

Trick or Treat?

Review of Sandra Danneil, *Trick, Treat, Transgress: The Simpsons' Treehouse of Horror as a Popular-Culture History of the Digital Age* (Marburg: Schüren, 2021)*

by Moritz Fink

Being a veteran *Simpsons* fan who has written several articles and two books on the topic, I'm always thrilled when a new publication on *The Simpsons* comes out. What is there left to say about *The Simpsons?*, the critic in me wonders each time, only to learn that the seminal series doesn't have a final point.

Curiosity overcame me once again when I heard of Sandra Danneil's dissertation, *Trick, Treat, Transgress: The Simpsons' Treehouse of Horror as a Popular-Culture History of the Digital Age*, suitably published shortly before Halloween. An entire monograph focusing on *The Simpsons'* Halloween special episodes? That sounded intriguing.

Into the Halloween Fog

In *Trick, Treat, Transgress*, author Danneil embarks through a veil of mist, on a "quest of finding a proper category for "Treehouse of Horror"", as she notes in retrospect (22). Having read the book from cover to cover, however, I'm still unable to see through the mist to which category she was getting at.

The book is divided into two main chapters: Theory and Analysis. After a compact introduction, the author touches on crucial theoretical concepts ('quality TV', 'participatory culture', 'culture jamming'), which could have used more than the light treatment they received.

That said, Danneil does a great job in analyzing the significance of *The Simpsons'* "Treehouse of Horror" episodes within the larger mother media franchise. A self-described *Simpsons* fan – a "Simpsonian native" (27) – who grew up with the show in the 1990s, she conveys a passionate take on the popular series through this highly informative book. However, sometimes the author's enthusiasm overstates the scope of her thesis. "*The Simpsons* were [sic!] new pop material", she writes,

and thus gave observant readers the opportunity to develop new theories of media convergence and participatory culture (Henry Jenkins), remediation and hypermediality (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin), or mediascapes (Arjun Appandurai), and of Jean Baudrillard's simulations from 1981[...]. (17)

While it is true that *The Simpsons* tapped into new ground and offered new perspectives for media scholars to understand the series through various theoretical concepts, the show itself most certainly wasn't the pivotal media text that caused those thinkers to develop their theories.

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The Sirens of Postmodernism

One of the central aspects that marked *The Simpsons*' innovative appeal in the early 1990s was the show's parodic exploration of pop culture history, and the annual Halloween episodes have provided a powerful platform of this feature – a utopian outlet where the series' writers can ritually stretch and break the show's canonic conventions.

Possibly unnecessarily, Danneil spends over fifty pages – most of the first chapter of the study – to reiterate *The Simpsons*' relationship to postmodernism, before she tentatively turns to the meaning of "Treehouse of Horror" as the major focus of this book. Without a doubt, TV phenomena like *The Simpsons* had a massive effect on media culture at the millennial turn. Reconsidering the series through the lens of postmodern theory, however, not only invokes a blurry, somewhat outdated intellectual concept; it builds on early academic accounts of *The Simpsons* when the show was still a novelty in the 1990s.

Reiterating *The Simpsons*' status as the ultimate postmodern 'artwork' owing to the show's excessive degree of quotationalism and overt intertextuality, as observed by German pop culture theorist Diedrich Diederichsen over twenty years ago, indicates not much more than the series' trajectory from originality to routine. In this connection, we miss getting to the core of the matter – namely, what is it that originally made *The Simpsons* distinctive from earlier American cartoon shows, which would demand a label of distinction such as 'postmodern'?

