“People Who Look Like Things”

Representations of Disability in *The Simpsons**

by Moritz Fink

Introduction

Throughout Western cultural history, representations of disability have been couched in a dominant discourse that, as Tom Shakespeare has emphasized, “always maintains physically different people as other, as alien, as the object of curiosity or hostility or pity, rather than as part of the group” (49). On the other hand, although “The comic stereotype of the disabled fool or clown is part of a pattern of cultural representation” (ibid.), such images are also an integral part of the carnival aesthetic as it has been seminally theorized by the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. While Bakhtin describes carnival in terms of constituting a legitimized suspension of the established hierarchies that lasts only temporarily, his concept of the carnivalesque also transcends this narrow definition. Thus it is through the carnivalesque spirit that Bakhtin recognizes an “unofficial” folk or popular culture, which offers “the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (34).

I draw upon this model, arguing that the cartoon form offers a framework where disability is resignified in relation to conservative forms of representation—that is, disability does not so much represent a deficiency or flaw but rather contributes to the destabilization of cultural hierarchies. Taking the US television show *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–present) as a popular example, my study shows that the series deconstructs traditional stereotypes or clichés of human deficiency. In particular, I examine how the imagery of disability in *The Simpsons* works both as a comic device based on “incongruity” (Morreall) and social criticism. For this purpose, I first give a brief overview of some “disabled” characters in *The Simpsons*. Analyzing two characters—Herman and Sideshow Bob—I suggest that they add to the general parodic aesthetic of the series. Then, I discuss two episode segments that implicitly critique the objectification of disability in the media: Homer’s portrayal as “fatty” in the episode “King-Size Homer” (1995) and *The Simpsons*’ fictional TV talk show “People Who Look

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Like Things” (“Homer’s Triple Bypass,” 1992). As both close readings demonstrate, satire can contribute to make us—the audience—engage with questions of political correctness in relation to disability and humor.

My thesis is that, by embedding offensive humor within the text, *The Simpsons* provides a level of distanciation. Mostly associated with German playwright Bertolt Brecht and his notion of “alienating” spectators from theatrical illusion, the theory of distanciation has found its way into film and television scholarship largely in relation to techniques we associate with “avant-garde” aesthetics (Hayward 93). With the satirical take on disability, I wish to propose another form of distanciation according to which the audience is asked to critically re-assess its understanding of political correctness or what Rebecca Mallett calls the “tolerant subject position”—an attribute often taken for granted in today’s liberal societies.

Cartoons and Disability

Over the last decade, a considerable branch of disability studies scholarship has focused on the textual analysis of disability as representational object. According to David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, the imagery of disability in fictional text is a common trope—what they call narrative prosthesis—used by authors to drive a story forward or, alternatively, a symbolic signifier responsible for the encoding of character traits. In this logic, textual disability is supposed to activate the reader’s assumed linkage “between external ‘flaws’ and character motivations in a way that insists upon corporeal differences as laden with psychological and social implications” (96). One of Mitchell and Snyder’s premises is that disability as literary trope does not necessarily point to disability’s social and political dimension. Instead they propose the metaphor *prosthesis* to describe the ways in which disabled characters have been literarily utilized as a device to compensate for the void of normalcy. “Disability,” they write, “cannot be accommodated within the ranks of the norm(als), and, thus, the options for dealing with the difference that drives a story’s plot is twofold: a disability is either left behind or punished for its lack of conformity” (56).

Although Mitchell and Snyder’s theory is certainly rewarding from a narratological perspective, it does not pay enough attention to the aspect of genre. If we accept Mitchell and Snyder’s thesis, according to which the imagery of disability constitutes a significant trope in the history of literature and film (and, for that matter, television), we must also acknowledge the genre in which the representation is situated. The cartoon genre, for instance, however mimetic of traditional narrative forms it may be, has always parodied the tropes and conventions of traditional storytelling, too. This dualism is especially pronounced in the generically mixed format of *The Simpsons*, being both a sitcom and a cartoon.

