Homer Simpson Explains our Postmodern Identity
crisis, Whether we Like it or not: Media Literacy after
“The Simpsons”
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ABSTRACT
This article suggests that “The Simpsons” is a sophisticated media text about media that forces educators who teach media literacy into an encounter with postmodern theory. The meaning of postmodern theory for media education is explored through a focus on two ongoing themes in “The Simpsons”: the changing conception of personal identity and the consequences of a relentlessly ironic worldview. Icons of popular culture can be used to teach about philosophical constructs.

From its inception “The Simpsons” has posed a significant challenge to educators. The program, which ridiculed all forms of authority and turned Bart Simpson into a wildly popular anti-hero, initially provoked an intense reaction from the education community, in some schools leading to the banning of paraphernalia bearing Bart’s images and regular denunciations of the series. As the series grew in popularity—and eventually was joined by other cartoon series that were seen to be even more educationally offensive, such as “Beavis and Butthead” and “South Park”—the furor died down to a ongoing but passive hostility toward the program, at least in the classroom.

It certainly didn’t help the educational community’s case to have Time magazine name the series the best television program of the 20th century, or to have the poet laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky, praise the series, stating that it “penetrates to the nature of television itself” (Owen, 2000, p. 65). Nor did it help that many teachers went home, turned the program on, and laughed themselves silly. Yet another divide has been created between the culture of children and the culture of education, a problem that has been perhaps even more painful for media educators, many of whom follow Hobbs’ (1998) argument that “the texts of everyday life, when constituted as objects of social knowledge, provide the possibility for combining textual, historical, and ideological analysis in ways that help students and teachers move beyond the limits of traditional disciplines and subject areas” (p. 21).

To be sure, there have been efforts by media educators to bring “The Simpsons” into the classroom. Our review of the media literacy literature and media literacy sites revealed a number of examples of proposed lessons incorporating the series, from examining “The Simpsons” as a contemporary variant of social satire to comparing “The Simpsons” family to other television families. However, in almost every case, we sensed that the unique qualities of the series eluded these efforts. The basic tools of media education and literacy as typically agreed upon by numerous media literacy communities—tools which direct our attention to basic precepts such as the idea that “the media are constructed”—appear not to be enough to turn “The Simpsons” from renegade popular culture into a teachable moment (Aufderheide, 1993; Media Awareness Network, 2000). Perhaps the central problem with “The Simpsons” is that it seems to drag the media literacy debate onto the unfamiliar and even foreboding terrain of postmodernism, where issues of image and representation begin to fall apart, a terrain where few media educators are willing or able to follow.

Of course, there has been an effort to define, critique, and bring postmodern theory to bear on educational theory and practice, particularly from advocates of critical pedagogy (e.g., Aronowitz & Giroux, 1992). Yet this has been a theory-driven effort that has not reached very far into educational scholarship, and has made almost no headway into the frontlines of educational practice. Many teachers
have never heard of the term “postmodernism.” The same pattern is equally, if not more pronounced, in the media education community. Our review of media literacy literature and key media literacy web sites in the United States and Canada revealed an almost complete absence of discussion and debate on postmodernism. There have been, of course, notable exceptions (McLaren, Hammer, Scholle, & Reilly, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997).

The outcome of this empty space is another critical divide, in this case not between students and educators, but between media educators and media theorists. In examining this divide, we are struck by two observations. First, the gap between media education practice and media theory comes precisely at the moment when teachers and media educators are finding themselves overwhelmed by strange new popular cultural texts for which the unfamiliar category of “postmodernism” may potentially be the most fruitful interpretive guide. Second, the positions of students and media theorists stand in the closest relationship. Students are living inside an increasingly postmodern popular cultural experience that media theorists are attempting to name, define, and interpret. The problem is that students don’t necessarily have the vocabulary to make sense of their experience, and the vocabulary that theorists have developed seems to make sense only in graduate seminars.

“The Simpsons” offers a promising opportunity to strategically address these issues, highlighting the limits of conventional media literacy tools, illustrating the aesthetic look of postmodernism, and providing some vocabulary to name that look. In effect, it serves as an example of how the idea of postmodernism can be used to develop a new range of critical interpretive skills for constructively engaging this growing trend in popular culture. Our article presents a brief introduction to postmodernism and a grounded example of the benefits and limits of applying this theory. Our intent is not to provide an exhaustive or even extensive introduction to postmodern theory. Rather, it is to position “The Simpsons” as a media text that can be used as a starting point for exploring postmodern theory.

