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Of Visual Culture and Pedagogical Interventions

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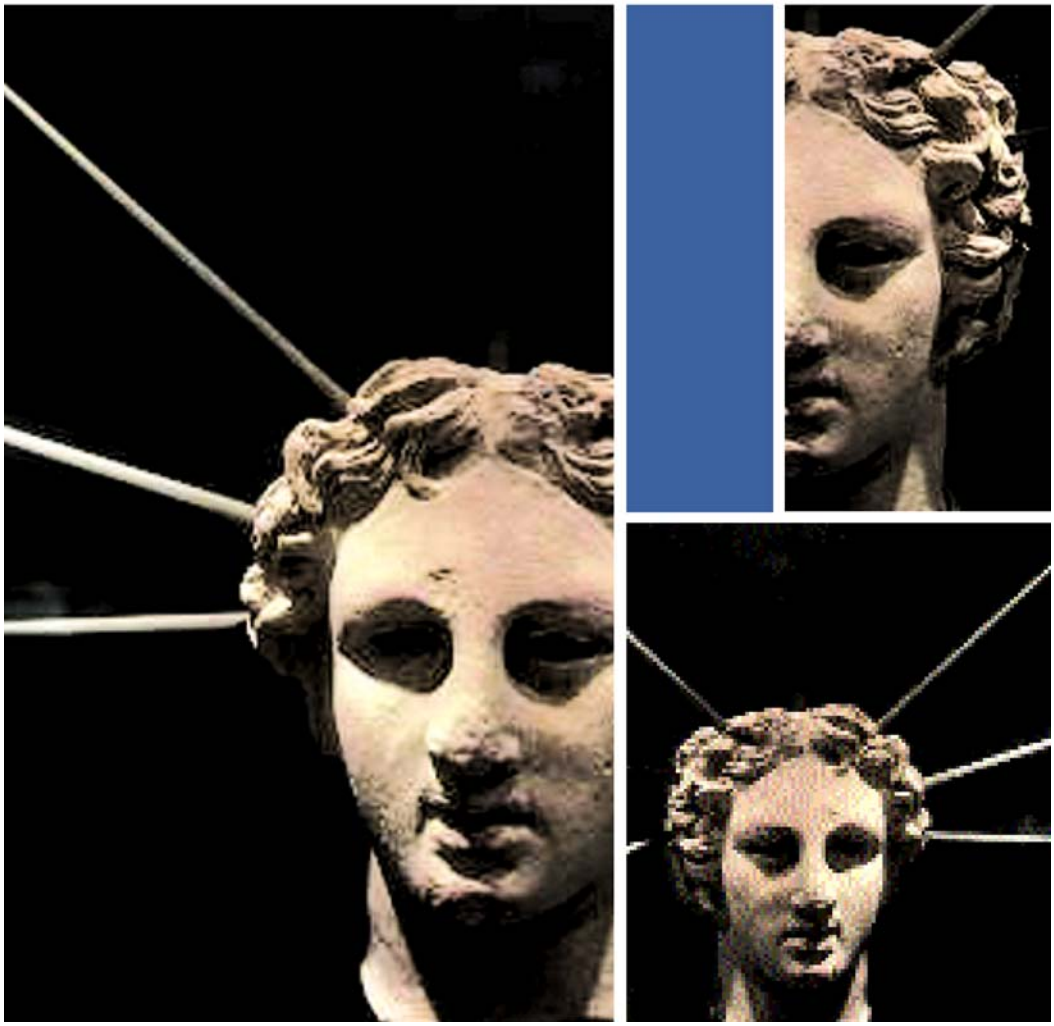

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Of Visual Culture and Pedagogical Interventions

Amit Ray

Despite the potential of contemporary visual culture to bring to light the multiple and varied sites of globalization, in its American context the international parameters of visualization are rarely, if ever, visible. Indeed, as part of mass media's steadfast valorization of globalization in US culture, resultant international divisions of labor, environmental impacts and cataclysmic political, social and cultural transformations are largely hidden from view.