In his book-length study on *The Simpsons*, Jonathan Gray notes that the characters mainly consist of “*hyper*-stereotypes” to satirize sexual, ethnic, class, or national prejudices and clichés: Homer, the beer-drinking, single- minded, working-class American dad; Marge, the caring, near-perfect mom; Willie, the all-Scottish groundskeeper at Springfield Elementary School; Apu, the Indian immigrant owner of the local Quick-E-Mart; etc. In addition to these *sociocultural* caricatures, the satirical universe also exhibits what we may call *literary* stereotypes: the Simpsons being a caricature of the typical sitcom family; Bart Simpson, the antiauthoritarian rascal with an affection for the theatrical in the tradition of Tom Sawyer or Dennis the Menace; Dr. Hibbert, the Bill Cosby-esque, good-natured family doctor of the Simpsons; or conman Lyle Laney, who talks the people of Springfield into buying an expensive monorail à la Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man* (“Marge vs. the Monorail,” 1993). As Gray points out, one of *The Simpsons*’ essential characteristics is its parodic humor regarding character and genre conventions. Accordingly, “much of [the series’] humor is deeply transitive, pointing outside the borders of *The Simpsons* to all manner of genres, texts, and discourses. To laugh at these jokes is frequently to read those other genres, texts, and discourses as much as it is to read *The Simpsons*” (10). The show’s premise, then, is not so much to chronicle the adventures of an American family, but rather to play with our knowledge of popular cultural history and its generic tropes.

Even though the series primarily addresses the realm of the televisual (and Gray rightly emphasizes the prominent function of the sitcom in this context), *The Simpsons*’ universe incorporates a broad range of stereotypes as representational objects, like literary and film character archetypes, which encourage intertextual readings and intellectual inquiry. Hence, one aspect that demands elaboration is the imagery of “disabled” characters in *The Simpsons*, how it works as a comic device, and what this tells us about the cultural meaning of disability as representational trope. Similar to what Julia White has observed for one of the show’s offspring, South Park, The Simpsons’ satiric incorporation of images of disability potentially teaches its viewers to be informed readers, heightening their “awareness of how media represents disability, how this representation influences the understandings and attitudes of the able-bodied ‘normate,’ and how those of us who interact with texts can question those understandings and attitudes" (74).

In contrast to Gray's "*hyper*-stereotypes," images of disabilities are rather rare on the show, mostly represented through marginal figures.[1]

Herman, the one-armed owner of Springfield's military antiques shop, comes to mind; or the extremely tall man, who is ridiculed by Nelson thanks to his funny appearance in a disproportionately small car ("22 Short Films about Springfield," 1996); the lonely blind man who purchases the Simpson family's dog, Santa's Little Helper, as a guide dog ("The Canine Mutiny," 1997); Maya, the woman of short stature with whom bartender Moe falls in love ("Eeny Teeny Maya Moe," 2009); the man "with a leg for an arm and an arm for a leg" after he has been mistreated by quack Dr. Nick ("Homer's Triple Bypass," 1992); Hans Moleman, a recurring character, who is almost entirely blind; the maniac Sideshow Bob with his oversized feet; Mr. Burns, the demonic owner of Springfield's nuclear power plant, a skinny old man with a hooked nose and hunchback; and who could forget the three-eyed fish Blinky, caught by Bart and Lisa in "Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish" (1990)? Incidentally, the writers have also invited the English theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, who is profoundly bodily disabled, to have occasional cameo appearances in the show ("They Saved Lisa's Brain," 1999; "Don't Fear the Roofer," 2005; "Stop or My Dog Will Shoot!," 2007; "Elementary School Musical," 2010). Although this list is just a quick sketch of appearances of disabled characters in *The Simpsons*, it nevertheless suggests that these figures play largely a marginal role within the series. Perhaps with the slight exception of Mr. Burns, the main characters are entirely depicted as "able-bodied" characters.[2]

However, there are two aspects that complicate the distinction between "the disabled" and "the able-bodied" in *The Simpsons*: the show's cartoon form and its satire content. Considering the visual form, Paul Wells notes, for instance, that the show's graphic "look" exhibits a relatively high degree of what he terms "cartoonalness" (94–95). By this, Wells refers to the reductionist, anti-realist approach that is necessarily linked to the names

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[1] Like other television series, *The Simpsons* depicts some of its major characters as being temporarily impaired/disabled. The typical trope here is when someone is confined to a wheelchair for the course of one episode like Bart in "Bart of Darkness" (1994), which is, of course, also a direct reference to Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film *Rear Window*. The episode "King-Size Homer," which is examined here, is also an example of a protagonist being temporarily impaired.

