“Oh Yeah!”: Family Guy as Magical Realism?

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THE PREMIERE EPISODE OF FAMILY GUY, titled “Death Has a Shadow,” was first broadcast on the FOX Network on 31 January 1999, after Super Bowl XXXIII. It begins with patriarch Peter Griffin preparing for the bachelor party of a work colleague and promising his wife, Lois, that he will not overindulge. He does, however, to the tune of thirty-seven beers, which his son Chris heralds as a “new family record.” Despite suffering from a hangover, Peter goes to work the next morning and falls asleep while monitoring the production line at the toy factory. Following a subsequent local news report on the large number of unsafe toys suddenly being sold, Peter is fired for negligence. To keep Lois from finding out, he applies for welfare support and, because of a bureaucratic error, receives a weekly check for $150,000. He tells Lois he has been given a big raise at work and starts spending the money extravagantly. When she discovers Peter’s deception, she orders him to return the money, and he decides the best way to do this is by throwing the cash from a blimp during the Super Bowl, which causes a riot in the stadium. After being arrested and spending some time in jail, he appears in court where the judge sentences him to twenty-four months in prison for welfare fraud. The family reacts badly to the news, each taking a turn to exclaim, “Oh no!”—first Lois, then the family’s talking dog, Brian, followed by oldest son Chris, and then daughter Meg. The scene reaches its climax when a giant anthropomorphized jug of Kool-Aid bursts through the courtroom wall and bellows, “Oh, yeah!” Everyone in the courtroom stares, nonplussed, at the large talking jug, and then, as if realizing the impropriety of his outburst, the Kool-Aid Man backs slowly out of the room via the hole he just punched through the wall.

The scene continues, and Peter is exonerated of his crime with the help of his baby son, Stewie, but it is clear that the climax of the episode was reached with the interruption by this magical figure. Although it is not explained within the episode, the intruder is the icon of Kool-Aid, an artificially flavored soft drink. The Kool-Aid Man is a gigantic frosty pitcher filled with the red liquid and marked with a smiley face, as seen in advertisements for Kool-Aid. In television commercials, the Kool-Aid Man is known for suddenly bursting through walls after being magically summoned wherever children are making Kool-Aid and yelling “Oh, yeah!”

As an ardent fan of all kinds of animation for many years, I recall watching this episode around the turn of the millennium and finding the appearance of this intruder startling, as it disrupted the narrative so violently. It left me feeling bemused. The episode offers no explanation for this sudden incursion and hardly any time to dwell on it because as soon as the invading creature exits the scene, the episode continues apace, forcing the viewer to move on with the renewed flow of narrative. This was a

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familiar sensation, however, one I recognized but never before from animation. In fact, I was reminded of works from the literary world, particularly those that use a technique called magical realism.

Strange, inexplicable events are commonplace in what is arguably magical realism’s most famous novel, Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, first published in Spanish in 1967. For example, José Arcadio Buendía stumbles upon a Spanish galleon marooned in the midst of the jungle. Never explained, it leaves the reader to wonder how, in the midst of a realist narrative, this can be? How can it be possible that a marvelous cloud of butterflies follows Mauricio Babilonia wherever he goes and that Remedios the Beauty can miraculously ascend into heaven? All these magical events are dealt with in a matter-of-fact way, grounded in a realist narrative, which is a hallmark of this type of fiction.

The difficulty is that these magical occurrences break the rules of what are, in every other way, realistic narratives. Similarly, the problem with *Family Guy* seems to be how to read the Kool-Aid Man incident. But *Family Guy* is animation. How much does animation have to do with “realistic narratives”? After all, animation is the realm of fantasy, the home of a cat and mouse duo that drop anvils on each other’s heads, a wolf whose eyes bug out at the sight of an attractive woman, and a wise-cracking rabbit who can walk on air as if he’s unaware of the “gravity” of his situation. If realism is not the natural rule of animation, then why be surprised and confused by an impossible event, such as a huge advertising icon bursting through a wall?

