.

It’s easy to laugh at the low quality of many a television program and scoff at the “hacks” who turn them out, but to create a program *well* on a regular basis is more difficult, I think, than many know. Once one learns the pitfalls and pressures, the many ways that a program can be interfered with, or a writer blocked, it is sometimes impressive that anything of quality gets made, especially at the pace required.

Reading the foregoing, more than one reader might conclude that I have been influenced by my subjects’ point of view. I no doubt have been. But this is among the reasons I have presented the individuals in interview form, to let readers make their own assessments.

I liked the great majority of the people I interviewed and found them bright and engaging. My experience, incidentally, seems to be the norm. Todd Gitlin observed that the television creators he interviewed possessed

“real intelligence,” and found himself “liking almost all of them” (1983, p. 14). The same goes for Muriel Cantor and her assessment of the television producers she interviewed in the late 1960s (1971).

Some of the harshest contemporary criticism of television and its creators, or of latter-day Frankfurt School critics for that matter, is often on target in the abstract and sometimes in actual practice, but such views need to be held up to a more complex reality of how individuals actually function in the industry, how they are both frustrated and gratified in the process of creating their programs. There *is* much poorly crafted television product churned out every season. Indeed, one of the questions explored in the pages ahead is why television *isn't* better, what the obstacles and impediments are to a better product. There are many such obstacles and through the interviews one sees patterns and themes develop: interference from the network, too many cooks spoiling the broth; overdependence on focus groups, ratings, and demographics; a short-sighted obsession with the bottom line. And we see a significant solution in the creative freedom extended by HBO.

The interviews also permit us to see how individual talent and vision survives in television. For some, early talents and propensities were nurtured in childhood; other times they are stymied or lost and then rediscovered. Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley were right: “the autobiographical visions of individuals . . . manage to break through onto the television screen” (1983).

ESTABLISHING AUTHORSHIP: THE AUTEUR APPROACH

How is artistry and authorship to be established in the collaborative media? Scholars and critics have wrestled with this question for some time, particularly in film. In the next few pages I wish to focus on how the auteur approach in film began and on some of the problems in its application, and then discuss how the auteur approach came to be applied to television.

Auteur theory first developed when critics and scholars began formally to study film through the lens of a given director's body of work (*oeuvre*). Andre Bazin, then the editor of the influential journal *Cahiers du cinema*, is often credited with laying groundwork for auteur theory by persuasively arguing—in Europe of all places—for the quality, and even the *superiority*, of the American film and its diverse and distinctive genres. By raising the status of the American film, especially in largely neglected genres like the western and crime drama, Bazin also raised the status of many American filmmakers whose work had been previously ignored. Building on Bazin, in the 1950s and 1960s, François Truffaut (1954), and then Andrew Sarris (1968), began to formally argue that the principal author, or auteur, of a film was the director and that it was the director who gave a film, or series of films, their distinctive artistic and cinematic quality.

The enterprise wasn't focused exclusively on film aesthetics. They also wanted—and succeeded—to raise the status of film, as well as film criticism,

closer to the levels established in the fine arts. Indeed, Truffaut publicly called for a *politique des auteurs*, and would later tell Sarris that the auteur approach was “a polemical weapon for a given time and a given place” (Sarris, 1962/1979, p. 661).

Some dismiss the auteur approach for these motives. Aaron Sultanik, for example, criticizes what he characterizes as a deliberate effort “to give film history a group of superstar figures of similar stature to the ‘artists’ of the past . . . to upgrade the ‘public’ and ‘private’ identity of the medium, to underline the notion to both the general filmgoing public and academia that film is an art and not a business” (1986, p. 84).

But we ought not to devalue the approach with such reasoning. The important question is whether the auteur approach works or comes up short. Does it contribute to the analysis, evaluation, appreciation and understanding of film—or television? Or does it cause too narrow a focus on the director in film or the producer in television, to the exclusion of others’ contributions? More to the point, does it keep us from attending to critical aesthetic features of film or television?

On the one hand, it seems inevitable that people would come to better understand and categorize work in any art form by looking for themes and styles that distinguish works from one another, and the body of each artist’s work from others’. Such an approach would surely help us better understand and appreciate individual works. David Marc and Robert Thompson answer the critics of auteurism this way:

What critic would dare review a book without mentioning the name of its author? The very heart and soul of the artistic act is the communication of a creator’s emotion, perception, and thought to an audience. To deny the animating influence of the creator’s personality in a film is to place it (and by implication, the entire medium) outside the realm of art. (1992, p. 6)

On the other hand, one can overapply the auteur approach. Should we consider all of Picasso’s thousands of sketches, paintings, doodlings, and sculptures significant simply because they are Picasso’s? If deemed an auteur, a film director’s entire body of work does tend to rise in stature while sometimes very good, nonauteur films are diminished by comparison. What happens to the assessment of the films of a director who works well in different styles but never becomes known for a singular style or type of movie? By not being identified as auteurs, do such directors’ artistic achievements pale unfairly in revisionist comparison?

How *do* we settle on the creator in a collaborative medium? In theater, which is said to be a writer’s medium, we know and identify plays by their authors: Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Chekhov, O’Neill, Williams, Ionesco, Mamet, Wasserstein. The choice to focus on the playwright makes sense because plays are produced and performed many times under hundreds, and even thousands, of different directors. And most plays are performed as the playwright’s dialogue was originally written. It’s easy to see why theater

is called a writer's medium, even though directors, actors, and set designers make enormous creative contributions to how a given production of a play is interpreted, performed, and experienced.