**Fear of Postmodernism**

If everyone loves “The Simpsons,” postmodernism has its fair share of critics. Writing in *U.S. News and World Report*, Leo (1999) argues that postmodernism has created a language that no one can understand, a language that is used to intellectually bully readers into agreeing with outlandish propositions. The academic world, on the other hand, has offered more equivocal assessments. Hebdige (1988) argues that “we are in the presence of a buzzword,” a word which, while confusing, does capture an important social or cultural transition. Kellner (1995) agrees, observing that “. . . the term ‘postmodern’ is often a placeholder, or semiotic marker, that indicates that there are new phenomena that require mapping and theorizing” (p. 46). In the few instances where references to postmodernism do appear in media literacy literature, its ambiguous nature is emphasized. For example, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1997), in their effort to begin charting the challenges posed by multimedia education in an increasingly digitized media environment, believe that postmodernism, although “glib and sweeping,” offers a useful way to characterize a number of broad social and cultural transformations. Some of the changes that interest Buckingham and Sefton-Green include the nature of consumption, the blurring distinctions between production and consumption, the poaching of texts and symbols, and the rejection of the “elitist and sterile oppositions between high and popular culture” (pp. 289–292).

Given the slipperiness of the concept, postmodernism nevertheless marks a critical new moment in the study of media and representation. Building on the work of Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1997), we begin by asking “what is postmodernism?” and “what can we do with it?” With its questioning of “truthfulness” and its interrogation of the politics of media representations, postmodernism, once it is understood properly, can be a rich source of pedagogical theory and practice.

**The Postmodern Condition: Definitions and Symptoms**

What exactly is the term “postmodernism” trying to capture? There is, first, the idea of opposition to “modernism.” In essence, modernism states that individuals and nations, guided by rational thinking and
scientific achievements, are moving toward a more humane, more just, and more economically prosperous future. In other words, modernism embraces progress, viewing it as a linear and inexorable phenomenon with positive outcomes. Accordingly, the “post” in postmodernism stands for the belief that there is no longer any guarantee of progress. In fact, there is very little consensus as to what progress even means.

Postmodernity typically is distinguished by an undermining of authority, the denigration of history by turning it into a “style” or evocative nostalgia, the questioning of progress, and the tendency to view the future as empty. Other postmodern symptoms include the idea of image overload, intertextuality (the seemingly random quoting of one text by another), a heightened sense of media self-reflexivity calling attention to representation as a hall of mirrors, and pastiche, defined as the tendency to assemble disjointed images and text fragments. Finally, the postmodern condition is marked by commodification overload (the tendency to turn everything into a product or marketing opportunity), irony overload (the elevation of irony as the dominant rhetorical posture), and the increased questioning of the meaning of personal identity brought on by viewing the self as a social construction.

In short, the idea of postmodernism calls attention to the ways in which a great deal of everyday popular culture is now fully informed by, if not driven by, the basic media literacy precept that media construct social reality. In fact, much of popular culture relentlessly draws attention to the very arbitrariness of almost every aspect of our social experience, as well as the moral and epistemological foundations on which social experience depends. In other words, the curriculum of popular culture has outstripped the curriculum of the classroom, even the media education classroom. The vocabulary of postmodernism allows us to begin to see and name the many ways in which this is taking place, but it also leaves us at a loss about how to proceed.

Recognizing this dilemma, communication and educational theorists have attempted to clarify what is to be gained by drawing on the social and theoretical insights generated by the deconstructive energy of postmodern criticism. At the same time, they have tried to show how to tame this energy in the service of modernist values such as human rights, equality, freedom, and democracy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Best & Kellner, 1991; Giroux, 1997; Kellner, 1995; Rorty, 1989; Wolin, 1990). A “critical postmodernism” encourages us to ask new questions about all claims to authority (scientific or otherwise), about how new forms of representation and new inflections in the style of representation made possible through technology and commodification change the quality of meaning, and about how cultural dominance is produced and maintained through the patterns of contrasts used to define social and linguistic categories (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Scholle & Denski, 1995). Postmodernism offers new tools for critical interpretation and new responsibilities for connecting media and cultural interpretation to democracy as a “form of society that enables critical reflection and activism,” making us understand “the ways in which our seemingly private individual identities are formed, through language and symbols, in relationship to each other and the broader social and political community” (McKinlay, 1998, p. 481).