Knowledge of the history of animated sitcoms, and sitcoms in general, is enough to solve the mystery; it is not unreasonable to claim that *The Simpsons*, the first animated show to be screened in prime time since *The Flintstones* in the 1960s, instigated a renaissance for animated sitcoms, which include *Beavis and Butthead*, *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, *Futurama*, and of course, *Family Guy*. Although *The Flintstones* was the first to combine animation and the sitcom format in 1960, its aim was not strictly realism; the Flintstones shared their world with dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures, some of which acted as modern conveniences for the families and could even talk. The creators of *The Simpsons*, however, deliberately set out to make their show as realistic as possible, and it is this realism that forms the basis of my argument. This commitment to realism changed viewers’ perceptions of television animation, which became very much the status quo. Combining realism, the sitcom, animation, and a satirical attitude “works to elevate the position of *The Simpsons* within cultural hierarchies” (Mittell 25) from its lowly status as “just for children” and opens up a wider audience, providing more opportunities for other television animation, such as *Family Guy*, to make it to the air. Subsequently, a strong foundation audience for animated sitcoms allows writers to be more adventurous with different comedic styles. In short, *The Simpsons* provides the “realism” on which the “magic” of *Family Guy* is based.

I realize that suggesting a correlation between *Family Guy* and magical realism raises two contentious issues: whether realism is a reasonable or even possible aim for an animated program and whether the existence of magical realism is feasible outside of literature. First, there is the issue of realism. Rather than insist that animation be the domain of fantasy as animators in the past have done, the creators of *The Simpsons* were concerned with realism from the outset. James L. Brooks, co-developer and executive producer alongside Sam Simon and Matt Groening, insisted that “we ought to make people forget they’re watching a cartoon” (qtd. in Williams and Jones, “Cartoons Have Writers?” 1). They set about developing a writing style for television animation that would attract a new, adult audience that would otherwise consider television animation the domain of children. Steve Williams and Ian Jones remark that “[s]omewhat perversely for a 100% hand-drawn creation,” James L. Brooks was aiming for “realism, the everyday, and strong emotional resonance. For people to forget they were watching a cartoon, he argued, its charac-
ters had to behave—think, laugh, cry—like you and me.” The first step toward this realism was to create a recognizable world and situations to which the average viewer could relate.

As an animated program, *The Simpsons* can create environments and develop situations that the average live-action sitcom cannot. The Simpson family is free to roam around the fictional town of Springfield, allowing for a wider range of situations and larger number of characters than are available to any live-action situation comedy without a massive budget. These diverse situational characters come together to create what Nichola Dobson calls a “constructed reality” (86). This freedom was not lost on the team behind *The Simpsons*, with Groening describing the show as “a sitcom, but there’s no ’sit,'” (qtd. in O’Connor C18) and with writer Jon Vitti attributing the wide variety of locations and fast pace of the show to “the flexibility of cartoons,” where the action can take place outside of the living room. Vitti remarks that with “five minutes of cartoon footage, it’s just as easy to have 12 scenes as three” (qtd. in Jankiewicz 54). A broad range of characters and settings allows for greater depth and complexity than had been seen in television animation before, making the animated world a more familiar place for the viewer.

*Esquire*’s Tom Carson goes as far as to argue that animated sitcoms surpass their live-action counterparts in terms of realism: “in their literal depictions of our contemporary environment no less than their jaundiced takes on it, animated shows are more realistic than conventional ones.” Carson argues that when compared to the static and budget-limited sets of live-action sitcoms, the rich depiction of the Simpsons’ hometown of Springfield recalls the gritty realism of the naturalist school of literature.

As the world opens up for the animated sitcom, so does the possibility of social satire, which, through critique of the unsatisfactory or taken-for-granted aspects of modern living, has the potential to alter the way we perceive reality, bringing about yet another level of interrelation between reality and the animated world:

Abu’s [sic] Quik-E-Mart [sic], Krusty Burger, the nuclear power plant, and Springfield Elementary all irrevocably change our relationship to the equivalent locales on our own suburban landscapes. They have been recontextualized experientially. They are points of reference for social satire. They are no longer functional façades, but have been transformed into breaks in the veneer: portals through which to deconstruct the rest of suburban experience. The tube that was once used to sell us the suburban utopia is now the lens through which we can demystify its symbols and smash its myths. (Rushkoff, “Mediasprawl: Springfield USA”)

This illusion of realism is not shattered by a cackling studio audience or canned laughter. There is no tradition of canned laughter in animation because a live audience would be impossible, but in a sitcom, canned laughter is conspicuous in its absence. There is a sense that this is born of a mutual respect: *The Simpsons* respects the intellect of the viewers enough that the prompt of the laugh-track is unnecessary, and it in turn commands a respect that had been denied to television animation in the past. Even *Seinfeld*, the most progressive sitcom of the 1990s, had not taken the courageous step of dispensing with canned laughter.