With film and television things are more complicated. First, each involves an even more complex, collaborative enterprise than does theater. Second, unlike theater, perhaps the most crucial part of the artistic process in film and television is involved in how performances and scenes are "staged" and composed for the camera, shot (i.e., recorded), and edited. And third, because it *is* recorded, the work can be viewed and studied again and again and the contributions of each of the numerous collaborators can be closely critiqued, evaluated and reevaluated over the years. In theater, but for occasional film or tape, the only stable product *is* the script.

Is Film a Director's Medium?

Because of the success of the auteur approach, and because it is a very useful way to think about film as art, we do focus on the director as the key film creator: Hitchcock, Fellini, Riefenstahl, Kurosawa, Bergman, Welles, Kazan, Spielberg, Ford, Allen. Still, we shouldn't blindly accept that film is a director's medium or, for that matter, that television is a producer's medium. More consideration is needed.

Understandably, screen and television writers don't much like the auteur approach. They have long lamented their second-class status (for example, see the interview with Jean Rouverol). *Should* Orson Welles be deemed the auteur of *Citizen Kane* when Herman Mankiewicz wrote most of the screenplay, albeit with Welles' assistance? What about Robert Towne's classic screenplay for *Chinatown*—who should be considered the author of the film: Towne or Roman Polanski, the director?

We also need to remember that there was a time when American film, like television, was itself a producer's medium, with films closely supervised by the studio moguls and production executives of the day: Louis B. Mayer, Jack Warner, Irving Thalberg, Darryl F. Zanuck, Samuel P. Goldwyn. Nearly two decades before the advent of the auteur approach in film, sociologist Leo Rosten (1941) wrote this about the prominence of the movie producer in his book *Hollywood: The Movie Colony*:

In the final analysis, the sum total of a studio's personality, the aggregate pattern of its choices and its tastes, may be traced to its producers. For it is the producers who establish the preferences, the prejudices, and the predispositions of the organization and, therefore, of the movies which it turns out (pp. 242-3).

More recently, film historian Thomas Schatz (1988) employed archival materials from the studios to make a persuasive case that it was the studios and the producers, more than the directors, who were the significant forces in film

in that period. His assessment of the emphasis on the director in the auteur approach, at least with regard to movies from the studio era, is unforgiving:

Auteurism itself would not be worth bothering with if it hadn't been so influential, effectively stalling film history and criticism in a prolonged stage of adolescent romanticism. But the closer we look at Hollywood's relations of power and hierarchy of authority during the studio era, at its division of labor and assembly-line production process, the less sense it makes to assess filmmaking or film style in terms of the individual director—or *any* individual, for that matter. The key issues here are style and authority—creative expression and creative control. (p. 5)

Still, it *was* the producer who played the critical role at the studios. As Schatz tells us, Frank Capra wrote a letter to *The New York Times* in 1939 in which he complained that “about six producers today pass on about 90 percent of the scripts and edit 90 percent of the pictures.”

In the studio era, a production executive *would* often select material, as well as the director, the writers, and the stars. He would see dailies, sometimes make critical decisions in editing, and approve the film's final cut. Some directors were accorded very little control or freedom under this system, but others, like Capra, received a great deal more.⁴

Gone with the Wind offers an extreme but instructive example of the difficulty in determining a film's authorship. Some credit David Selznick with being the critical force behind the movie: “He bullied, coaxed, wooed, and dragged the film into being as directors fell by the wayside” (Thomson, 2002, p. 11). Four directors worked on the movie, including Selznick. But is there a principal auteur of *Gone with the Wind*? Some might say that the book's author, Margaret Mitchell, should stand as the critical author, even of the film. Others would point to Sidney Howard, the primary screenwriter, who had previously adapted the novel into a Broadway play. Some might point to Victor Fleming, who got the final directorial credit and won an Oscar for best director. Probably the best answer is that there *was* no single auteur of *Gone with the Wind*—there were many.

The Auteur Approach in Television

Most people know television series by their stars, and sometimes by their producers: Serling, Bochco, Lear, Spelling, Quinn Martin, Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, Agnes Nixon, Susan Harris, Lee Rich, Garry Marshall, David E. Kelley, and Aaron Sorkin. We hardly ever talk about television in terms of the director, and when we know the writer in television, he or she is almost always the producer. In television, the producer is the key creative force (more on this in Chapter 4). The producer creates and runs

⁴ Capra titled his 1971 autobiography *The Name Above the Title*. Doing so may be one of the reasons that Joseph McBride chose to title his 1992 biography of the director, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success*.

the show and it is the producer who, more than anyone else, with rare exception, is the creative mind and manager behind a series and its programs.

In television today, and certainly since the early 1960s, the producer remains in charge, conceiving of the program and often writing, or helping to write, the original treatment. Indeed, the television producer is more critically involved and often lends more personal vision to the final product than did the powerful movie producers of the studio era. Consequently, many of the interviews in the pages ahead were done with individuals who are, or who were at one time, producers. No single profession helps us understand better how television is created.

In the late 1960s, sociologist Muriel Cantor (1971) completed the first formal study of television creators, interviewing 59 leading dramatic television producers, missing only a few of the entire group then working on network programs in Hollywood. In the book that resulted, *The Hollywood TV Producer: His Work and His Audience*, Cantor documented the central role of the producer.⁵ In the book's foreword, former television producer Frank La Tourette wrote that the television producer is "unlike the producer in the theater and motion pictures. From a creative and executive standpoint he is the most powerful force in television" (p. vii).

