

comment dit-on 'do'h!' en français?

by giselinde kuipers



The Simpsons Movie
(Twentieth Century Fox, 2007)

Humor doesn't travel well.

In the international audiovisual market, comedy is a much less successful export than the drama, romance, crime, or action genres. Apparently, murders, car chases, broken hearts, and cheating spouses translate easier than jokes and witticisms.

Every once in a while, though, a comedy manages to transcend cultural boundaries. In the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* became the first television comedy to draw large audiences outside the Anglophone world and Northwest Europe. Today, the most successful of the few American television comedies that work outside the United States is probably *The Simpsons*, the animated show about the dysfunctional Simpson family, now in its 19th season.

In the summer of 2007 the show made it to the big screen with the long anticipated *The Simpsons Movie*. Like the TV series, the movie became a global success story—it made 65 percent of its profit outside North America, a high proportion in any genre but especially for a comedy. The movie was a great

success in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and some Asian (Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore) and African (Kenya, South Africa) countries.

The Simpsons Movie, like the series, is one of the rare cultural products that manage to be popular and critically acclaimed at the same time. This may not be unusual in the United States, where critics tend to be fairly open-minded toward pop culture (and where academics have produced a veritable library of Simpsons studies). But *The Simpsons Movie* garnered positive reviews in various upscale newspapers in countries with a more cautious attitude toward American popular culture: the Netherlands, Germany, and (even) France.

With typical hyperbole, the left-wing French paper *Libération* raved that the movie “transforms into a small treasure of perfidious humor the chronicle of manners and customs of a town emblematic of a ‘schizo’ present caught between the selfish quest for happiness and the constraints inherent in collective living.” *NRC Handelsblad*, the Netherlands’ most prestigious daily, published an impassioned plea from one of the younger editors asking readers to overcome their suspicion of cartoons because

ly admitted in a review “one has to like *The Simpsons*,” despite the show’s often irritating Homer-imitating fans. Thus, *The Simpsons* have been consecrated, as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would say. Yet, this high-brow approval clearly hasn’t damaged the family’s popular status.

In the movie, Homer Simpson once again wreaks havoc on his family and his hometown, which, we finally learn, borders on Maine, Nevada, Ohio, and Kentucky. While his daughter Lisa is canvassing for the rescue of the heavily polluted Lake Springfield (her talk about the subject is entitled “An Irritating Truth”), Homer dumps the excess waste produced by his new pet pig into the same lake, poisoning it and the town forever. The government, led by President Schwarzenegger (“I was elected to lead, not to read”), decides to seal off the toxic town by covering it with a glass dome. When the people of Springfield discover Homer is responsible for polluting the lake, the family flees to Alaska. However, when they hear about the government plans to demolish Springfield and turn it into a new Grand Canyon (touted in a commercial by Tom Hanks, as himself), the Simpsons return—after several dramatic

Understanding *The Simpsons* mostly requires knowledge of the United States as seen on TV. And this America hasn't been the exclusive territory of Americans for a long time.

The Simpsons is “mandatory philosophy.” Even the German Frankfurter *Allgemeine Zeitung*, quite likely the most serious newspaper on earth, grudging-

moments including a serious marital crisis, the arrest of Marge and the children, and Homer having an epiphany—to save Springfield.

In many ways, watching the movie was like watching a slightly longer episode of the show. Many of the familiar characters make an appearance, and much of the trademark irreverent humor and plenty of the playful intertextuality that holds so much appeal for the show's solid fan base remains.

However, producer/inventor Matt Groening seems to have made some concessions to turn the show into the stuff blockbusters are made of. The movie focuses more on family dynamics and dramatics than the average episode, which probably makes for a strong plot with lots of suspense and opportunities to relate to the central characters. But it also makes the movie a tad sentimental. Also, while the movie has many intertextual references to film, TV, arts, high culture, pop culture, politics, other episodes, and famous works of art, these references aren't as abundant and are much less arcane and eclectic than in most episodes. I assume this is supposed to help the movie reach (even) wider audiences than the show, but I couldn't help feeling things had been dumbed down a bit.

Still, the movie was entertaining enough. The sufficiently strong plot carries it for the entire 90 minutes. There are some nice subplots; guest appearances by Tom Hanks, Green Day, and Bambi; an excellent bad guy; and some very good jokes. Bart's especially memorable naked skateboard ride across town arguably benefits from the big screen. Obviously, many people around the world agree.

The Simpsons' worldwide success depends on American popular culture's worldwide success. This isn't as circular an argument as it may seem. The movie, like the TV show, is based to a very large extent on self-conscious and sophisticated play with the conventions, genres, references, and visual vocabulary of American media culture. And this globalized American media culture is (almost) as familiar to the many non-American

viewers who, just like Americans, have grown up with it.

In my research, I have questioned viewers in Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands about American television comedies. Most of them had never been to the United States but they all had vivid (if undoubtedly flawed) pictures in their minds of what a typical American town, house, living room, and kitchen look like; how American schools, colleges,

The Simpsons' worldwide success depends on American popular culture's worldwide success. This isn't as circular an argument as it may seem.

courts, and police stations work; and what a mall, a baseball stadium, a donut store, a bad neighborhood, and a typical street in an American suburb look like. The combined picture of these images of televised America pretty much sums up Springfield.

The Simpsons Movie, like the series, consciously places itself in this media reality. In some scenes, references to other media products are obvious—as the dome covers Springfield, a dark shadow slowly moves over the town, just like in *Independence Day*. The dome itself, though transparent, looks like the dome in *The Truman Show*, and the reporting of daily events in the dome are also very much like the reports from Truman's dome. In a romantic scene between Homer and Marge, the birds from *Cinderella* come to undress (rather than dress) Marge and Homer.