[2] Although elderly people in *The Simpsons*, like Abe "Grampa" Simpson, feature characteristics that may technically qualify as "disabilities," my study will not consider these characters under the category of disability.

Hanna-Barbera and their made-for-television cartoons— *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, *Jonny Quest*, *Tom and Jerry*, or, most notably, *The Flintstones*. The concept of disability, thus, is reframed by *The Simpsons*’ animated form and the incorporation of explicitly cartoonal features such as four fingers, yellow skin, extreme overbite, and googly eyes, or the integration of anthropomorphized creatures, physical deformities, and other surreal spectacles. Carl Rhodes has linked *The Simpsons*’ “grotesque realism” to the cartoon’s general carnivalesque dimension of representing the human form in “exaggerated ways” (379). In this regard, it is one of the genre’s inherent features to be centered on caricature, whereby instances of “physical difference” and “mental incapacity” (Shakespeare 48) have been incorporated into the cartoon’s language up to the point where certain idiosyncrasies became cartoon conventions. Featuring typical cartoon characteristics, deviants like “stuttering Porky Pig, speech-impaired Elmer Fudd, near-sighted Mr. Magoo, and mentally retarded Dopey” (Longmore 65) are therefore obscured by their very cartoonalness.

Regarding *The Simpsons*’ satiric component, Barry Hodge notes in his assessment of the show’s relationship to ideological forms of representation that, in order to become objects of social criticism, cartoon characters must play even more to cultural stereotypes. In that sense, one should not conflate characters that serve *The Simpsons*’ sociopolitical satire with representations of disability per se. Apparently, Clancy Wiggum, the delightfully “stupid” Chief of Springfield’s local police, is to be understood more as a satirical comment on a society that allows its state authorities to be run by “fools” than an example of mental illness. Another example of “subnormal” intelligence, Homer Simpson finds out in one episode (“HOMЯ,” 2001) that his mental deficiencies have been caused by a crayon he had stuck in his brain when he was a child. Once the crayon is removed, his IQ goes up again, but soon he discovers that being smart does not necessarily correlate to being happy. Homer decides to have the crayon stuck back in his brain so as to regain his “stupidity.” Like Chief Wiggum, Homer’s character makes sense only in the context of social satire. In fact, as a satirical image, Homer already constitutes something like a narrative prosthesis. In addition to his mental deficiencies, Homer is portrayed as rather unattractive from a social-realist perspective (he is bald, overweight, foolish, and clumsy). Yet do these attributes render Homer a disabled character? And if so, does this mean that the creators of *The Simpsons* want to argue that American society rewards people who are mentally disabled? Probably not: in the show’s satirical universe, Homer is not signified as disabled or “*ab*-normal,” rather he represents a satirized version of the "desired norm." As Chris Turner puts it, "He is the Everyman. The [show's] hero" (99). Both the satire and cartoon aesthetics evoke an effect of defamiliarization that renders many of the characters in *The Simpsons*' universe grotesque idiosyncrasies, social "others," or narrative prostheses in Mitchell and Snyder's sense.

Disabled Characters in *The Simpsons*

There exists a well-established strand of discussion in both media and disability studies that deals with the examination of disabled characters as literary "stereotypes." Paul Longmore's seminal essay "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures" can be taken as a point of reference here. According to Longmore, "Among the most persistent [stereotypes] is the association of disability with malevolence. Deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil" (66). Ahab, the one-legged captain of the *Pequot* in Herman Melville's classic *Moby-Dick*, is definitely one of the most famous disabled characters in Western literature. Ahab is obsessed with getting revenge on Moby-Dick for having maimed him. Moreover, he is a maverick; a tyrant depicted as an antipode to the crew. As Longmore emphasizes, such functioning of disability has become a consistent trope of storytelling to connote the "bad guys" (ibid.).