For “The Simpsons” audience, an ambivalence toward technology and progress is standard fare. This view of the future as empty and without guarantees has also been associated with the core identity of Generation X, whose slogan might read “We have seen the future and it sucks.” While any aspect of postmodernism discussed above can be found in and explored within “The Simpsons,” two concepts in particular—irony overload and the questioning of identity—will serve as reference points in our reconsideration of the series. The problem of identity is a central concern for all young people, but it is a problem that is not being satisfactorily addressed, given the growing levels of hopelessness, cynicism, despair, and suicide among teenagers. Of particular interest to us is that “The Simpsons” repeatedly focuses on this very issue: the problem of selfhood in an increasingly absurd culture pulverized with images, symbols, values, irony, commercialization, and hucksterism.

What lessons does “The Simpsons” teach? What lessons can be learned as the characters on the show are thrust into various battles for selfhood within the postmodern terrain? Like much postmodern
culture, “The Simpsons,” is saturated with irony and obsessed with issues of authentic identity, particularly in relation to media culture. Our task is to articulate an interpretive frame of reference to help media educators and viewers begin to make critical sense of these symptoms.

The Challenges of Postmodern Selfhood

Gergen (1991) notes that postmodernists divide history into three epochs, each of which corresponds to a particular conception of personal identity or selfhood. These periods are labeled as the pre-modern (romantic period), the modern era, and the postmodern. From the pre-modern or romantic tradition, we derive our belief in a stable center of identity. In Gergen’s words, “powerful forces” in the “deep interior of one’s being” are held to be the source of “inspiration, creativity, genius, and moral courage, even madness” (Gergen, 1992, p. 61). Modernism redefined the self, shifting the emphasis from deep, mysterious processes to human consciousness in the here and now; always in keeping with such values as efficiency, stable functioning, and progress. The self in its latest form—what Gergen calls the postmodern or relational self—is no longer viewed as a separate entity, but is increasingly understood as a relational construction, defined by and spread across the people and life experiences each individual encounters throughout her or his existence. In short, as McNamee and Gergen (1999) argue, “there are no independent selves; we are each constituted by others (who are themselves similarly constituted). We are always already related by virtue of shared constitutions of the self” (p. 15).

Linked to this notion is the idea that a conscious understanding of ourselves as beings occurs through language, which is itself a fundamentally relational concept, and that our identity grows and develops in relationship to the endless dialogues that we have with others, with culture, and with ourselves. In this sense, our interactions with the media become deeply significant. Moreover, this new consciousness of the relational meaning of the self comes at exactly the moment when the relationships we enter into and which contribute to our definition of self are multiplying at an exponential rate and are being increasingly spread over a greater and greater span of time and space.

It is one thing to contemplate the meaning of the relational self when we think of, say, two friends engaged in a mutually sustaining and defining dialogue. In this setting, the idea of the relational self is promising, perhaps even reassuring. However, extending the idea of relationship to include every symbolic encounter in which we willingly or unwilling participate—from intentional relationships to unintentional and forced relationship with 3,000 commercial messages per day—presents new challenges. A critical postmodern perspective calls attention to this crisis of identity, a crisis in which the media of communication and their commercial foundations are deeply implicated.

Of course, thinking of the self as a relational construct not only gives insights into the crisis of the self, but it also offers a way of thinking about how to address that crisis. In this more hopeful and positive sense, the relational self offers a glimpse of those selected aspects of human experience and identity that may be used as a moral foundation in the face of the deconstructive maelstrom of commercial postmodern culture. The relational self suggests a moral compass that is based less on the absolute truths of religion or science than in the process by which we create ourselves and our humanity through ceaseless and inevitable physical, linguistic, and psychological dependence upon one another. Drawing on the work of Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, Jurgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Jerome Bruner, McNamee and Gergen (1999) lay out a clear and thoughtful introduction to what a moral ethic organized around the relational self would look like. They have called it “relational responsibility,” defining relationally responsible actions as those that “sustain and enhance forms of interchange out of which meaningful action itself is made possible.” Isolation, they argue, “represents the negation of humanity” (p. 19). The standard of relational responsibility is in stark contrast to the deconstructive tendencies of postmodernism. As such, it can serve as a critical bridge linking the interpretive power of a critical postmodernism to the modernist values associated with progressive democracy.
At the same time, it is clear that the deconstructive tendencies of postmodernism (as a set of contemporary conditions) have substantial implications for personal identity construction. Giddens (1991), for example, warns of the “looming threat of personal meaninglessness.” It is this threat that directs us back to a consideration of one of the central tropes of postmodern discourse: irony. As noted above, relentless irony is a hallmark of both “The Simpsons” and the postmodern era. As individuals struggle to confront postmodern challenges to identity, there is reason to ask whether there is any value in the postmodern strategy of irony. Thus, the implications of irony both for identity formation and relational responsibility must be considered.