The recent Iraq war illustrates this point precisely. Media coverage of the war offered a systematic bombardment of images limited almost entirely to ethnocentric and martial constructions of America's intervention. Rarely did American visual media provide any access into the language, culture or history of Iraq (or, one might add, into America's own history in the region)—despite the remarkable opportunities for putting on display one of the world's oldest civilizations. Beyond the sphere of the political, within the realm of popular culture (if, for argument's sake, we try and maintain a division between these two fields), one finds a similar phenomenon occurring in both television and film.

While globalization is supposedly increasing opportunities for human interaction and cultural exchange, the realm of visual culture in the United States seems increasingly resistant to the multiple, simultaneous and often contradictory situations that constitute economic, technological and cultural globalization. While there are a host of explanations for such a situation—a tradition of isolationism, multinational media monopolies, hyper-consumerism—the uneven consequences of globalization are not part of the American visual field.

At the undergraduate level of education in the United States, Cultural Studies offers avenues for addressing this lack of visual representation through an intensive, materialist analysis of that which is conspicuously visible. In light of the Birmingham school's more than three decades of analyzing public culture and mass media, the undergraduate classroom in the United States presents an imposing but necessary challenge. As a result of a world system in which the United States is the sole hyperpower, the invisible contexts of American power, influence and consumption can be addressed by examining some familiar forms of popular culture generally, and television—that most ubiquitous form—in particular.

My personal context as a professor in a large, primarily teaching oriented Technology University within the United States is central to my interest in the question of visual technologies and the 'future' of the humanities. The humanities have been in crisis mode for much of the twentieth century as the influence of the printed word has ceded prominence and authority to other forms of informational, and cultural, transfer. How have traditions such as my own, rooted as they have

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been in the printed word, responded to the new media of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries? And also, how should relationships between images and power be analyzed for content and context: How are the exigencies of power played out symbolically *and* literally? In essence, then, it is the gap between contemporaneity and the cultural study of comtemporaneity that has become my concern. And, of course, this provides possible routes for pragmatic pedagogical intervention.

I am currently in the process of implementing a course on the television program, *The Simpsons*, at RIT. My decision to make this course available was based on a number of factors relating both to the unique status of *The Simpsons* in popular (and particularly youth) culture, as well as to our student audience. In considering our institutional context as a technology school, with renowned photographic and imaging science programs, as well as programs in visual arts and animation**,** there seems to be a paucity of course offerings addressing the cultural parameters of the image and the role of the visual in postmodern culture. Aside from a smattering of courses, students are being provided a largely formalistic and ahistorical approach to the study of the visual, as if form and genre were themselves not products of specific historical processes and cultural contexts. For example, as students of colonialism and 'western' art movements are well aware, the radical experimentations with form initiated by artistic modernism cannot be segregated from the history of colonial acquisition and appropriation (Clifford, Appiah and Torgovnick). Being trained primarily in postcolonial literary and cultural studies, I sought out a way to use popular culture in order to establish the global parameters of visual cultural production and transmission with which American students could engage.

The Simpsons is a common text with which all but a small number of students are familiar. And, it is out of this familiarity that I see an opportunity for addressing the underlying structural aspects of cultural production and reception that might challenge the stringent parochialism of American visual culture.

The scenario out of which television programming, such as *The Simpsons,* is transmitted typifies a key feature of contemporary transnational cultural production—the simultaneity of both progressive and reactionary cultural forms made available for mass consumption. Yet, in the instances that I will elucidate in the second half of this paper, the particulars of transgressive animation that engages in social commentary—a hearty subgenre of American television, generated as a result of the success of *The Simpsons*—are counteracted by representations of the real. It is in those outlets known for their satirical animation that one also finds versions of 'reality' offered up through these networks' journalistic and news reporting divisions that are politically, socially and culturally conservative, even reactionary. While lauded as one of the most intelligent and relevant political and social satires on the American cultural scene, *The Simpsons* is also a product of the vast media empire of Australian magnate Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Though *The Simpsons* may delight progressive viewers with its witty, intertextual and self-reflexive commentary on religion, politics and family life in the United States, the program must also be examined as part of Fox and Murdoch's vocal conservative political agenda.