In the 1980s, Newcomb and Alley (1983) took an important new step, formally applying auteur theory to television in their book of interviews with 11 major producers, *The Producer's Medium*. Newcomb and Alley demonstrated that one could discern the hallmarks of auteurism in television. There were distinctive similarities in each producer's television series—in the content and issues and in the tone and style of the storytelling. The significance of *The Producer's Medium* in applying auteur theory to television, and the value of using interviews with creators as a means to do so, is recounted by David Marc and Robert J. Thompson (1992):

Proclaiming television, in the title of the book, to be *The Producer's Medium*, Newcomb and Robert S. Alley offered readers a series of revealing interviews with, and critical essays about, some of American television's most important and prolific video artists. . . . *The Producer's Medium* had two particularly significant virtues. First, the interviews with the various producers firmly established the primacy of the producer as the auteur of the American commercial television series. . . . The Newcomb and Alley study was replete with anecdotes and observations from specific working producers. These personal oral histories had the effect of translating a theory into an undeniable assumption about how television production functioned. . . . Second, and more important for most people interested in understanding television, the critical sketches offered by Newcomb and Alley constituted a potent statement on the application of auteur theory to American television. (pp. 7–8)

Marc and Thompson applied and extended auteur theory to television, adding new perspective. In *Prime Time, Prime Movers* they covered the work of over 50 creators, 26 with their own chapters. Nearly all were television

⁵ At the time there were no leading female producers working in television drama.

producers. However, Marc and Thompson wisely point out that there are other sorts of auteurs in television. They argued, for example, that comedians like Jackie Gleason, Milton Berle, Lucille Ball, Sid Caesar, and Red Skelton, each with their own show in television's first decade, ought to be considered the auteurs of those programs. Their point is reinforced by veteran comedy writers Bob Schiller and Bob Weiskopf in their interview in Chapter 3, just a few pages ahead.

There is also recognition that during the first decades of television production, at least in some instances, creative control could be seen as resting with the studios—just like Schatz's argument about film in the studio era. In a book edited by Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns (1990), three essays advance the idea of "studio as auteur." Each essay focuses on a different studio: Warner Bros., Desilu, and Screen Gems. David Marc wrote the one on Screen Gems, Thomas Schatz the one on Desilu, and Christopher Anderson the one on Warner Bros.

Of course, the networks also play a critical role and mustn't be neglected. It is the networks, in some ways like the old movie studios, that tell television studios, production companies, and their producers about their precise programming needs: for example, that they need a new comedy on Tuesday nights that will attract an older female audience. This is what producer Susan Harris was told by NBC before she created *The Golden Girls*. The rationale and impetus for the series came from the network, based in its analysis of competing audience demographics. But the series' creation was given over to Harris. As will be seen, the networks sometimes exercise a great deal of control in the development of a new series (see the interviews with Frank Dawson, Lee Rich, and others). And just as different directors worked under more or less constraint within the old studio system in movies, so too, depending on the network and the producer, will a television network and a given producer work more or less closely in shaping a particular series.

So where does this leave us? Quite simply, there are auteur producers and nonauteur producers in television, just as there are auteur and nonauteur directors in film. There are producers of vision and of little vision. There are artists and there are hacks. And as some of the interviews in this book show, there are producers who might be considered auteurs who work outside the series format, and there are creators other than producers who lend their own personal vision and artistry to the programs they make.

One can err by working too exclusively with a strict, single-creator thesis when studying collaborative media. In doing so, we run the risk of neglecting the substantial contributions of other creators as well as other critical features of film and television aesthetics.

To my mind, the auteur approach is best seen as a vehicle, a way to better understand and appreciate art and creativity in film and television. Just as paradigms in the sciences and humanities bring about more or less commentary and illumination, living shorter or longer lives based in their practical utility, the auteur approach will be with us as long as it continues to help us see more than might otherwise meet the eye.

MATT GROENING

Matt Groening (pronounced gray-ning) is the creator of *The Simpsons*. After college, and after a series of dead-end jobs, Groening began drawing the alienated rabbits that would populate his breakthrough, underground comic strip, *Life in Hell*. *Life in Hell* gained wider distribution, and in 1987 caught the attention of James Brooks (with Allan Burns, one of the creators of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*). Brooks started working with Groening to create short vignettes of *The Simpsons* for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. Full-length episodes would come with the show's launch on Fox in December of 1989. The program is still going strong all these years later, airs in over 100 countries around the world, and at last count had won 16 Emmys.

The Simpsons overshadows most every other television program in its biting satire of American life. The show appeals to children and adults alike and has revolutionized how commercial television thinks of animation. Without *The Simpsons* it's hard to imagine *Beavis and Butthead* or *King of the Hill* or a slew of other programs. In 1999, Groening launched his second animated program, *Futurama*.

The Simpsons has been taken quite seriously by critics and academics. One book, *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, argues for the fundamental moral and religious message conveyed by the program. Another, *The Simpsons and Philosophy: The D'oh! of Homer*, analyzes the cultural, philosophical and political meaning of the program.

We learn in the interview how Groening's alienated experiences in school served as an important source for *The Simpsons*. We also learn how an animated program is created—how the dialogue is first taped in a recording studio and the drawings made later, in Korea, to match the sound.

I interviewed Groening in his offices on the Paramount lot in 1991 during the second year of *The Simpsons*, not long after Bart Simpson had been turned into a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon. Groening seemed unfazed. He was struck by what he had accomplished but it hadn't gone to his head. This might be one of the reasons he's still turning out terrific programs years later.