Along with dropping tired sitcom clichés such as a laugh track, many of the visual conventions of traditional animation made for television had to be jettisoned in the quest for realism. In an interview with Erik H. Bergman, Groening specifies one such convention, the practice in some Hanna-Barbera cartoons in the 1960s of using the same background repeatedly to save money while sacrificing a sense of spatial reality: “Some realism matters because [as Groening says] ‘animation can create an entire world.’ Fred Flintstone might run past 35 windows in his living room. ’If the Simpsons ran 20 feet they’d run into a wall.’” Along with a stricter adherence to the solidity of the world around them than in most other animated programs, the Simpson family also has more stable physical bodies. They do not enjoy the same resilience as many cartoon
characters, such as Wile E. Coyote or Daffy Duck, who can survive plunging hundreds of feet into a ravine or a shotgun blast to the face. Groening was adamant about obeying the laws of physics: “the characters’ heads do not get crushed by anvils. Their eyeballs do not pop out of their heads, and their jaws do not drop to the ground” (qtd. in Schefelman 69). The creators of The Simpsons made the conscious decision to forsake the physical elasticity of animation, opting instead for the spatial freedom animation can provide. The only aspect of the program that defies reality is the fact that the Simpsons do not age. Bart is always ten years old, Lisa eight, and Maggie a baby. Because the television audience has become accustomed to real human actors in live-action sitcoms in a state of arrested development because of re-runs, this becomes less problematic and does not damage the illusion of realism.

Jason Mittell says The Simpsons managed, through mixing the genres of animation and situation comedy, to achieve a “paradox of realism” (20). He focuses primarily on the early years of The Simpsons, “as the show’s initial novelty and controversial reception led to intense discussions and debates on how to make sense of this program” (17). Mittell argues that it is the differing cultural values that are placed on the sitcom and the animated cartoon that trigger the paradox of realism he describes. The sitcom, being traditionally live-action, automatically garnered more respect as a format than the animated cartoon, which had unfairly gained a reputation as being an intellectual vacuum suitable only for children. The live-action sitcom, “as an aesthetic form grounded in realism and contemporaneity, has remarked upon almost every major development of postwar American history” (Hamamoto 2) and earned a passage into the category of “quality television” along with socially conscious sitcoms such as The Mary Tyler Moore Show, All in the Family, and MASH in what was later known as the 1970s “renaissance” of American television (Brower 165).

The Simpsons continued this tradition of social consciousness. In fact, it was part of a crop of shows appearing in the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s, including Married . . . With Children and Roseanne, which focused on working-class families struggling with money issues. This is not an entirely new concept, of course; there have been sitcoms based on working-class families since the late 1940s, such as Mama, The Goldbergs, The Amos ‘n’ Andy Show, The Honeymooners, and later, All in the Family. Quite often the humor is bleak, and there is real conflict among family members. In middle-class, conservative sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s, such as Father Knows Best, The Partridge Family, and Happy Days, and in more recent sitcoms such as The Cosby Show, Home Improvement, and Everybody Loves Raymond, wider social or economic problems do not tend to intrude. Furthermore, the minor difficulties the characters face are resolved neatly within half an hour. The home and nuclear family structure provide a sanctuary from the real world, shielding the characters from the stress of social and financial hardship and thus keeping the ideal of the happy American family intact (Henry 265). Working-class or “ethnic” sitcoms have fallen in and out of fashion over the years, periodically giving way to middle-class, conservative sitcoms and what David Marc calls the “magicom,” a concentrated group of sitcoms in the 1960s with fantastic premises, such as Mister Ed, Bewitched, The Munsters, The Addams Family, I Dream of Jeannie, and Green Acres. Megan Mullen suggests that the working-class sitcom moved out of fashion for economic reasons, and the swing toward depicting middle-class families living in idyllic suburbs with all the modern conveniences was due to the sitcoms becoming showcases for advertising the sponsors’ products (66).

As for the instigation of the magicom, Marc speculates, “Had an urge to zap America into an alternative universe been liberated by the fears, promises, and changes in consciousness that accompanied the national confrontations with war, racism, drugs and hi-fidelity electric erotic music?” (107). Possibly, but as I will
demonstrate, fantastical figures and storylines can be another way of approaching, rather than avoiding, the concerns of the nation in an indirect way.