Within Western cultural history, examples of villains being marked as monstrous, physically impaired, or more or less disabled are indeed legion (with Azog the Defiler from Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Hobbit* being perhaps the latest popular instance). Yet, as Mallett has observed in her analysis of the *South Park* episode "Krazy Kripples," disability stereotypes "are not necessarily a negative form" ("Choosing 'Stereotypes'," 6). Incorporated into the satiric context of shows such as *South Park* or *The Simpsons*, these formulas become foregrounded insofar as these series draw on "'stereotypes' as part of an arsenal of methodological tools seeking to trouble texts by effecting a critical impetus for revelation and challenge" (5). Before I get to *The Simpsons*' dimension of social criticism offered by the satirical portrayal of disabilities, however, let me briefly outline two examples that demonstrate how the show uses disability in a carnivalesque sense.

The first is the figure of Herman, the one-armed owner of Springfield's military shop. Herman's depiction as an amputee illustrates well how *The Simpsons* parodies the way characters are traditionally signified as "dubious." This stereotype is further corroborated in the series through Herman's criminal ("The Springfield Connection," 1995) or even perverse ("22 Short Films about Springfield," 1996) activities. From this perspective, Herman can be read as a sort of Ahab-doppel- ganger. He is portrayed as a paranoid, insane maniac. In the episode "Bart the General" (1990), for instance, where Bart has an argument with Nelson Muntz, Springfield's school bully, Herman becomes the chief strategist of Bart's battle plan and completely identifies with the kids' dispute. It is certainly ironic that Herman's impairment is not due to a war experience, because he completely resembles the cliché of a veteran suffering from mental illness—he wears a medal and military-style clothes and uses references to war history to contextualize Bart's argument with Nelson. When the kids simulate their encounter with Nelson using a stuffed bag as a dummy, Herman is even equipped with an antique rifle with attached bayonet. The hilarious climax of the scene happens when he screams "Die!" in an absurdly theatrical manner while furiously stabbing at the Nelson-dummy, ripping it into pieces. In the carnivalesque world of *The Simpsons*, however, a figure like Herman is no signifier of moral or narrative failure. On the contrary, as Bart asks his grandfather whether the man is "a little nuts," Grampa Simpson replies, "General George S. Patton was a little nuts. And this guy's completely out of his mind! We can't fail!" And, in fact, it is with Herman's help that Bart wins the battle against Nelson.

In addition to such caricature of literary/filmic disability character tropes, disability in *The Simpsons* also self-reflexively comments on the cartoon tradition. To be sure, *The Simpsons*' universe abounds in cartoon clichés, but one of these tropes, which is especially interesting for our concern, is the character of Robert Onderdonk Terwilliger, alias Sideshow Bob. A typical stock character (or sideshow character, for that matter), Sideshow Bob is marked by his freak hair and oversized feet. Following Mitchell and Snyder, one could argue that the figure functions as narrative prosthesis: Bob appears only occasionally on the show; his character does not develop and provides a theme for setting up a story; he is pathologized as "evil" (his major goal is to kill Bart Simpson) and is regularly "punished" for his immorality by being sent to Springfield Penitentiary.

Reading Sideshow Bob as satiric commentary, however, adds another dimension to his character. First of all, Bob's ambivalent relationship to popular culture is interesting. Bob is a professional clown, frustrated by his role as a stooge in *The Krusty the Clown Show* (a television show where Bob is the target of physical gags like being fired out of a canon). Yet Sideshow Bob considers himself to be an agent of high culture and intellectual enlightenment. This tension, then, becomes symbolically carried out by Bob's obsession to kill Bart Simpson. As David Arnold observes, “We can read Bart as an avatar of the kind of [popular] culture available in and defined by Springfield, and Sideshow Bob’s persisted attempts to kill him represent an attack on, and defense against, the gradual evacuation of high-cultural taste and values” (13). Paradoxically Bob’s existence is both based and dependent on popular culture. He works for television and his job is to entertain people—especially children—with slapstick gags and clown-show shenanigans. Though he is disgusted by being a clown and by the low culture that surrounds him, this world seems to be his fate: he has oversized feet and a mop of hair—elements that correspond to our cultural understanding of a clown and cartoon character. The cartoonal nature of Bob even manifests itself in his very raison d’être as a constant antagonist of Bart, a scenario that is reminiscent of Chuck Jones’s Coyote chasing the Road Runner (see “Black Widower”).