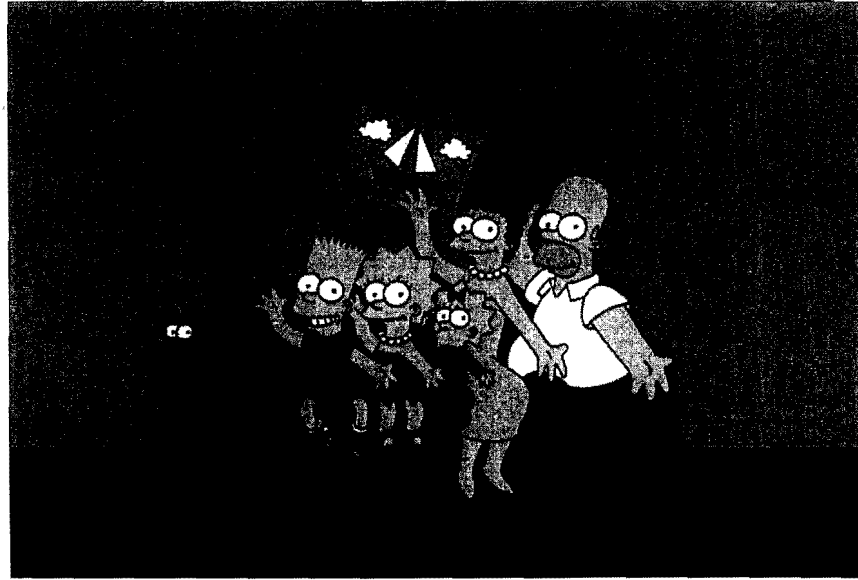
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I read that one of your school teachers had phoned you and remembered that you hadn't been a "good listener."

Yeah. That was on my report card. She had given me an "N"—needs improvement.

Is Bart Simpson at all like you?

Bart really isn't me. I joke about it in interviews sometimes because it's an easy answer, but he's more a combination of me and some of my dumber friends.



Santa's Little Helper, Bart, Lisa, Maggie, Marge, and Homer Simpson (l-r).

It does sound like you had some difficulty in school.

I was in an almost constant battle with authority, but my battle was conscious. Bart doesn't know what his rebellion is about. I think I had an inkling of what my rebellion was about.

What was it about?

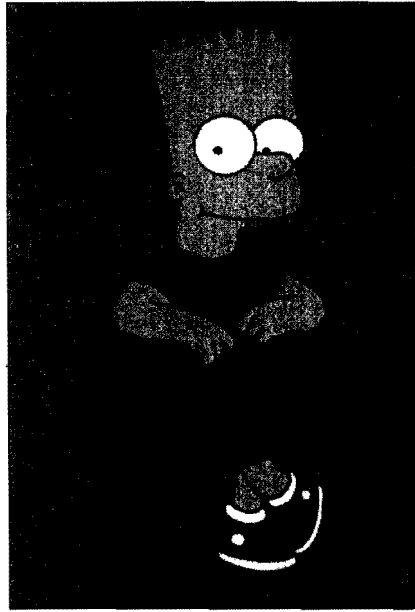
I was bored, and that seemed unnecessary. There was way too much busy work. There were arbitrary punishments and humiliation on an almost constant basis. And a lot of what we were taught was not only questionable, it was obviously untrue.

A lot of the other students probably bought what they were taught. Why didn't you?

Part of it was my background. My father was a filmmaker and cartoonist and we had lots of books and magazines and films around. My mother is funny and clever, and we were praised in my family for being verbally quick, which was what got me whacked on the head by teachers. My parents were very supportive of my deviations from the norm.

How early did you start cartooning?

There isn't a time in school that I don't remember drawing. It's how I kept my mind occupied. Stuff was confiscated, as they put it, and torn up by the teachers. My friends also drew cartoons. We were a little rambunctious, but at least we weren't dead in our seats the way a lot of other kids were. They punished creativity. What I've ended up doing as an adult has been in spite of school because every step of the way I felt that my aspirations were criticized. I was told they were frivolous.



Bart Simpson

At least they gave you something to rebel against.

I would have found something else to get annoyed about. But definitely the struggles and the rebellion I experienced growing up are a main part of my creative output. It's part of my comic strip. It's part of *The Simpsons*.

I've read that as a kid you were reading a World War II P.O.W. book that reminded you of 4th grade.

I was in the 4th grade and I read this book called *Escape from Polvitz*. You had these oppressive guards who kept you from going out of the classroom, or your prison cells, and we were forbidden by the school to cross the street and go to the candy store during lunch time. The principal stood in his office with binoculars, so we'd sneak down to the basement of school, tiptoe past the boiler, and go out of this utility tunnel and circle around two blocks below the school and this hill to sneak in the back door of the candy store. It was very dramatic!

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1954. That's where I grew up.

Do you have brothers or sisters?

I have an older sister and an older brother and two younger sisters.

I was a precocious kid. I went to my first antiwar demonstration in 1966 when I was 12 years old. I wanted to see what all the commotion was about, and I was fascinated by ideas about progressive education and put them to the test when it came time to go to college.

Where was that?

I went to Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. It's a state school that has no grades and no required courses. It was amazing to me because by the time I finished high school I thought that there would be no institution I would ever be loyal to because they were all corrupt and full of bureaucrats and stuff.

What was the first thing you ever published?

My very first piece was in 1962 in *Jack & Jill* magazine when I was eight. It was a "finish the short story" contest. The story was about a little kid who wanted to be a ghost for Halloween. He put a sheet over his head and went up into the attic and bumped his head on the beam in the attic and said, "Now I know what I want to be" and then you were to finish the story. They printed a number of winners. The other kids said Little Billy wanted to be a cowboy, or a truck driver. In mine the kid hit his head and died. The force of the blow killed him and they boarded up the attic.

When did you start drawing your alienated rabbits?

I drew rabbits in high school and then I continued to draw them in college. When I moved to Los Angeles in 1977 after graduating from college I started drawing a little comic book called *Life in Hell* in which I described my misadventures with bad jobs and so on.

How good is your cartooning in your opinion?

Well, I'm probably more critical of them than anybody, but I do have a sense of clarity which a lot of underground cartoonists don't have.

You make it look simple.

That's one of the appeals of my stuff. It's inviting to people, it's friendly to the reader. It's not mystifying. The artist is not a virtuoso artist.