Many more scenes and images are somehow reminiscent of movies and TV programs, without referring to any one show or film in particular. They evoke the visual grammar and clichés of genre pieces, ranging from computer games and TV news shows to a variety of cinematic genres—monster movies, post-apocalyptic disaster films, spy thrillers, and most American of all, westerns. An angry mob marches on the Simpsons' home in the night with lit torches. The

family takes refuge in an idyllic log cabin in the Alaskan snow. After the collapse of civilization, a toppled statue rests in Springfield's square, surrounded by devastated houses with broken windows and reigned over by a madman in strange attire (Barman Moe). An evil government official in a dark suit and tie slyly manipulates the president sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. Homer saves the town at the last minute from a tick-

ing time bomb. Marge and Homer drive off into the sunset.

Such genre play forms the foundation of *The Simpsons* phenomenon, the format of the show itself being one extended play on the sitcom genre. Some scholars have interpreted *The Simpsons* as a parody of the sitcom, but that doesn't quite capture it. Rather, the show takes the sitcom form as the basis for intertextual play with a wide variety of cultural forms and genres, from Shakespearean drama and film classics to action movies and cartoons.

Because this visual vocabulary is almost as well known outside the United States as inside, non-American viewers, especially the younger generations, are easily able to appreciate *The Simpsons* playing with it. This explains why *The Simpsons* is so much more successful abroad than so many other shows.

Take for example the other American hit series of the 1990s, *Seinfeld*. It failed outside North America mostly because it was about the actual, rather than the televised, America. It was about tiny transgressions of the conventions governing public life—the unspoken rules of the uniquely American institution of dating or how to deal with waitresses, valets, hairdressers, soup salesmen, and the other service workers so omnipresent in

American life (and who always need to be tipped). Understanding such humor requires much knowledge of everyday life in the United States. Understanding *The Simpsons*, on the other hand, mostly requires knowledge of the United States as seen on TV. And this America hasn't been the exclusive territory of Americans for a long time.

The Simpsons' brand of humor plays on the particular cultural capital that comes with living in a highly mediated society: recognizing styles and references, but also being able to see through the media logic. From this point of view, it's easy to see why there's less of this intertextuality in the movie version. By definition, blockbusters are supposed to require less cultural capital than other media products in order to reach larger audiences. On the other hand, this intertextuality and media savvy probably has been crucial for *The Simpsons'* intellectual cachet, even persuading snobby Europeans.

A final feature of *The Simpsons* contributing to its international and intellectual appeal is its irreverence and subversiveness. By international standards,

American comedy often comes off as excessively sentimental and moralizing. In my research, I found Europeans have a preference for American comedies with darker humor focusing on dysfunctional families such as the Bunkers, the Bundys, and the Connors (Roseanne's family). The popularity of *The Simpsons* fits this pattern neatly. Its humor is sharp and at times dark. And the members of the Simpson family, while (ultimately) loving and loyal, are also known to be mean, selfish, angry, and unpleasant—and in this respect, despite being cartoon characters, probably more human than most human sitcom characters.

Moreover, this irreverent humor also is used to satirize, ridicule, and criticize American society. The televised version of America seems to be populated mostly by people who are proud to be Americans—and their one-dimensional enemies. In this orderly and patriotic media landscape, the Simpsons are refreshingly subversive.

This critical bent is also evident in the movie. The plot centers on the dangers of pollution. The villain, Russ Cargill, is an American government official gone

mad, manipulating a movie star-turned-president who doesn't want to read and yearns for Danny de Vito. Typically, Cargill has the best line in the movie. When one of his associates warns that he seems to have gone mad with power, Cargill responds: "Of course I have. You ever tried going mad without power? It's boring. No one listens to you."

Many non-Americans may have felt like Cargill's underling at times when contemplating America's enormous cultural and political power. To see this smug and powerful country ridiculed from the inside is gratifying for outsiders, who see their criticisms and suspicions corroborated by a reliable source. This means that sometimes, non-Americans like *The Simpsons* for exactly the same reasons some Americans (including George H.W. Bush, at least during his presidency) don't—it makes fun of America.

Giselinde Kuipers is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam and author of *Good Humor, Bad Taste: A Sociology of the Joke*. Her current research focuses on the spread of American television comedy in four European countries.

the lie of heroism

by matthew desmond

That was one mean fire season. In October and November dozens of plume-dominated fires—those are the ones that burn so hot and fast they create their own weather patterns and wind currents, the ones that give off that sonorous, otherworldly reverberation: a line of tanks thundering forward in unison—ripped through Southern California. They scorched half a million acres, destroyed thousands of homes, and snuffed out at least 10 lives.

Although these fires claimed fewer acres and lives than those that ignited the Golden State in 2003, they garnered significantly more media attention. In

fact, according to a report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, nearly 40 percent of all news coverage between

In referring to firefighters always and only as heroes, do we not look straight through them?

October 21 and October 26 was devoted to the California fires, making them the "second biggest story of 2007," trailing only the Virginia Tech massacre, which accounted for 51 percent of coverage in a single week.

Several elements combined to make

the California fires a mega story. There was, first, the awe and beauty of destruction. "You hate it, yes, but your eyes do

not," Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien once wrote of combat. The same is true for the majesty of wildfire—as well as for the devastation it leaves in its wake. Add to this the hunt for the arsonist (who later was found to be a firefighter chasing down the Frankenstein he had brought