Irony, Identity, and the Dilemma of Responsibility

“The Simpsons” is regularly celebrated for its incisive wit and social satire, for its capacity to use irony to call attention to the absurdity of everyday social conventions and beliefs. Irony functions as a critical form that helps us to break through surface meaning to see and understand the “true” nature of things in a new and deeper way. It is a vehicle for enhancing critical consciousness, and it represents a moral force of good in the service of eradicating conventional evil (Rorty, 1989). As Hutcheon (1992, 1994) notes, critical irony is intimately linked to politics. The power of deconstructing can be a first step to political action, and irony’s oppositional character can be a major critical force. The subversive functioning of irony is related to its status as a self-critical and self-reflexive mode that challenges hierarchy, and this ability to undermine and overturn is said to have politically transformative power.

But this is not where the use of irony ends in “The Simpsons,” nor does it capture the postmodern turn in the concept of irony. Postmodern irony is ambiguous and its meaning is contested. It can be interpreted by adherents as playful, reflexive, and liberating; opponents, however, see it as frivolous, deviant, and perverse (Hutcheon, 1992, 1994; Kaufman, 1997; Thiele, 1997). In postmodern irony, clarity in moral delineation begins to disappear. For instance, in contemporary comedy, as in all social behavior, all actions are subject to satire from some perspective. Further, since postmodern irony begins with the assumption that language produces all meaning, a kind of “emancipatory indulgence in irony” is evoked—an invitation to reconceptualize language as a form of play. As Gergen (1991) writes, “we needn’t credit such linguistic activities with profundity, imbue them with deep significance, or set out to alter the world on their account. Rather, we might play with the truths of the day, shake them about, try them on like funny hats” (p. 188). In other words, postmodern irony invites us to “avoid ‘saying it straight,’ using linear logic, and forming smooth, progressive narratives” (p. 188).

“The Simpsons” is saturated with this form of postmodern irony. But where does that leave media educators trying to work with this enormously popular series? On the one hand, media educators would like to engage the series fully because it raises many challenges to conventional ideas of representation and selfhood; on the other hand, they are unwilling to lead students to see media literacy as a form of deconstruction that leads only to meaninglessness or play.

Some media scholars see postmodern irony as a difficult challenge for teachers committed to linking media literacy with productive citizenship. Purdy, for example, laments that “between Madonna and the fist-fight between Jesus and Santa Claus that opened the cartoon series South Park, there is less and less left in convention whose flouting can elicit shock.” Irony, he concludes, “invites us to be self-absorbed, but in selves that we cannot believe to be especially interesting or significant” (p. 26). Conway and Seery (1992) are similarly concerned about the implications of postmodern irony for engaged citizenship. “Although irony may equip the dispossessed with much-needed critical perspective and even underwrite a minimal political agenda,” they write, “it is generally regarded as irremediably parasitic and antisocial” (p. 3). Hutcheon (1994) also shares this concern, noting that irony can be “both political and apolitical, both conservative and radical, both repressive and democratizing in a way that other discursive strategies are not” (p. 35). Gergen (1991) frames the challenge of postmodern irony in terms of its challenge to forming a coherent self. If all serious projects are reduced to satire, play,
or nonsense, “all attempts at authenticity or earnest ends become empty—merely postures to be punctuated by sophisticated self-consciousness” (p. 189).

If this is the dilemma that “The Simpsons” raises in its use of both critical and postmodern irony, to what extent is it contributing to a social consciousness with a potential for social action, as opposed to contributing to a cynical numbness founded on ironic detachment? What solutions does the series offer for resolving this dilemma? Are there any alternative solutions that acknowledge the postmodern challenge to identity?

**Exploration of Self in “Homer to the Max”**

With these concerns in mind, we examine an episode of “The Simpsons” that originally aired on February 7, 1998. The episode focuses with particular vehemence on the quest for identity and asks the following questions:

- How is the idea of the self understood in relationship to the blizzard of media images, symbols, and values?
- How does irony fit into the exploration and resolution of identity issues?
- How do we understand “The Simpsons” confrontations with the self and identity in terms of what has been called the postmodern condition?