How did you get started doing Life in Hell?

I had a series of really lousy jobs when I moved to Los Angeles. At first, I just did it for my own amusement. I came to Los Angeles because I had this idea about doing creative work in Hollywood. I had worked on a college newspaper and had enjoyed doing everything from typing up classified ads to composing headlines. It didn't matter, it was all part of the process. I wanted to work in journalism and I was hoping that there would be some sort of underground press left in Los Angeles, but there wasn't really. They went out of business simultaneously with my arrival.

The counterculture was dying.

The counterculture was *dead*. Then came the rise of alternative news weeklies, the *LA Weekly* and the *Los Angeles Reader*. I wrote freelance

articles, concentrating mostly on rock music. Wrote about all sorts of weird bands with names like Severed Heads and The Ugly Janitors of America. Some even weirder than that. At the same time I was doing my weekly comic strip for the *Los Angeles Reader*, starting in 1980.

How hard did you push to get The Simpsons off the ground? Was the concept in your head much earlier?

Since the time I was a kid I was a fan of animation, in particular *Rocky & Bullwinkle*. I thought all of the Jay Ward and Bill Scott cartoons were really well written, with great voices and great music. I thought if I ever got a chance to try my hand at it I would really enjoy it. I didn't have the patience to do the animation myself, but I knew that I wanted to do design and write it. So from time to time I would pitch ideas. I would finagle an appointment with some producer at some studio and I'd try to tell him my idea. I got nowhere.

The very first meeting I had was right next to Paramount studios. When it came time to go to the meeting I walked over there, but the guard wouldn't let me on the lot because I wasn't in a car. Like I was a nut. And I said, "I live right over there." He didn't believe me so I had to go back and get my car.

I met with this guy. He shook my hand and said, "I just want you to know I'm a completely duplicitous asshole and nothing I say can be believed." Those were his exact words. "Now, what are your ideas?"

He swatted away every single idea I had. I would naively try the same thing over and over again. I'd say, "I think there's room on television for a prime time cartoon that appeals to kids and adults, not exactly the same as, but using as a role model, *Rocky & Bullwinkle*. A cartoon with very poor animation, but with great writing, great voices and great music." Invariably, they said that that cartoon was a failure. It only appealed to smart kids. "I want something that will appeal to the three-year-olds," they'd say.

So how did things get started?

What happened was that a woman named Polly Platt became aware of my stuff. She is a movie designer who had worked with James Brooks on *Terms of Endearment*. She liked my cartoons, showed my stuff to James Brooks, and brought him a piece of my original art. My girlfriend at the time, whom I later married, Debra Caplan, was managing my career and was syndicating my comic strip. They liked my stuff. I was too shy to go over to Paramount and meet him myself. Debra was always talking to these people.

Debra published my first book, *Love is Hell*, and then *Work is Hell*, and then we got picked up by Pantheon Books and I was doing just fine.

Did you meet Debra through the strip?

Debra worked at the *Los Angeles Reader* where I was an editor, writer, and cartoonist. She sold ads. We knew each other for a number of years before we started going out together.

At what point did you know you were going to get a shot at television?

Brooks moved Gracie Films from Paramount over to Fox and started working on the Tracey Ullman show for the Fox network. He called me up. We had lunch. Originally the idea was to do *Life in Hell* as a short cartoon for *The Tracey Ullman Show*. The format changed from a 2-minute cartoon each week to four 15-second cartoons.

Then I found out that Fox demanded to own whatever I did. I had been working on *Life in Hell* for several years by this time and I felt I shouldn't give it up for TV cartoons, so I made up *The Simpsons*.

My introduction to television was idyllic because Brooks had done some of the most memorable shows in TV history and he's got enough clout to make his artistic vision work. He made it so I didn't have to meet with any network people ever about content. He's executive producer along with me and Sam Simon.

How quickly did The Simpsons gel in your mind?

I needed to come up with an idea really quickly. In the back of my mind was the idea of doing something that might possibly end up spinning off into its own TV show, so I created a family which I thought would lend itself to a lot of different kinds of stories. In high school I had written a novel, a sort of a very sour *Catcher in the Rye*, self pitying, adolescent novel starring Bart Simpson as a very troubled teenager. I took that family and transferred it, made them younger, and then drew. It took about 15 minutes to design the characters the first time out.

Were they all the same characters that we now know and love?

Yes, but they've been transformed.

Why didn't you leave Bart as an adolescent?

TV does children really badly, and I thought there was room for something different. Teenagers are already running rampant on television, but kids are done very unrealistically in sitcoms. Sometimes, a particular character gels with an audience and becomes the star.

Was Bart at the center all along?

Yeah. The rest of the Simpsons in my original conception were in a struggle to be normal and Bart was the one who thought that being normal was boring.

How much has Brooks helped you to learn how to tell a story in 22 minutes?

In terms of writing, it's been the greatest learning experience in my life. I've learned more about structure, storytelling, and pacing. Everything is a writing problem to be solved, so even though these cartoons were very simple in dialogue it was a matter of learning how to tell a story and keep people interested.

Brooks was a great mentor because he had ambitions for the show which were even loftier than anything I could articulate. I intuitively felt the things that he said. The way the show was going to work was to have moments of emotional reality. Our goal was to make people forget that they were watching a cartoon. To go with a real emotion with a cartoon effect. And it worked.

There are moments when Homer is abject, depressed, and you see it in his eyes and it's quite poignant. I don't know if that's unprecedented in cartoons, but I certainly hadn't seen much of it before. Is it hard to get that effect?

It's a collaborative effort in order to get these effects across. It's working with great writers. Brooks contributes many memorable lines. Sam Simon, the other executive producer, is brilliant and quick.