On our journey through the fog of meaning, our guide dithers about the infamous *Simpsons* epigram "A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man". While it is proposed that we "look at this quote from a postmodern popular-culture perspective" (29), according to which *The Simpsons* has "enlighten[ed]" its viewers and fans through an "entirely new [...] viewing experience" (29–30), we see the author back off from the postmodern label just one page later, reasoning that "the longer [she] thought about the 'noble spirit that embiggens the smallest man', the clearer it became that [*The Simpsons*] can also be read as a disturbance, an irritation of postmodernist assumptions" (31). If this is so, why does the book spend so much time with postmodern theory? Postmodernist thinking on *The Simpsons*, it seems, has formed a smokescreen that envelops *Simpsons* scholarship to this day, and the author's ambition to penetrate the long-lived cartoon phenomenon lured her into this territory.

***The Simpsons* vs. "Treehouse of Horror"**

The book's perspective becomes clearer – and specifically valuable – when the author gets to the point. This happens as late as page 33 in the introduction and page 80 in the main body of the text, as she turns to the meaning of the "Treehouse of Horror" episodes. "The Treehouse Series", Danneil notes,

does not simply quote from other media texts, but discursively commemorates them. As a consequence, the "Treehouse of Horror" texts re-negotiate, re-mediate, and re-member their historical material for the present, it re-purposes older texts, and re-creates an archive of American popular-culture history. (33)

It is this idea of reading "Treehouse of Horror" as a pop-cultural archive that I find both refreshing and compelling. Yet I wonder whether Danneil's assessment is exclusive to the "Treehouse of Horror" episodes? Put differently, does the re-animation of the "past" (34), the "carnavalesque" re-presentation of the bodily (92), the eclectic referentiality that creates "a site of media archeology" (102) become manifest mainly in *The Simpsons'* parodic recourse to traditions of gothic and horror fiction in form of the series' Halloween specials?

I fully share Danneil's fascination with the "Treehouse" episodes in that they are dedicated to playing with the popular-cultural capital of fan-cult traditions like gothic/horror and science fiction. What leaves me ambivalent, however, is the suggested evaluation of the Halloween episodes to be in any way 'more artful' – more "unique" and "innovative" (9), "complex" and "literary" (196) – compared to the canonic *Simpsons*. This not only seems to run counter the author's cultural-studies approach, which seeks to abolish boundaries between low and high art, it also thwarts her overall affinity to *The Simpsons'* artistic quality.

To be sure, the Halloween specials have broadened the *Simpsons* series' parodic spectrum, allowing the show's writers to touch on the macabre or 'darker' themes associated with cult genres like gothic and horror fiction, and to temporarily suspend the boundaries of the show's cartoon realism in favor of moments of animated spectacle and special effects. Illustratively, Danneil details *The Simpsons'* way of re-enacting Edgar Allan Poe's classic "The Raven" in Season 2's debut "Treehouse of Horror" episode. But if we consider the mode of re-creating 'pastness' through parodic representations of media images an indicator of formal complexity, this wouldn't apply only to the "Treehouse of Horror" episodes but to *The Simpsons* as a whole.

Take the show's countless parodic references to iconic movies, such as *Citizen Kane* when Mr. Burns runs for Governor in the Season 2 episode "Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish" (1990), *Pulp Fiction* in Season 7's episodic "22 Short Films About Springfield" (1996), or to the horror classic *Village of the Damned*, spoofed as "The Bloodening" in Season 10's "Wild Barts Can't Be Broken" (1999). As these examples suggest, if we understand "Treehouse" as a rabbit hole to popular media history, the canonic *Simpsons* is likewise a (parodic) pop-cultural archive chronicling media experiences of the past.

In general, I love the idea of analyzing "Treehouse of Horror" as a separate subseries with its own characters, narrative tropes, and logics, thereby distinguishing it from the parent series that is *The Simpsons*. Nevertheless, I can't quite buy the extra degree of originality that *Trick, Treat, Transgress* attributes to the Halloween special episodes. Danneil correctly traces EC's horror comics from the 1950s as the major inspiration for "Treehouse of Horror". However,

her juxtaposition of viewing post-WWII era horror comics as a reference point for the Halloween specials versus *Mad* magazine's role as reference point for the regular *Simpsons* series (122) isn't satisfying, given *Mad*'s parodic range targeting various genres, including horror and gothic fiction. (Ironically, it was *Mad* magazine which initially riffed on Poe's "The Raven" in 1954's *Mad* #9.)