The show begins with the standard sight gags on the couch and the Simpson family’s lampooning of television’s midseason replacement series. The program that finally captures the family’s interest is “Police Cops,” which becomes a show within the show. As the two Miami-Vice like heroes of “Police Cops” subdue would-be bank thieves, one of the police detective heroes, a millionaire cop surrounded by admiring women, introduces himself as “Simpson, Detective Homer Simpson.” The Simpson family is shocked and Homer is particularly overwhelmed, confusing himself with his television image. The plot then unfolds in essentially five kernels that take up and explore Homer’s confusion over his own identity (Chatman, 1978).

First, Homer identifies completely with the television detective hero: “Wow. They captured my personality perfectly! Did you see the way Daddy caught that bullet?” In turn, the entire community of Springfield validates Homer’s new pseudo-identity, treating him as if he were the television detective hero: “Hey, Mr. Simpson, sir, can I get your autograph?” Second, the “Police Cops” producers change their television detective character from glamorous hero to bumbling sidekick, launching a series of gags about Homer’s true identity. The new characterization is actually a near perfect replication of the “real” Homer Simpson. This outrages Homer: “Hey what’s going on? That guy’s not Homer Simpson! He’s fat and stupid!”

The town continues to respond to Homer as the television character, only now with ridicule rather than respect. Nonetheless, Homer gains some insight into the confusion between his “real” and “fictional” identity. As a crowd of co-workers gathers in the hallway outside his office waiting for him to “do something stupid,” Homer retorts, “Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you gentleman, but you seem to have me confused with a character in a fictional show.”

Part of the pleasure for viewers derives from the irony of the cartoon character Homer making the claim that he is the “real” Homer Simpson, as opposed to the fictional cartoon character within the cartoon. The writers of the episode then continue to play with this seemingly endless hall of mirrors between “real” and “fictional” identity by scripting Homer to behave exactly in the manner of the revised fictional detective character. Homer obliges by spilling a fondue pot on the nuclear reactor control panel.

Homer’s identity crisis eventually leads him to Hollywood, where he confronts the producers of the “Police Cops”—By the Numbers Productions—and demands that they recast the detective character: “I’m begging you! I’m a human being! Let me have my dignity back!” The lines between Homer’s real identity and his media identity blur even further when his efforts in the production office are used as grist for a new gag in the next “Police Cops” episode.
In the third kernel, the plot shifts away from Homer’s struggle over his identification with his media representation to his fixation on the idea that a new name will give him a new identity. In this kernel, Homer goes to court to sue “Police Cops” for the improper use of his name. When his request is immediately rebuffed in the name of corporate proprietary interests, he rashly decides to change his name to Max Power. Homer’s life is immediately transformed. His self-image improves, he becomes forceful and dynamic, and his co-workers and boss treat him with respect. Mr. Burns, remembering Homer’s name for the first time, exclaims, “Well, who could forget the name of a magnetic individual like you? Keep up the good work, Max.” While shopping at Costington’s for a new power wardrobe, Homer meets a member of Springfield’s elite with a similarly powerful name, Trent Steele. Trent immediately takes Homer/Max under his wing, inviting him to garden party for “Springfield’s young, hip power couples,” an event that turns out to be the jumping off point for an environmental protest.

The critical moment in this kernel—which links the identity crisis of “Police Cops” with the identity theme in the “Max Power” portion of the episode—occurs when Homer reveals to his new best friend Trent Steele the origin of the name “Max Power.” When Trent exclaims, “Hey, great name!,” Homer replies, “Yeah, isn’t it? I got it off a hairdryer.” Homer’s resolution to his identity crisis with his media self is to redefine himself in terms of the power setting of a small household appliance. The self is now equated with a product. At first, the results are stunningly successful.

The fourth kernel leads to the denouement. In the third kernel, Homer’s appropriation of the identity of his hair dryer appears to have resolved his identity crisis in satisfactory manner. However, this solution soon falls apart. At the garden party, Homer and Marge rub shoulders with celebrity environmental activists Woody Harrelson and Ed Begley, Jr., two of the many celebrities lampooned in the episode. The idea behind these scenes is that Homer, as the buffoon celebrity Max Power, is on the same level as other equally shallow and ridiculous celebrities. Finally, Trent Steele announces that it is time to board a bus to protest “the wanton destruction of our nation’s forests.” This cause is relentlessly parodied: “We have to protect [trees] because trees can’t protect themselves, except, of course, the Mexican Fighting Trees.”