I use a particularly well-know episode of *The Simpsons* to illustrate this point. While the program regularly addresses broad social issues, it rarely plunges into extended periods of realism. However, a segment aired as part of the Halloween

episode broadcast on October 27, 1996 took a very different tack. Several days before the 1996 U.S. Presidential election, *The Simpsons* took on the issue of American electoral politics. In the segment, aliens have kidnapped Homer and promptly instructed him to "take us to your leader"(Keeler). Homer thinks they must mean the American president, Bill Clinton. But remembering that there will soon be an election, he informs the aliens that Bob Dole may become the leader instead. The space aliens proceed to seek out Clinton and Dole and replicate themselves as the two presidential candidates. The ensuing presentation of Kang and Kodos on the campaign trail provides a scathing criticism of the electoral process: the vapid rhetoric of political debates, the superficial media coverage of events, and the relative engagement (or lack there of) of the citizenry. When Dole-Kang is asked by reporter Kent Brockman (whose election special is billed as "Campaign '96: America Flips a Coin.") why they should vote for him instead of Clinton, Kang replies, "It makes no difference which one of us you vote for. Either way, your planet is doomed! Doomed". Brockman replies, "Well, a refreshingly frank response there from Senator Dole". The inevitability of power politics and the accompanying empty rhetoric is humorously illustrated during a political debate where one of the aliens suggests the direction that we, as a people, must head. He then suggests all directions—forward and backward, up and down, side to side—concluding that we must always keep " twirling, twirling towards freedom". The audience erupts in applause. However, it is in the final scenes where the absurdities of two party national politics are most caustically ridiculed. In the concluding two sequences, the two alien-candidates are speaking before the Capital building when Homer jumps on stage and reveals the candidates to be imposters. The crowd reacts with a collective gasp. Kodos responds, "It's true, we are aliens. But what are you going to do about it? It's a two party system. You have to vote for one of us". When someone suggests voting for a third-party candidate, Kang laughingly responds, "Go ahead, through your vote away. A-hah-hah-haaaah"! We then cut to Ross Perot in the crowd, punching his fist through his straw campaign hat. The scene ends and the next begins with a heroic low-angle shot of the White House, flag waving prominently in front. From this iconic image, our view is drawn to an aerial view of numerous people on the Mall building gigantic machine-works. As we close in on Homer and Marge in the crowd, we see that all are in chains, connected to one another with neck manacles as an alien overlord supervises their heavy labor. It is clear that the aliens have enslaved the human race. When Marge questions the faults of the political system, Homer responds, "Don't blame me, I voted for Kodos". On this note, the segment ends.

When considering how, just weeks before the "Treehouse of Horror VII" episode, Fox had started its now infamous cable news network, this particular episode from the mid-nineties frames what would become the predominant trend in American culture—politics amongst newly-enfranchised youth would be viewed primarily through the lens of humor and satire. The lingering sense of disenfranchisement and disengagement of younger voters is reflected in *The Simpsons* unflinchingly bleak view of American politics. Four years later during the 2000 election, in an oft-noted article in their magazine, *The New York Times* reported how young adults received much of their day to day reporting on the campaigns not through the news media but through the late night comedy shows like Leno's *Tonight Show*, *Late Night with Letterman* and *The Daily Show with John Stewart* (Sella). In my own non-scientific polls of my classes, this is still

overwhelmingly the case. When students do choose to tune in to broadcast and cable news, they are confronted with an increasingly Ameri-centric and conservative vision of global geopolitics.

I follow up the *Simpsons* clip with a more recent version of popular American animation, *South Park*. Like *The Simpsons* before it, *South Park* has inspired both critical acclaim and public outrage. Irreverently over the top, *South Park* is broadcast on Viacom's Comedy Central and traffics in much more risqué topics than what is found on *The Simpsons*. The characters' sharp comments (spouting forth from the mouths of second graders) regularly traffic in the profane. But, like *The Simpsons*, *South Park* is heavy on political and social satire.