Significantly, though, although Bob is a “freak” character, his huge feet do not make him an outsider, because such cartoonal features belong to *The Simpsons*’ universe. Thus, while Bob’s feet were once the object of evidence after Bob had disguised himself as Krusty (“Krusty Gets Busted,” 1990), they are no stigma in *The Simpsons*. Much more, they enable him to be in show business—an important branch in the series’ satirical universe. In the episode “The Italian Bob” (2005) Bob’s oversized feet are even discovered by Italian winegrowers as a practical device for crushing grapes, and Bob starts his own wine label. A certain disability, such as Sideshow Bob’s feet, thus gets reframed by *The Simpsons*’ carnivalesque context; it is rendered an *ability* rather than a normative deviance.

Passing for Disabled? “King-Size Homer”

In contrast to the more or less apolitical examples mentioned before, *The Simpsons*’ 1995 episode “King-Size Homer” is especially pertinent to our discussion, since it addresses the issue of disability explicitly through Homer’s plan to be declared medically “hyper-obese” in order to be permitted to work from home under the status of disability.[3] To Homer, having a disability is associated with the privilege of not having to go to work and stay home instead; it affords the opportunity to be lazy—his idea of the perfect life. Nevertheless, after he has gained 61 pounds and is officially considered “disabled,”

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[3] First aired in 1995, “King-Size Homer” reflects the American legislation inadequately. In fact, it was not until 2010 that obesity was considered a disability by US courts under the Americans with Disabilities Acts (cf. Bratt; US EEOC Press Release).

Homer begins to encounter some downsides to his physical condition: due to his obesity, his wife, Marge, does not find him attractive anymore; he is not permitted into the movie theater, and is ridiculed over his appearance by a group of people; eventually, he even causes a nuclear meltdown in Springfield’s power plant. In the end, though, Homer saves the town of Springfield from a nuclear disaster (ironically by his oversized body), but nonetheless decides to become “thin” again. In the episode’s very last scene, we see Mr. Burns motivating his employee to do sit-ups, an exercise Homer is unable to perform. With a shrug, Homer’s boss finally agrees to pay for liposuction treatment, and the episode ends.

A reading of “King-Size Homer” that follows Mitchell and Snyder’s theory of narrative prosthesis would suggest that the creators of *The Simpsons* use the disability issue not only as an opportunity to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the animated form, but also as a motive for setting up the episode’s narrative. Like so many episodes, “King-Size Homer” focuses on Homer’s strategies to evade any kind of work and to lay around on the couch all day long, watching television. With Mitchell and Snyder interpreting images of disability as “a device of characterization and narrative ‘rehabilitation’” (57), one could argue that Homer’s wish to become disabled is “punished” in order to reset the episode (i.e., to achieve narrative closure). However, while it makes sense to apply Mitchell and Snyder’s thesis to the episode’s narrative, whereby Homer’s disability is functionalized in order to set up the episode’s story and accomplish the denouement (Homer plans, conflict set, and conflict resolved), one must not overlook the function of Homer for *The Simpsons*’ satire in general and his “passing” for disabled in this episode in particular.

Because Homer principally functions as a vehicle to reinforce and subvert ideological positions on the show, the regular viewer might be skeptical about Homer’s enthusiasm concerning his new identity—something he exhibits more or less in every episode—right from the start. To strengthen this ambivalence, Homer’s unreliability is further underpinned by his new character being totally overdrawn: He wears a complete outfit, consisting of a colorful muumuu with a floral pattern, a hat, which Homer calls “fat guy hat,” plus a cape from the point he leaves the house to go to the movies. Through choice of wardrobe, Homer thus mimics “fat” people as he probably knows them from the media.[4] Homer's stylization is informed by the "stereotype" of an obese person as it is mediated through the dominant cultural perspective—that is, connoted with a feminized or infantilized imagery and portrayed as a "freak" that is looked or stared at. Homer's "costuming," then, can be read as a satiric reference to the "social act" of staring (cf. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 44) insofar as his performance is presented as a visual spectacle; it conjures up a sense of "primitivism" or "exoticism" by which extremely overweight people have been rendered stereotypes of representation in a cultural context that, as Ami Farrell observes, "has made the degradation of fat people a media ritual" (119).