This dichotomy of working- and middle-class sitcoms is evident in the contrasts between *The Simpsons* and *The Cosby Show*, the animated sitcom’s main rival in the early 1990s. FOX decided to schedule *The Simpsons* in direct opposition to *The Cosby Show*, which aired on NBC, and the ratings for *The Cosby Show* went into decline and never recovered. It was eventually canceled in 1992, having already been criticized for being socially unrealistic at a time when “almost half of all black children, 46.5 percent, and 39 percent of Hispanic children were classified as poor” (Hamamoto 134). Although not an ethnic minority, *The Simpsons* live in the world of scarcity that *The Cosby Show* seems to deny. The first season has many stories about the family’s financial problems. In “Homer’s Odyssey,” Homer loses his job at the nuclear power plant and contemplates suicide because he cannot provide for his family, and in “The Call of the Simpsons,” he desperately tries to keep up with more affluent next-door neighbors, the Flanders, by buying a motor home he cannot afford.

In the first episode, “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire,” the family is preparing for Christmas when disaster strikes. Homer does not receive his Christmas bonus, and Marge must spend all their savings having a tattoo removed from Bart’s arm. During the rest of the episode, Homer struggles to get presents for the family and steals a Christmas tree, a concept the writers admit was controversial at the time. In the DVD commentary for this episode, director David Silverman reveals that it was James L. Brooks’s idea to “anchor the Simpsons economically and keep them mired in their money problems to make it real, because in most sitcoms people have no money problems whatsoever, or the money problems aren’t real.” A cartoon family had become the most accurate representation in the sitcom landscape of the financial hardship of many American families.

Regardless of the fiscal differences between the shows, it is the actual behavior of the characters that marks the real distinction between the Simpsons and the Huxtables. Johnny Carson commented that in terms of their interaction with one another, the Simpson family “seems more realistic. Family life at the Simpson home probably reminds more families of their own households than do the relatively homogenized antics of the Huxtable clan” (qtd. in Shales). It was important that the characters behave in familiar, realistic ways, and the banal, everyday situations they encounter during the earlier episodes in particular demonstrate this. In the DVD commentary for “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire,” Matt Groening notes the importance of daily activities such as Homer’s embarrassment at the meager Christmas presents he can afford from a convenience store in contrast to the lavish gifts purchased by his more affluent neighbor, Ned Flanders. Groening’s attention to detail included making the environments as realistic as possible because he “wanted this show to be full of trash, and cracked walls, and imperfections in the pavement,” unlike the glossy, featureless backgrounds traditionally associated with animation. The trash and cracks are subtle signs of the imperfection of reality, even though the Simpsonian world consists of nothing more than paint on celluloid.

Ultimately, the issue of realism in any visual medium, let alone animation, is highly contentious. It could be argued that there is no such thing as an unmediated real world (McKinnon). Realism is more about a “sense” of the real and relies heavily on the “suspension of disbelief” that is required from the audience. There exists an unquantifiable spirit of realism, and a character’s behavior in a given situation either will ring true or will not. Discussing the work of Walt Disney, Sergei Eisenstein knows that the characters he sees are not real but miraculous “tricks of technology . . . such beings don’t really exist. But at the same time: We sense them as alive. We sense them as moving. We sense them as existing and even thinking” (qtd. in Newman 193). Through its dedication to “making people forget they’re watching a cartoon,”
The Simpsons provides that “sense” of realism, the bedrock on which Family Guy can build its “magical” realism.

Magical realism, as the seemingly paradoxical term suggests, is a technique of storytelling that exploits the juxtaposition of realism and the fantastic. Although the term is now more commonly associated with literature, Franz Roh initially suggested the idea of “magic realism” in 1925 to describe a “new, neo-realistic, style in German painting” practiced by a group of painters, categorized generally as post-expressionists, for whom there was a sense of magic in the everyday. In differentiating the words magical and mystical, Roh said he wanted to “indicate that the mystery does not descend to the represented world, but rather hides and palpitates behind it” (qtd. in Faris 1). “Magic realism,” as Roh called it, and “magical realism,” which is now the accepted term describing a literary movement, are very different, however (Roh 112). In the eyes of many literary critics, including Anne Hegerfeldt, the idea of magical realism has a “rather remarkable, if not actually miraculous, lease on life which, through the simplifying glass of retrospective vision, is frequently dated to the publication of Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude in 1967” (62). Wendy B. Faris explains that “very briefly defined, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them” (1). Hegerfeldt clarifies this, asserting that “these non-realistic items cannot be ‘re-contextualized,’ explained away as dreams, hallucinations, metaphors, or lies; presented in a strikingly nonchalant and matter-of-fact manner (often even demonstratively so), there seems to be no option but to accept them as part of the fictional world” (66). Although fantastical fiction takes magical happenings for granted in somewhat the same manner that magical realism does, magical realist fiction stresses mundanity to fragment the hegemonic realist narrative and so “paradoxically manages to flaunt these elements as transgressions of realist conventions, thereby causing the reader to hesitate—not over the ontological status of the fantastic items, as would be the case in fantastic fiction, but over which set of conventions are to guide the reading of this narrative” (Hegerfeldt 66). This is a key point in my argument for Family Guy’s strange relationship with magical realism: the viewer hesitates, much as I did while watching “Death Has a Shadow,” uncertain which set of conventions apply to the narrative: the laws of the traditional sitcom (realism) or the laws of animation (magic).