One of the book's notable merits lies in the argument that gothic and horror fictions constitute a literary continuum which has always functioned as a way to express "secret fears and social anxieties" (176). Here, Danneil's reading of "Treehouse" as an extension of *The Simpsons*' satirical caricature of conservative TV families in traditional sitcoms (263) implies links to studies of 1950s crime and horror comics expressing the dark underside of the stereotypical white postwar American society (e.g., Hirsch 2021). Drawing on the postwar mystery anthology-series *The Twilight Zone*, Danneil convincingly argues that *The Zone* and *The Simpsons*' Halloween episodes share a "daring attitude to unfold mind-needling terror behind the doors of seemingly safe American homes" (236). 'Re-animating' many original features of *The Zone*, "'Treehouse' has created its own distinct way of translating the Gothic romance and the newer horror story into complex animation" (177), in that the series consciously conflates emotions of terror and laughter "as a comic confrontation with the serious world behind its horror-story adaptations" (96).

The Simpsons' Couch as Participatory Realm

The central argument and core of *Trick, Treat, Transgress* is Danneil's reading of "Treehouse" as a (proto-)form of commercial media showing viewers and fans how to creatively engage with media images in the digital environment, building on media theorist Henry Jenkins's (2006) concept of 'convergence culture'.

Danneil takes the so-called 'couch gag' (a segment from *The Simpsons*' opening sequence that varies from episode to episode and provides room for creative play) to demonstrate *The Simpsons*' interplay with participatory culture. This is confusing insofar as the couch gag has functioned as a routine side stage of *The Simpsons*, where the writers and animators could act freely from the show's satirical realism and deploy other forms of representation associated with the poetics of participatory culture, such as using LEGO or real-live actors to reenact the show's iconic intro.

Arguably, the guest animators discussed in Danneil's book (whose animation style, I would argue, rather than auteurist freedom becomes reflected in the famous series) have also been more of a gimmick of *The Simpsons* (starting with John Kricfalusi in 2011) rather than a characteristic of the non-canonic Halloween specials. While Guillermo del Toro's guest-written couch gag inaugurating 2013's "Treehouse of Horror" remains epic in its own regard, the Halloween specials have typically opened with individual short-story segments, like pop-culture parodies or satirical commentaries on current events such as Presidential elections.

In the process, Danneil concludes that *The Simpsons* represents a site of participatory culture and collaboration at the shift from analogue to digital. This relationship "invite[s] *Simpsons* fans [...] to become artists [...]" (156), which "helped to rediscover television not only as a space for committed consumption, but also for active fan participation" (169).

Where's the Candy?

Now that the mist has lifted a little, it reveals a trail with footprints, being metonymic with one of *Trick, Treat, Transgress*'s shortcomings: the book would have profited from building more on previous approaches to *The Simpsons* – a more profound look into work on *The Simpsons* and participatory culture in general (e. g., Fink 2012, 2016, 2019; Shores 2019), and the series' Halloween specials, most notably Derek Johnston's chapter in *Haunted Seasons: Television Ghost Stories for Christmas and Horror for Halloween* (2015), in particular.

A bonus of Danneil's work is the incorporation of many illustrative images. Thus, it was a joy to explore the history of *The Simpsons*' "Treehouse of Horror", while I asked myself if there's some kind of development traceable as to whether the series' writers were trying to push the limits of 'horror' acceptable for a prime-time TV show.

Troubled by these obscurities, I shut *Trick, Treat, Transgress* and left the house for a walk. As I went into the cold, foggy fall night, I could feel a chunk of candy in my left pocket. At the same time, my right pocket was sadly empty.

This was how I ultimately felt about the book, which left me wondering if my Halloween read was both a treat and a trick.

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