Three of our five directors started out being the original animators on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. They've drawn the characters over and over again enough to know them. Most traditional cartoonists convey emotion by extreme exaggeration, and what I try to do is have my characters start out looking grotesque but there's an open quality to the line, and by shifting the shape of the eyeball just slightly you can completely alter the mood of the character. I learned this from a book called *How to Cartoon the Head and Figure* by Jack Hamm, which says in lesson number one: draw an oval, draw two dots, and draw a slash for the mouth.

There was a clear design to the characters which lends itself to the acting and then the animators make the characters act, working with great recorded lines from the actors.



Doh!

It's a constant struggle, but we get effects that are beyond my wildest dreams and stuff that lets me create beyond belief.

What problems do you have to stay on top of?

Keeping the characters on model, looking the same from shot to shot, from show to show. Most of my characters appear in three-quarter profile and maintain whatever emotional impact they have best from that angle. I very rarely draw characters straight on, and when I do I never hold it. It's an effort to convince the animators to draw them in three-quarter profile.

Do you know why that works psychologically?

It's because they're flat drawings in an animation that we're trying to bring to life. It's an illusion.

Are there many cartoonists who do this too, or do you do it more?

I try to take advantage of my limitations. I do good limited work.

How does the production process get started?

At the beginning of the season all the writers get together in a fancy rented hotel suite. We spend a day or two just throwing out ideas. A series of harried secretaries scribble down everybody's words and then these are typed down as notes. Story ideas are fleshed out in other meetings and different writers go off and write the scripts. They come back, the scripts are written, rewritten, rewritten again, and then we have what is called the table reading, where all the actors get together and sit at a table and read.

Just like a sitcom?

Exactly like a sitcom.

The approach is heavily influenced by James Brooks.

Definitely, the writing for most animation on television is an afterthought. It's one guy cranking out stuff, which is why cartoons on TV are so bad.

After the table draft the writers go away for a day or two, furiously having scribbled notes during the reading as to what works and what doesn't work. Then we rewrite the script one more time and then on the day we record the show, the actors get together one more time. They run through the script and then leave anywhere from 15 minutes to 4 hours, and we rewrite based on that day's reading.

Next we sit down and record the show in the recording studio. The actors stand in a semicircle with microphones and music stands and read the scripts. We go from scene to scene. They interact with each other and we do several takes to get the kinds of performances that we want. Actors ad lib stuff and we change things and rewrite it. Simultaneously with the recording the script is sent to the animation

studio and a director and a storyboard artist sit down and visualize the script. The script is written in standard television form.

So, when Julie Kavner does the voice for Marge, she doesn't know how it's going to be drawn at all. She provides an intonation that even the writer didn't put in.

Exactly. And they pull jokes out of thin air. Traditionally, cartoons have looked for a consistently "up" tone. In fact, we've used people who do cartoon voices and we generally have to say "Bring it down, bring it down," because cartoons are always up, up, up. Everything's "Hey! Here we go!" We want real acting instead.

We do storyboards. We have about 40 speaking parts per show, much higher than a regular sitcom. We have special character designers and background designers. I also design characters and alter characters. By now it's a fairly smooth process.

I get the glory on the show but it's a collaborative process. A lot of people don't get any credit at all. The storyboard is about 120 pages long and our scripts vary from 40 to 60 pages. Once that's approved, the animation is filmed. It's basically a film storyboard: an outline of pencil drawings that don't move but which are synched to the dialogue soundtrack. We have a vague idea of how the show is going to look.

Then the whole thing is sent to Korea and about four months later we get back color film and we watch a rough cut of it and we call for re-takes where characters heads fly off or where the synch is off. We edit the show and spot music. The show has a full orchestra accompanying it; it's not just a synthesizer. That's recorded right across the street here. And then we put in the sound effects and finish up the show about a day or two before air.

We started out with 5 animators and now have about 80. The expense of animation is such that if the show were done completely here it would be too expensive. This is the only way to make the show work. All the creative decisions are made here. The ink and paint and the actual filming of it are done in Korea.

Are the production costs at all close to what a sitcom would be?

It's about equivalent. We don't have any costumes or sets, but its offset by other costs.

The problem with the show is that it's too successful for its own good. Fox took a big chance by committing to 13 episodes without a pilot, based on the *Tracey Ullman* cartoons. Then when the show went on the air, *The Simpsons* took off immediately. It'd only been on the air a little over a year and they ordered more shows immediately, but it takes us 6 months to do a single show.

You must be thinking of a spin-off.

We've talked about spinning off the show. I have a few ideas for spinning off the show. It could happen. And I have lots of other ideas for other animated shows.

Might you spread yourself too thin or lose quality?

It's not so much the quality that I'm worried about, because I think I can maintain the quality. The idea is to keep having fun. That's what I'm interested in, keeping the fun going. I have some other ideas I'd like to try out. I'd love to see my *Life in Hell* characters on the air. I'm not going to sell them to somebody else, I have to own them.

There's a similarity between you and David Lynch of Twin Peaks in that both of you came from the underground and have made it in the mainstream.

I think the history of pop culture, at least since I've been a kid, is about co-opting hipness. Something is far out and then gets sucked into the mainstream. MTV is full of film techniques that were outrageous and avant-garde, and now everybody's gotten used to that fast cutting.

My underground pals and I used to sit around and talk about sneaking into the media, trying to see how far we could push our ideas. Often, the stance of the oddball artist is antimainstream because it's soul killing and represents compromise. Instead of thinking in those terms, I've embraced it and tried to see how far I could make my stuff go.

You don't think you've had to compromise very much?

You give up something on one level and you gain back a lot more on a different level.

What do you think you've given up?