The Second Gulf War began on March 20, 2003 with air strikes on Baghdad. Two weeks later, on April 9, the very same day that American troops in Baghdad toppled the gigantic statue of Saddam Hussein, Comedy Central aired "I'm a Little Bit Country". In that episode, the elementary school age children who are the primary characters take up their teacher's offer to miss class in order to attend the anti-Iraq war rally in town. At the rally, they are confronted with anti- and pro-war protesters (who utilize the same signs and slogans as those who had actually been protesting the war in the weeks and months before). When the opposing sides disagree about what the founding fathers would have thought of their actions, the boys display their ignorance over who the founding fathers were and what they did. This leads to a homework assignment that requires them to study and report back on 1776 and the American independence movement.

In preparing their homework, one of the boys (Cartman) experiences a flashback to the events of 1776, encountering the founding fathers and the debates of the day. He finds that a very similar debate is occurring within the Continental Congress. Various historical figures battle back and forth over the wisdom of going to war. Eventually, Ben Franklin intercedes with the following:

I believe that if we are to form a new country, we cannot be a country that appears war-hungry and violent to the rest of the world. However, we also cannot be a country that appears weak and unwilling to fight to the rest of the world. So, what if we form a country that appears to want both? (Parker)

The congressmen agree with Franklin's brilliant formulation, as he proceeds to draw out its implications, "We could go to war with whomever we wished, but at the same time, act like we didn't want to. If we allow the people to protest what the government does, then the country will be forever blameless". On hearing this, Cartman snaps out of his reverie and quickly makes his way to the town square, where the opposing parties are facing off in an increasingly heated confrontation. He brings to the crowd his understanding of the foundational principles of the republic:

> I learned something today. This country was founded by some of the smartest thinkers the world has ever seen. And they knew one thing: that a truly great country can go to war, and at the same time, act like it doesn't want to. *[Cut to crowd shot]* You people who are for the war, you need the protesters. Because they make the country look like it's made of sane, caring individuals. And you people who are anti-war, you need these flag-wavers, because, if our whole country was made up of nothing but soft pussy protesters, we'd get taken down in a second. That's why the founding fathers decided we should have both. It's called "having your cake and eating it too."

One of the crowd chimes in, "He's right. The strength of this country is the ability to do one thing and say another". The episode concludes with crowd members merging these simultaneous and contradictory positions into an ethos for the United States: "We can be a nation that believe in war; And still tells the world that we don't. (Crowd sings) *Let the flag for hypocrisy fly high from every pole / We're a little bit country, and we're a little bit rock-n-roll*".

The televised Iraq war made quite a show out of the toppling of Saddam's statues, despite aerial photographs published widely on the internet that showed the event as an event choreographed by American forces. What was striking about the *South Park* episode was its remarkable timeliness. Unlike the 1996 *Simpsons* episode, which was written and produced with significant foresight, the episode of *South Park* was written, animated, produced and broadcast over a very short span of time. The same season also saw an episode on SARS. This incredibly brief turnaround time makes for near real-time commentary on contemporary social and political events. Such an acceleration of the production process allows viewers to laugh at events *as they are happening*. For cultural researchers and theorists, this change in the cycle of production and distribution is an important development in that non-live entertainment begins to coalesce with the social understanding of (and responses to) current events.

Two aspects of the earlier *Simpsons* and the more recent *South Park* are particularly interesting and pertinent to my argument. The first involves the general sense of futility of both programs when confronted with the political status quo. Both programs suggest that it does not matter what you do, that your action will be subsumed into the inevitable workings of governmental power and that that laughter may be all we have left. As such, both provide a bleak view of the role of the citizen within the liberal democratic model of representative government.

The second issue involves the representations of the 'real' that are produced within the journalistic branches of media companies like Fox and Viacom. During the recent Iraq War, both of these networks (Cable and Network Fox News and Viacom's *CBS Evening News*) provided information on the war that remained consistent with what was coming out of the White House and Pentagon. Fox has been an overt mouthpiece for Bush administration policies but, interestingly, Viacom's CBS is not far behind. In a recent *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* study of war coverage, the CBS *Evening News* led all others in their use of commentary from current and former government officials. This was the case across the board (the minimum percentage was NBC's 60%) but fully 75% of CBS commentary was provided by "official voices, including current and former government employees, whether civilian or military" (Rendall).