This persiflage comes to the forefront when Homer leaves his new "workplace" (the Simpsons' living room) to go to the movies. As he approaches the movie theater in his "fat-man" get-up, the boy at the cinema's box office hysterically calls for the manager who summarily dismisses Homer. "I'm terribly sorry, Sir," the manager says, "but I'm afraid that our facilities are not equipped to meet your needs." When Homer asks what this is supposed to mean, the manager rephrases his point by using even more euphemisms: "What I'm saying, sir, is that a man of your…'carriage' couldn't… possibly fit in our seats." As Homer suggests he could sit in the aisle, the official denies his request and pretends to be "afraid that this would violate the fire code." The subtext of the manager's excuses is, of course, that the theater does not welcome persons of Homer's irregular size. In encoding the manager's language with attributes connoting "political correctness" (a super-polite register), and invisible scare quotes to euphemize ("carriage" instead of "fatness"), the episode's writers parody the kind of PC-speak that has become so typical of neoliberal societies. Similar to what Mallett's essay "Claiming Comedic Immunity" observes for *The Office*'s satirical humor, the rhetoric of the theater's manager is exposed as a hypocritical element of the multicultural climate of "tolerance." Like Mallett's reading of *The Office*, the theater scene is an example for how satire parodies the "performativity of political correctness" by deliberately failing, and thus demystifying, the universality of the "tolerant subject position" as it is normally taken for granted in neoliberal ideology.

The sequence culminates as a group of people gathers around the scene and we hear a male off-screen voice chanting, "Hey, Fatty! I've got a movie for you—A Fridge Too Far." The offensive remark is met with laughter from the bystanders, including the theater’s box-office boy and the manager. This juxtaposing can be said to appeal to *The Simpsons*’ audience’s feelings and solidarity insofar as it depicts a situation of mobbing caused by prejudice, social stigma, and negative discourse. By virtually writing a position of superiority and ridicule into the text, *The Simpsons*’ creators point to society’s (and implicitly to the audience’s) hypocrisy. Thus, if we were the ones who potentially were laughing at Homer’s grotesque appearance, despite our knowledge that it is politically incorrect to mock about disabled/obese people, this position of offensive humor is indirectly reinforced through the “mob” in the episode.

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[4] As noted in *The Simpsons Archive* (Cherry and Goldberg 1997), Homer's muumuu look is reminiscent of the mother from the 1993 movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape.* The allusion becomes explicit in a scene where Bart and his friends peek through a window to get a glimpse of the visual spectacle that is Homer.

Nevertheless, *The Simpsons*, in fact, exhausts its audience’s “tolerant subject position” through Homer, who comments in a serious tone: “I’m sick of all your stereotypes and cheap jokes! The overweight individuals in this country are just as smart and talented and hardworking as everybody else. And they’re going to make their voices heard! All they need is a leader.” Then he envelopes himself in his cape and leaves the picture. The comedy of the scene, of course, comes from the parodic take on a rhetoric of “fat acceptance.”[5] This is achieved through Homer, who usually lives up to the very prejudices about the group he now is advocating, namely being undisciplined, primitive, unintelligent, idle, and so forth. Homer knows very well how our neoliberal society works. In cliché-ridden language, he demands fair treatment, though we know that the wording of his message reflects quite the opposite of his original motivation for becoming obese. To be sure, all this does not mean that the writers of *The Simpsons* made the claim that fat people are lazy or incompetent. Obese or not, Homer is not a responsible worker, let alone a figure who possesses the qualities of a leader. His situation of working from home requires sitting in front of a computer and merely pressing “any key.” As he gets bored, he uses a broom to operate the computer while he is slouching on the sofa, watching television. Later, he even leaves his “workplace” to go to the movies, leaving a plastic rocking bird in his stead. Thus, it is through Homer’s character interacting with a virtual society that *The Simpsons* achieves a satiric commentary on the “tolerant subject position” inscribed in liberal ideology. By becoming obese, Homer is “passing for disabled”; by mimicking the codes of fat acceptance, he is “passing for liberal.” In fact, however, Homer only uses these etiquettes and rhetorics for his personal advantage (i.e., doing nothing and watching TV) and thus, in turn, lives up to the stereotype of the lazy, incompetent, television- watching “fat guy” that he is after all.