Back in the early days of my comic strip I would not allow any compromise. Any word that occurred to me, I would use. Any profanity. And then I made a conscious effort to not use profanity because it kept me out of some daily papers. Now, with *Life in Hell*, I'm in a little over 300 papers.

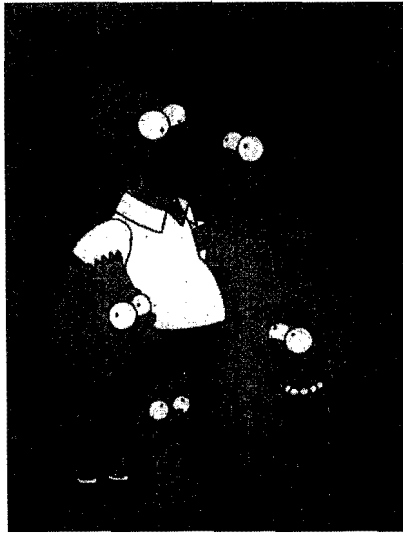
Did you have any compunction the first few times you censored yourself?

Yes, but then I've also never called myself an artist. I've always said I'm a commercial artist. Being commercial is part of it. It's the nature of the endeavor.

One of the things that intrigues me about your show is that it would be difficult to do this kind of satire in another medium. It wouldn't work.

One of the things that always appealed to me about animation is the ability to take short cuts with storytelling. You can compress the story and you can have emotional things turn much faster. You can do satirical things, and because it's a medium which is considered frivolous and for kids, you can sneak up behind people and pull the rug out from under them. It's really a blast.

In that regard, does it surprise you to have the former secretary of education critique the show? You've had T-shirts banned. Some adults are actually threatened by your cartoon characters.



The Simpsons pose for a family portrait.

No, it doesn't surprise me. There's always someone out there willing and eager to be offended.

Actually, I'm not sure how I feel about a kid wearing a T-shirt to school that says "I'm an underachiever" on it.

What the T-shirt says is "Bart Simpson, 'underachiever' and proud of it." No kid calls him or herself an underachiever. It's a label that's stuck on kids by adults. It's a way of programming kids for failure. Bart just embraces it because that's part of his rebellious attitude.

Some people argue that some kids are going to think it's okay to be a goofball.

Which is the worst lesson? Teaching a kid that a T-shirt may encourage you to be a goofball, or banning the T-shirt, saying it's more important than an idea being banned?

Where does the word "hell" appear?

On the T-shirt that says, "I'm Bart Simpson, who the hell are you?" It is cocky, sarcastic, willfully obnoxious, and reflects in a very mild way what kids are really like. Kids really do use the word hell and worse on the playground everyday.

But if everyone started saying "fuck" and "shit" on television kids would assume that that language was tolerable.

Well that may be so, but then the war is lost if the use of profanity is going to cause a deterioration in the culture. It's lost, because it's everywhere. Part of *The Simpsons* is to reflect that. One of the reasons that *The Simpsons* is appealing, and troublesome to some people, is that in a medium that is characterized by lousy storytelling, and condescending moral values, *The*

Simpsons is refreshing because it's slightly more close to reality. It does reflect in a mild way the way that people talk and it does say to people, "you are not alone" if you feel different. If you do not identify with what you see on television, *The Simpsons* says there are other people just like you.

When Homer chases Bart, there is the implication that if he gets a hold of him, he's going to inflict some sort of physical punishment. Indeed, he's been shown strangling Bart. Do you think those scenes could ever concern a child, as some might be so young as to naively think that there was approval or acceptance of such behavior on the part of a parent?

Child abuse is one of the recurring themes of *The Simpsons* and it's something that I think about a lot because we're dealing with a dysfunctional family, but one that is not completely evil. They love each other, but they also hurt each other a lot. We're also trying to do a show that's funny. I don't want to trivialize child abuse, but I also want to reflect it.

Conceivably, you could have Marge tell Homer that hitting Bart isn't inappropriate.

One of the things that I always say to the writers and to the animators is that *The Simpsons* should not enjoy their own insensitivity and cruelty. Everything they do is ruled by the impulse of the moment. There's a lot of very cruel humor on television and in the movies. *The Simpsons* portrays cruelty and insensitivity but we don't linger on it and we don't enjoy our own cruelty. The point of the chasing is not the sadistic satisfaction of hurting someone else. It's about someone who is not able to control his own anger. It's a complicated issue. It troubles me because I'm very opposed to child abuse. I deal with it in a much more thoughtful way in my comic strip. I did a comic book called *Childhood is Hell*. I like to think of the Simpsons as bad examples.

What would happen if Homer found himself with his hand over Bart in one episode and then flashed back to when his father did that and he says, "Oh no! I'm doing the same thing!"

As the show has proven to be more popular we get increasing pressure to tell good messages, to tell people not to drink and drive, to tell people not to litter, to tell people not to drop out of school. We think one of the reasons the show is popular is because it doesn't fall into the trap of preaching to people about the way they should behave. The Simpsons are bad examples. They do not behave the way people should behave. We give people credit for being able to tell the difference. Cartoons are characterized as a kiddie medium and kids are not trusted to delineate between good behavior and bad behavior. I personally think that kids appreciate the fact that they're not being condescended to.

One characteristic of child abuse is reliving it again and again. I think one of the things *The Simpsons* does is relive it for people in a vicarious way, in a palatable way, in this silly cartoon. In real life, an insanely raging father chasing a kid half his size through the house would not be funny.

There are other forms of abuse.

Yes. Homer represses Marge. Talk about abuse—what about emotional abuse of Lisa? Lisa is a genius and the family is not even aware of it. They're squelching her. There are constant examples of the way people shouldn't be. All the gory figures on the show are corrupt or stupid. We're fairly even handed in our disdain for the way people behave.