The partygoers travel to a stand of redwoods about to be bulldozed and are chained to the trees. The police (Chief Wiggum, Eddie, and Lou) confront Homer, attempt to swab his eyes with “Hippie-Strength” mace, and end up chasing him around his tree. His chain works like a saw, cutting down the redwood, which in turn topples the entire forest. Homer, freed at last, throws his chain into the air, killing a bald eagle. Homer, as the phony Max Power, is rejected by the phony celebrity activists. In the fifth and final kernel, which serves as an epilogue to the episode, Marge and Homer are in bed. Marge tells Homer she is glad he changed his name back to Homer Simpson and Homer responds, “Yes, I learned you gotta be yourself.”

The Episode Through a Postmodern Lens

The episode is intriguing because of its insistent focus on the search for identity, and the methods by which that identity is constructed within the absurdities of the postmodern landscape. As Gergen (1992) notes, “We are exposed to more opinions, values, personalities, and ways of life than was any previous generation in history; the number of our relationships soars, the variations are enormous: past relationships remain (only a phone call apart) and new faces are only a channel away” (p. 58). There is, in short, an explosion in social connections. What does this explosion have to do with our sense of selves and what we stand for, and how does it undermine beliefs in a romantic interior or in a rational center of the self? This is precisely the question this episode of “The Simpsons” takes up again and again. What is particularly engaging in this episode is the focus on Homer’s identity crisis and its relationship to the media.

This is not, of course, a theme unique to “The Simpsons.” As Caldwell (1995) observes, comedy-variety shows in the late 1940s and early 1950s were repeatedly using the conventions of intertextuality and self-reflexivity about the constructed nature of the media image. Even “Leave it to Beaver” aired a media/
self episode in the 1950s entitled “Beaver on TV.” Filmmaker Woody Allen often explores the connection between self and media, perhaps most directly in The Purple Rose of Cairo, where the film’s female protagonist is shocked to find her own film idol able to step off the screen and assume a flesh-and-blood relationship with her. More recent examples include the films Being John Malkovich and Nurse Betty. Nevertheless, episodes of “The Simpsons” address this theme with a critical edge seldom found in mainstream television. In this sense, the show serves as both an illustration and exploration of the mass-mediated self. And it certainly stands as an acknowledgment of the degree to which identity is dispersed across media encounters and the degree to which others respond to and validate these new media created selves.

Homer’s engagement with the television character bearing his name isn’t a simple one of identification, but a blurring of the boundaries between his “authentic” self and the image of himself dialogically reflected back to himself by the media. This episode takes the basic media literacy proposition that the media construct social reality and radicalizes it to argue that the fundamental identities of audience members are also socially constructed by media experience. The boundaries of our seemingly essential identities begin to fade. The writers engage in this play with the audience in at least two different ways. First, they force us, through our identification with Homer, to acknowledge the ways in which we identify and even lose ourselves in the fictional characters we watch. And to make sure this point is driven home, the writers pull the rug out from under us. In the forgetful pleasure of our positive identification with Homer, who in turn is identifying with the glamorous protagonist, the episode switches the roles of the “televised” Homer Simpson from seductive hero to buffoon. Homer is left the fool, and we too must confront our own identification with Homer and “The Simpsons” show.

At the same time, the show alternately encourages us to identify with Homer’s search for his authentic self and reminds us that the character we are following and relating to is a cartoon invention himself. This is the push and pull of postmodern irony, at once pushing us to critical insights about the conventions of representation and at the same time pulling us back to a safe level of detachment so that the stakes involved in unraveling our existential certainty about who we are do not become overly menacing.

The episode also illustrates the crisis of the self from the perspective of content and form, as detailed by Giddens (1991) and Gergen (1991, 1992). With regard to content, the episode shows us the myriad of ways in which Homer’s sense of self is pushed and pulled, stretched and contradicted. With regard to form, it never lets Homer’s character—or our understanding of his character—settle into a stable, coherent self once his identity has been called into question—at least not until the epilogue of the program. The episode moves beyond illustration of the relational self to a critique of the challenges facing the relational self in several instances, and it is certainly in these instances where some of the unique, potentially consciousness raising efforts of “The Simpsons” shine through.