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[5] The “fat acceptance” position argues that “fatness” must not be viewed in terms of a malaise but as an authentic embodiment of an identity—an activist standpoint that has emerged in the United States during the 1960s. As Wann outlines, weight-related beliefs are culturally constructed by popular, ideological, and prejudicial assumptions.

Similar to what Mallett describes for the functioning of disability jokes in British television comedy, *The Simpsons* is able to demonstrate the fragility of the “tolerant subject position” in liberal societies by means of parody and satire turning ideological “taken-for-granteds” inside-out. All these contradictions distance the viewer emotionally from the scene. We do not empathize with Homer, nor can we take his situation seriously. Instead, we assume right from the beginning that the episode will end up with Homer “saving the day” and being “thin” again, as the televisual law prescribes it (see Mittell 24). One could make the argument that this guaranteed restoration of the established order makes us feel confident, not uncomfortable. Writing about the 2001 film *Shallow Hal*, in which Gwyneth Paltrow plays an obese woman by means of wearing a specially designed “fatsuit,” Emily Fox-Kales notes that “the costume allows us to surrender to the fat jokes at her expense because we remain safe in the knowledge that underneath her suit is the ‘real’ Gwyneth Paltrow” (110). Yet I would argue that the satiric context of *The Simpsons* works differently: it appeals to us as a distorted mirror image rather than an illusion, foregrounding the fragility of the “tolerant subject position” rather than concealing it.

Passing for Funny? “People Who Look Like Things”

If “King-Size Homer” implies how the objectification of “freaks” has become a media ritual, the parodic representation of “People Who Look Like Things” in a scene in “Homer’s Triple Bypass” is even more overt in this respect. It features a fictional television talk show titled “People Who Look Like Things,” which is centered on the visual similarities between people and everyday objects. Of course, this banal conception already satirizes the superficiality of tabloid shows—a genre that was especially popular in the 1990s—like the ones hosted by Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, or Ricki Lake. A television-within-television moment, the sequence depicts a talk show host who introduces the show in front of a diegetic studio audience. In the following shot, the intradiegetic “camera” pans from left to right, and we see five persons sitting on the stage next to objects that are supposed to bear similarities to the shapes of their heads: a cash register, a palm tree, a broom, a Halloween jack-o-lantern, and a tea pot. Obviously, the *mise en scène* has a very exhibition-like character. As the camera pans, the diegetic audience is applauding and background music is blended in. In the next scene, we see the jack-o-lantern character as he is interviewed by the grinning host. The former says, “All we ask is to be treated with dignity and respect…,” whereupon the host mockingly interjects, “…and a little candle now and then?” The “pumpkin head” gets the joke too late and is already in the midst of answering, “Yes, and a new candle…,” before he stops, looking quite annoyed, and we hear the audience laughing at him.

While the absurd visual similarity between human beings and objects (evoking humor by being unrealistically grotesque) is achieved through *The Simpsons*’ potentials as an animated show, the sequence provides further social or political critique by referring to the mediated exhibition of “spectacular bodies” in the mass media, most noticeably, in tabloid talk shows (e.g., appearances of conjoined twins, people with hypertrichosis, and so on). Although some people may defend such performances under the label of inclusion, *The Simpsons*’ satire points to the exhibition-like nature of such formats. Kristina Chew also emphasizes this thin line between advocacy and exhibition: “The media can be said to have, on the one hand, contributed to familiarizing disability and making it less strange,” she writes. “On the other hand, the very showing of images of ‘others’ can have the effect of turning persons with disabilities, whose visual appearance is somehow different, into a ‘freak’ on display” (124).