Postmodern cultural theorists have long accounted for the ways in which capital is capable of maintaining such simultaneous and contradictory positions, which are then made available for the multiple proclivities of its mass audience (Baudrillard, Harvey, Zizek). Yet, it is the segregation of the fictional from the non-fictional that strikes me, for their relationship to one another is entirely skewed. While there may be entertainment that provides a critique of American power and hegemony, there is no broadcast or cable news network in the United States that provides consistent leftist commentary and analysis. Thus, the U.S. television media system seems to gesture, via programs like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, at critical, even oppositional stances to official power. However, such moments of critique are

embedded within a non-fictional matrix of visual representations that stay very much in line with official ways of seeing.

In having my students analyze the cultural politics of programs such as *The Simpsons*, I also impress upon them the manner in which the progressive politics of such programs, ostensibly meant to entertain, is bounded by a presentation of 'reality' that is a mouthpiece for Republican and right-wing politics: not only is Murdoch behind Fox News, he also publishes the tabloid *New York Post* and the neoconservative journal *The Weekly Standard*. The arena between entertainment and politics should not be viewed, as many students might assume, as mutually exclusive realms. While most have latched onto the term 'infotainment,' as a concept that captures some of the blurring of these boundaries, few are willing to examine the steady collapse of this fiction/non-fiction paradigm as it relates to broadcast media.

Examining one of our students' favorite and irreverent programs in the larger context of the multinational media conglomerate makes for some startled responses on their part. Students' own immersion in the cultural vogue for irony (mostly played out in the nineties and best exemplified by television programs such as *The Simpsons*, and films such as the *Scream* series) begins to seem less like entertainment and more like political containment. This is in large part due to the lack of examining popular culture in relationship to the broader social, cultural and political contexts. In providing such context, I expect students to think about the systemic and industrialized nature of cultural production. In juxtaposing the fictional/entertainment programming with the non-fictional/ journalistic programming, I expect students to register the multiple and contradictory positions occupied on just one network. But in considering these registers of fiction and reality (again, artificially maintaining their separation), one consistently sees how progressive politics appear almost exclusively in fictional landscapes, thereby siphoning off the energies and dissatisfactions of a populace that might be more inclined to engage politically were it not satiated with what becomes, in hindsight, a sardonic form of laughter. Thus, a network such as Fox can simultaneously occupy both progressive and reactionary political positions, but with a fictional world presenting a satirical view on American life while the more weighty "real" world events are presented from a largely right-wing point of view.

This real and immediate structural feature of media in shaping the cultural politics of the United States in September of 2003 becomes a point of departure for a class who will then spend the next 9 weeks learning about the cultural materialist-oriented analyses provided by several of the key theorists and practitioners of Cultural Studies. In understanding more fully the convoluted paths of production, distribution and consumption, I hope to inculcate in students the critical faculty of seeing cultural production in relationship to networks of politics, economics and material power.

The Birmingham school has been at the heart of Anglo-Cultural studies for a third of a century and provides much by way of the analysis of cultural production, high and low. As Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, John Fiske and Jessica Evans (amongst others) have taught us, by combining historical and semiotic analysis, we can ask different questions of our practices and habits as both producers and consumers within a postindustrial cultural matrix such as that of the United States. The analyses of television, transnational business practices, local debates and procedures, as well as content and form, provide a means for querying how and

why shows like *The Simpsons* give us the satisfaction of engaging with topical issues by way of submerging more explicitly political and active responses.

Tactical pedagogical processes, such as the example I have provided, may help our students ask better questions about a field of visual culture that literally effaces, but symbolically and imaginatively reconfigures, the concrete historical realities of American time and place; of living and working and viewing in the United States during the apex of its power around the globe and upon its own public cultures.

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