The first instance is when Homer goes to Hollywood to beg the production company to give him back his dignity by recreating his television character. Despite Homer’s protestations that he is a “human being,” the “By the Numbers Production Company” is undeterred from shamelessly exploiting Homer’s (cartoon) humanity. This scene suggests that the keys to our selfhood are held, in part, by uncaring corporations, willing to exploit us and our identity for their own gain. The second instance is in the critically sophisticated decision to offer Homer a second chance at achieving a dignified self by literally constructing his sense of self through total identification with the power setting of a hair dryer. In both cases, and particularly in the hair dryer gag, these are subtle critiques that may or may not be processed by most viewers. Neither is amplified in any significant way semiotically or through the plot. Reading through the fan postings for the episode on the Simpson’s Archive site, we found no evidence that these critiques had been taken up. In fact, there was little recognition of any of the identity issues discussed above, other than the humorous confusion over the name Max Power.

Nevertheless, these scenes infuse the episode with an important critical potential, particularly from the point of view of media educators. They allow us to think about the crisis of the self in connection to the concept of relational identity as well as within the context of what critical postmodernism has identified as
the ever-intensifying movement to turn everything into a commodity. Even one's sense of self is commodity, reducing us to believing that we truly are only what we own. In other words, while “The Simpsons” can certainly be enjoyed without any knowledge of postmodernism, viewers knowledgeable about some of the basic tenets of postmodern thought may more fully appreciate the twists and turns of its inventive plot lines.

Defusing Critical Themes

Nearly a decade ago, Collins (1992) reviewed a short vignette within a “Simpsons” episode that was constructed in much the same way as the “Homer to the Max” episode discussed above. Homer and Bart are watching Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade on television and discussing whether the cartoon characters appearing on the balloon-floats deserve such immortality. Just as Homer tells Bart that if “you start building a balloon float for every flash-in-the-pan cartoon character, you’ll turn the parade into a farce,” a Bart Simpson balloon float passes by.

Collins wanted to know about the effects of “hyperconscious irony” on television viewers: is its ultimate effect “emancipatory, leading to a recognition that television’s representations are social constructions rather than value-neutral reflections of the ‘real’ world? Or does this irony produce a disempowering apathy, in which no image is taken at all seriously?” (p. 36). Collins’ question is still with us today, especially because “postmodern” television shows show no sign of disappearing. We are attracted to the wealth of media literacy moments that such shows make visible, but we also realize that these programs often deconstruct the validity and importance of those same media literary principles.

It is the postmodern dimension of current media fare like “The Simpsons” that requires that we take the meaning and uses of irony very seriously, that we carefully attend to the quality of hope that is offered to media audiences after the deconstructive play of postmodern ironies has left us laughing and numbed. If we can no longer trust any absolute realities, if traditional moralities keep revealing their human limits, does this mean that the only viable options are to retreat into nostalgia, go shopping, or go shopping for nostalgia? Linking these concerns to identity issues, Gergen (1991) asks: “Once we are aware of the ironies of self-reflection, how are we to regard them? What response can we make? Is it simply an invitation to play and a surrender of any form of critical analysis or something else?” As he argues, when one’s being is constantly doubted and its constructed and contingent character is made evident, “then daily existence as an objectively given self is threatened” (p. 137).

With these concerns in mind, we conclude by examining how the critical issues raised in the beginning of the “Police Cops” episode regarding the self, the media, and consumer culture are resolved. Not surprisingly, the episode withdraws from its sophisticated illustrations of the challenges of postmodern culture in general and its more specific explorations of dilemmas of the self. It also withdraws from its use of critical postmodern irony to the more soothing romantic view of the self-contained and essential self, as well as to the nostalgic idea that the “traditional” family is a “haven in a heartless world.”

Let’s look at this turn away from criticism in a bit more detail. A central point of this essay has been that the nature of “The Simpsons” forces media educators to stretch beyond the basic premises of media literacy to confront the postmodern dimensions of the series and its postmodern implications for understanding media literacy. To this end, we focused on two postmodern media representational issues: the relational self and postmodern irony/irony overload. In the conclusion of this episode, it appears that the critical dimension of each of these pedagogical moments is surrendered.