In a satiric way, the “People Who Look Like Things” sequence, then, also draws the comparison between the talk show genre and the freak show as a cultural ritual that has prevailed in the Western world for at least 100 years (see Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 55−80). The characters are zoomed-in on one by one; the matching objects are positioned next to them to highlight their status as “freaks.” Similar to the cinema scene in “King-Size Homer,” one of the “freaks” is also mocked (by the host) and laughed at (by the diegetic audience) as a virtual form of ridicule. Here we are again confronted with a violation of the “tolerant subject position.” Certainly, the characters on the show look hilarious, but the host’s joke clearly crosses the line of what is “allowed” to be said or done to his guests. Why? Because the host (representing the ruthless media) and the audience (representing the vulgar mob) are not living up to what the liberal codex prescribes as ethically correct, even in terms of humor. Similar to what happens in “King-Size Homer,” the viewer is distanced from the scene emotionally by *The Simpsons*’ satiric cartoon form and encouraged to think critically instead. One may laugh at the visual joke of a man resembling a jack-o-lantern, but one is also urged to reflect and think *beyond* this exaggerated depiction and ask questions about the morality of television programs in the form of freak shows. How far can we go to entertain? How much do we allow in order to be entertained? Where are the ethical borders of entertainment and humor? Parody and satire as we see it on *The Simpsons* addresses these questions and invites us to raise them in relation to our media environment. As I have suggested, the genre of satire, by definition, produces a distorted picture of figures through caricature— an aesthetic that already provides a contrast to our naturalized understanding of "normalcy." Hence, the satirical language of *The Simpsons* is fundamentally both overtly intertextual and transitive. As Gray points out, "[*The Simpsons*'] comedy works on the ground of other genres, discourses, and/or individual texts, as is best evidenced by the fact that we must know of these sites in order to understand what the joke *is*" (105). In our example, the joke is not the host's punch line (which is not really funny at all); it is rather to be found in the awareness that, in this satiric portrayal, we recognize a discourse that exploits such platitudes *at the expense of a minority* and *for the entertainment of a dominant/superior social group*. In a process of distanciation, which Gray calls "indirect viewing," we are "laughing and playing with discourses of genre, and indirectly discussing *and criticizing* other media forms" (2). The portrayal of television talk shows as modern "freak shows," as it is offered by "People Who Look Like Things," therefore clearly encourages us to think critically about the contemporary media circus as an exhibition site. It exposes "us" to be a spectacular society hungry for the abnormal, absurd, abominable, or unseen, and the media apparatus as machinery that, piece by piece, feeds our insatiable appetite.

To a significant extent, both of the sequences analyzed critique this objectification and exhibition of people with disabilities in the media. They both provide the potential for distanciation and critical thinking for *The Simpsons*' audience by embedding virtual positions of offensive humor in the text. As Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering note, "what is accepted as joke [...] first has to be negotiated as a joke" (9). Humor is an unstable category, and it is the very discrepancy between what is *virtually* accepted as a joke—by the fictional audience in *The Simpsons*' "People Who Look Like Things" and the crowd in "King-Size Homer," respectively—and what is *culturally* negotiated as inappropriate or tasteless by the dominant ideology that makes the satire trenchant and encourages satiric readings on behalf of *The Simpsons*' audience.

Conclusion

Because the visuals in *The Simpsons* are created in a very reductionist and abstract cartoon style, details that would render a certain disability more realistic or even shocking are naturally omitted. Instead, disabilities are functionalized to exhibit ironic incongruities, visual curiosities, or spectacles. Nevertheless, as has been shown, through its alternative conception as cartoon, *The Simpsons* provides a carnivalesque universe where otherness is legitimate or even valuable. Furthermore, the series portrays a satirical mirror image of a society where the objectification of "freaks" has become a media commonplace.

Through incorporating positions of "offensive humor" in its text, *The Simpsons* offers the potential for distanciation and thus provokes its audience to look beyond *The Simpsons*, to realize that disabled people are still often rendered as visual spectacles and objects of mockery in our media culture.

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