But there is no character with any distinctiveness who hasn't gotten some sort of negative reaction. We had a bartender offer the police some pretzels and they say, "Sorry, we're on duty. But a couple of beers would be nice." We got some outraged letters from police.

There's also things that are depressing about *The Simpsons*. Homer works at a dead end job, and he's causing untold harm to the environment on a weekly basis.

There's a fairly clear statement that you are trying to make about nuclear energy.

It's a sacred cow in many ways. It's fun to make fun of. Those moments when Homer tosses around one of those radioactive particles that falls out into the street might actually have more resonance, it might actually motivate people to be wary about nuclear power, more than most other messages they see.

But I want to be modest here. I don't know if television changes anybody's mind. I think it may just give comfort to people you might agree with and there's a possible shifting of mood a little bit to one direction or another, but the goal of the show is not to do that. It's to entertain. It just happens to be that the best entertainment has a very strong point of view. My point of view happens to be something that doesn't get on TV very much.

Let's talk a little about the experience of becoming famous.

One of the good things is that it's not my face up there, so I can walk down the street and not be bothered, more than once or twice a day. Maybe in a restaurant. And then it's just fine. On that level, the attention is really enjoyable.

But there's so much work. I'm not basking in a hammock, drinking a coconut drink and saying, "Ah, fame." Because the work doesn't go away—it's still here. The most surprising thing about the attention is how isolating it can be with friends, who are put off for one reason or another. It's not even so much envy, although there's some envy with some people. It's a feeling that because of the attention I get I must have changed and I must not want to deal with them anymore, that they don't count anymore. I've questioned a few of them and they say they've imagined that I'm too busy for them, or they say, "I don't want you to think that I'm trying to get something from you."

So, simple social interaction has changed to an extent with a few people and I was surprised that it did. That's isolating and sad. But, most of it's really great.

Have you had the experience of thinking for a moment, "Is this really happening?"

There is part of me that still can't believe it. But there's a part of me that doesn't blink an eye at some of the more amazing stuff that's happened. But every so often something symbolic blows my mind. Like I went to New York for the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade and saw the giant Bart Simpson balloon coming around the corner and that was definitely a dream like experience. Seeing Bart Simpson on the cover of *Time* magazine was just numbing. Bart's been on the cover of every magazine and by the time he got on the cover of *Time*, which is symbolic in our culture, I didn't know what to think.

The bootleg T-shirts have been one of the wildest aspects of the whole Simpson phenomenon for me. There's a certain amount of conscious engineering of everything else that has to do with the success of the show. The bootleg T-shirts, with black Bart—that's something that couldn't be engineered, it's a spontaneous eruption.

Have you been asked to speak at any colleges?

Sure, lots. I don't do it more often because it just takes up too much time. I could go around the country nonstop for the next several years, I'm sure, and speak from college to college. It would be very easy to truck around the country with a couple of videotapes under my arm, answer questions and talk about the show.

Do people try and pitch you story ideas? Are you at all receptive to receiving them?

People try and pitch story ideas all the time, and, no, I'm not receptive. Any plot outline of a *Simpsons* show in the barest details could be good or could be great. Anybody could come up with that. It's the execution that counts.

What you're trying to do is do something as quickly and efficiently as possible, and we have a bunch of people who are really well paid and do what they do very well, so we're not looking for outside stuff.

One of the alleged myths of American culture is that money is going to make you happy. Does it make you happy?

There is no good answer to give. Any answer that somebody who has money gives just makes me want to punch them in the mouth.

It's very nice being comfortable because you can turn your attention to other problems, and it's much more interesting to turn your attention to abstract creative problems. On the other hand, that's been the story of my life. I used to live in a cockroach-infested crummy Hollywood apartment and didn't balance my checkbook and could barely get the rent paid and stuff and I was still as uncorrupted by money. I don't care about it. It's nice to make my family comfortable.

But of course, money doesn't buy you happiness. The great thing about being comfortable and having the money is being able to choose

your destiny and not have to worry about little stuff. So that's really good. It's nice to be able to contribute to charities that you appreciate and political causes. There's not much gratification in throwing your money down the drain for hopeless political causes.

What are your primary political causes?

Let me put it this way. When you're perceived as having money there is a constant stream of people trying to get you to contribute money. What I have tried to do is support things directly rather than large bureaucratic groups. There are certain fantasies that I had in the old days when I didn't have any money as far as creative projects that I wanted to do or finance, and it would be interesting to see if I get the opportunity to do those things.

It must have run through your mind that there's some symmetry between you and Walt Disney. Do you think about him? Or a Simpsonsland?

This has been the most amazing year of my life. I had fairly grandiose dreams that . . . if they didn't happen they didn't happen, and they happened beyond my wildest dreams. So I hesitate to rule things out, but, yeah, Disney was one of my heroes growing up. I hope I don't make some of the same mistakes that Disney made.

As far as politics?

Yeah.

Well, he started a good school, California Institute for the Arts (CIA).

Yeah, that's where many of our animators come from.

EDWARD ZWICK AND MARSHALL HERSKOVITZ

Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz comprise one of the most innovative writing, directing, and production teams in television. They are unusual in that they successfully move back and forth between film and television. In television, they are best known for the award-winning *thirtysomething*, which ran from 1987 to 1991 on ABC.

More recently, they produced *Once and Again*, a near sequel to *thirtysomething*. The stylistic similarities are unmistakable as they were with *My So-Called Life* and *Relativity*, their other two series. Zwick and Herskovitz fit the description of auteurs about as well as anyone in television.

An everyday naturalism is one of the hallmarks of their style. The story lines are not so much about a specific plot and its resolution as about an evocation of the characters' inner lives. Instead of telling a story about how a character loses his small company, they are more interested in telling the