

The Simpsons – Is it Art?

It occurs at the same time every day. Thousands of people gather at the same for a common purpose. They plan their schedule around it and jump through hoops to avoid missing it. It should come as no surprise that “it” is the ongoing adventure of that wacky animated family, the Simpsons. Now in its ninth season, the program has been honored with a Peabody Award, 10 Emmy Awards, seven Annie Awards, three Genesis Awards, three International Monitor Awards and three Environmental Media Awards.¹ The show has opened the world of animation to a new, and older, audience. The Simpsons is paving the way and has become the standard against which all other such shows are measured. The sitcom style along with socially adept writers and producers is certainly one of the secrets behind the great success. Clearly we are discussing a top-notch television program, but is it a work of art? Although some maintain that The Simpsons cannot be considered serious art, it actually fits comfortably into accepted definitions of art.

Perhaps the most naïve argument against granting The Simpsons the distinction of being art is that a television program cannot be art. The only reasonable basis for this argument is to appeal to a version of the media definition of art. Classifying art by media is a common practice in organizations such as

the National Endowment for the Arts. The NEA has a list of media such as painting, composing, pottery, sculpture, poetry, literature, etc. and works falling in one of these categories is considered art and hence may be eligible for funding. If we accept such a roster as defining art, then indeed The Simpsons is not art since television is not enumerated in the list. This argument, however, is clearly quite weak. For example, for many years the musical genre of Jazz was not on the NEA list. Does this mean Jazz was not art until the day it was appended to the media list? Certainly not. Therefore, it stands to reason that there are more criteria involved in calling something art than merely medium.

Another objection raised to labeling The Simpsons “art” is that it is merely an illogical assumption of overly enthusiastic viewers. Or put more generally, although something may be well done and perhaps personally important to many people, that does not classify it ipso facto as an artwork. For example, though the Toyota Camry is a well-built automobile and may have a personal impact on its owner and her lifestyle, it seems easy to argue that such an automobile is clearly not a work of art. However, two important criticisms can be formulated against extending this same line reasoning to The Simpsons. First, conferral of artistic status on a thing by the patron population may indeed be sufficient to make it a work of art. This idea is known as the institutional theory of

¹ Simpsons Web Sight,
<http://www.foxworld.com/simpsons/>, © Fox
Broadcasting Company

art as originally promoted by philosopher George Dickie. Dickie might argue that if works such as *The Simpsons* are accepted as art, then the definition of art becomes flexible and morphs itself to incorporate the new works.

The next refutation is against the objection that *The Simpsons* serves no purpose beyond its entertainment value. Two different refutations of this contention are possible. The first involves a variation of the Aristotelian ideas about tragedy. Aristotle proposed that the tragedy was a tool designed by the artist to accomplish its catharsis of emotion. The audience is said to identify with the characters and action so that the characters are either better, worse, or about the same as the viewer. Although Aristotle's ideas were about tragedy, I believe they can be altered to apply equally well to comedy. For example, consider the character of Homer (Simpson, that is). For those lacking a familiarity with *The Simpsons*, Homer is the overweight and balding father figure and head of the Simpson household. He works at the local nuclear plant and enjoys drinking beer, watching television, and drinking more beer. Two things, though, always remain constant for Homer, no matter what happens to him: his happy-go-lucky nature and his love for wife Marge and his kids. Though his adventures usually turn out for the best, it is his hamartia, or errors in judgement, combined with the fact that the audience can relate to his actions and consequences that makes *The Simpsons* effective. Therefore, by the Aristotelian viewpoint,

The Simpsons may indeed be accepted as a work of art.

An obvious counter to the argument I have presented is that Aristotle's theories are out of date and, hence, no longer accurately characterize art. Though Aristotle's ideas may be valid by today's standards, Collingwood's expression theory is certainly modern and it can also address the accusation that *The Simpsons* serves only to entertain. Expressing emotion is the focus of the Collingwoodian philosophy. Understanding and conscious exploration of emotion is the meaning of expression here. The first question is who is doing this understanding and exploration – the creator, the audience, or both? Collingwood would say that this exploration applies to all involved in the art. He sees art as a very collaborative effort – the creator responds to the audience and the whole process is dynamic.

The Simpsons fits smoothly into this definition. When a *Simpsons* writer such as Conan O'Brien germinates an idea for the show, it comes from his own feelings combined with the state of our society. He is usually making some sort of statement about his personal feelings on an issue we take for granted. For example, the television program enjoyed by the Simpson family is called "Itchy and Scratchy." It is an overly violent kids cartoon program that makes creative tongue-in-cheek statements about the vicious content we casually accept everyday. The cartoonists then takes the idea and adds their own flair by producing

believable characters who transmit what the writers intend. Indeed, even horror genre aficionados are sometimes disgusted by the comically sadistic spectacle of “Itchy and Scratchy.” Finally, the audience adds its important piece not only with their patronage, but also by expressing their thoughts via feedback to the producers, casual references, Internet discussion, and so forth. It seems clear that the Simpsons is a collaborative work of art by Collingwood’s criteria and again that the aforementioned Toyota Camry is not.

Finally, I offer yet another rationale for granting The Simpsons artistic status – one that does not conform fully to a single philosophical heading but is probably closest to the creativity arguments as presented by Jeffrey Maitland. I define art as that which experiments and pushes the envelope of its genre. I argue that The Simpsons has done exactly this and more. When it began, it was a cute animated series that explored some basic interpersonal issues with the intent to be comedic. However, in developing it has not only raised the bar of the cartoon genre but has transcended into a different category. The Simpsons became the first animated situation comedy. Through the creativity and genius of everyone involved, The Simpsons has achieved a status previously held only by non-animated programs such as “The Cosby Show,” “Friends,” and “Cheers.” Therefore, it is my conclusion that The Simpsons is a work of art for its blazing of new territory. Certainly other shows will come along and try to make

the same move, but The Simpsons was first and therefore a pioneering work of art.