First, the idea of the relational self is rejected. When Homer turns to Marge as they lie in bed and says “I learned you gotta be yourself,” we are comforted with the most obsessively repeated summary of romantic individualism in the vocabulary of popular culture. The threat of the blurring borders between one’s authentic self and one’s mediated self is contained. The threat of one’s confusion over “who I am” and “what I own” is contained. Moreover, it is contained literally within the confines of the marriage bed, a symbol of the modernist utopia of intimacy between two self-sufficient individuals in a committed
“relationship.” In this modernist view, to be in a “relationship” or not to be in a “relationship” is a choice. A relationship is not viewed as the inescapable foundation of a “self” with its consequent responsibilities, obligations, and joys. The idea of the relational self, which could serve as the basis for a nonmarket ethic for both personal and social relationships, is lost. Although Homer’s final “I learned you gotta be yourself” could also be read ironically, it stands as the final narrative handhold for the viewer to resolve the episode.

Second, the separation of public and private—particularly in the realm of identity and relationship—is scrupulously maintained. Again, this follows the modernist view. Homer’s activism against the corporate world’s exploitative engineering of personal identity is an isolated, individual quest that “humorously” reveals the futility of challenge. When Homer does join a group in order to act in relationship with others to achieve a social goal, his “joining” is both against his will and dependent on his phoniness. The members of the group are also viciously satirized for their insincerity, their self-servingness, and their kookiness. As much as “The Simpsons” celebrates and even tenderly appreciates quirkiness of character, quirkiness is presented as “uncool” as soon as it flowers into organized resistance against corporate mainstreaming.

What message, then, becomes foregrounded? The idea of the relational self—formerly used as the means by which corporate media culture and consumer culture are criticized—is itself critiqued. The very idea of the relational self is seen as a threat, in the same way that corporate manipulation and celebrity phoniness are threats. In fact, the episode suggests that the solution to the issues of corporate and consumer manipulations of identity lies in “just being ourselves,” even though “ourselves” are spread across the myriad of social and mediated interactions that we experience voluntarily and involuntarily every day: The idea that the relational self, understood in a positive light, could serve both to deepen the critique of commercial mediation of identity and to articulate an alternative ethic of responsibility is not on the screen.

This retreat into the romantic, individualized self is heightened by the excesses of postmodern irony, which move the ironic trope from critique to detachment to nostalgia for real or imagined traditions. As Homer makes his way from his encounter with the corporate soullessness of “By the Numbers Productions” to his encounter with the mindless environmental activism of the celebrity phonies, he learns that all social or political action is equally futile and absurd. This lesson fits with Homer’s return to his “authentic self” and his marital bed, but it denies viewers any hope—other than cultural regression and increasing privatization of experience—for dealing with the postmodern world.

Taylor (1991), in her study of television families of the 1960s and 1970s, found that the central task of these shows was to help hold together a conservative view of the nuclear family against whatever challenges and contradictions history had to offer. In this sense, it is ironic that “The Simpsons” serves a similar purpose, offering the family as sanctuary against a world gone mad. “The Simpsons,” however, innovates by recognizing that the challenges posed to contemporary culture are less about external political threats or even domestic strife than about the threat to meaning itself and to a meaningful existence. In this way, it opens much critical territory and thoughtfully charts contemporary life’s postmodern absurdities before shutting down the argument and debate over these very issues.

**Conclusion**

We began with the question: If “The Simpsons” is the answer, what’s the question? We argued that “The Simpsons” is not the end of postmodern culture, but only another example of a tidal wave of media that are hyper self-conscious about meaning and representation. For better or worse, the series pushes us to an encounter with postmodern theory. This encounter provides a vocabulary to recognize the descriptive symptoms of postmodernism and to appreciate the deeper social and historical conditions leading to the postmodern condition. It also allows us to distinguish between, on the one hand, a postmodernism of despair which focuses on meaninglessness and, on the other hand, a critical postmodernism which
recognizes our power and responsibility to create a system of values based on the interdependence of communication and personal identity.

This is not to say we feel that we have the answers to these questions; rather, we wish to put forward the idea that these are the questions and issues that media literacy educators should be teaching toward. Drawing on postmodern theory, we examined two key ongoing themes in “The Simpsons”: the changing conception of personal identity in the postmodern era, as well as the fruits and futility of a relentlessly ironic worldview. Our intent was to provide some guidelines that media literacy educators could use to engage the increasingly pervasive phenomenon of self-conscious media texts that grapple with the blurring line between the “real” world and the reality of the media world. Rethinking the meaning of identity and recognizing the critical and destructive power of irony are crucial to understanding the impact of a commercial culture that concurrently creates, celebrates, and bemoans the explosion of meaninglessness. Programs such as “The Simpsons” give media literacy educators the opportunity to embark upon that journey.

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