Because of its ability to throw the hegemonic realist narrative of the Western world into doubt, the magical realist form has been identified as “an inherently postcolonial mode” that seeks to “redress the cultural hierarchy imposed by the colonizer by revaluing the alternative, non-Western systems of thought, presenting them as a corrective or supplement to the dominant world view” (Hegerfeldt 63). This has been especially applicable to Latin American writers, such as the aforementioned Márquez, Mário de Andrade, Laura Esquivel, and Jorge Luis Borges. Despite magical realism’s prevalence in Latin America, the critical trend has been to extend the mode beyond that region, and the term is continually being applied to writers of varying nationalities, such as Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Kurt Vonnegut, and Haruki Murakami. Hegerfeldt explains that magical realism is much more than just a postcolonial mode because it “argues for a revaluation of alternative modes of thought not only from within a specifically postcolonial perspective, but already on a more general level,” vindicating the use of the term outside of South America and, indeed, outside of literature as “a fictional counterpart to anthropological or sociological studies: tracing the various strategies by which individuals and communities try—and always have tried—to make sense of the world” (64). This is clearly a need that transgresses national and cultural boundaries, but can it make the leap from literature to the visual medium of television?

Roh, the originator of the term magical realism, seems to imply that it can when he argues that it constitutes “a special way of intuiting
the world and, as such, can apply to all the arts, even music” (“Magical Realism” 27). Many films have been based on the novels of magical realist writers, and the appearances of such films as *The Witches of Eastwick, Field of Dreams, Like Water for Chocolate, Wolf, and Chocolat* “in the cinematic mainstream, further attest to its increasing dispersion throughout all contemporary culture” (Faris 29). Neither do they all have a postcolonial subtext; many major American motion pictures, such as *City of Angels, Being John Malkovich, Donnie Darko,* and even beloved Christmas classic *It’s a Wonderful Life,* could be described as examples of magical realism, acting as “a means of initiating questions concerning philosophical issues such as the existence of God, the role of fate, and the idea of the self that extend beyond the film’s capacity to divert and entertain” (Bowers 115). Positing magical realism as a descriptive term for film and television remains a contentious argument. Garrett Rowlan, while not closed to the possibility of a magical realist film, explains that he finds literature to be the most suitable medium because the reader is “a conspirator with the author in a way that [he is] not in other genres [to give] the world that exists on the page an imaginative correlation.” On the other hand, visual magical realism “is boxed magic, lacking organic vitality, without that substratum that exists in that juncture between the reader’s imagination and the writer’s, a bond that joins the quotidian and fantastic.” Although I do not wish to argue for the superiority of either medium, there are reasons to believe that animation in a form such as *Family Guy* can fall into the category of magical realism. The thing that unites both literary and animated magical realism is that they both exploit entirely constructed realities.

Literature allows the reader to make use of the mind’s eye to construct the world that the magical realist author describes in meticulous detail and to add the magical element seamlessly with the use of some imagination. Part of the reason that some are skeptical about film’s ability to be magical realist is the fact that it is difficult to achieve the “seamless” integration the mind can more easily attain with literary texts. For example, poorly executed special effects can shatter an audience’s suspension of disbelief. Imagination does not rely on special effects, rubber prosthetics, or whether the strings are visible; as Wolfgang Iser writes, “the reader’s imagination animates” the text in his or her mind (276). Animation is just as much an entirely constructed reality as literature, the difference being that the visual imagery in animation is constructed externally. Prime-time animation, such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy,* is so good at being “about the real” (Dobson 89) that it does what James L. Brooks always intended and makes the audience forget it is watching a cartoon, distorting its objective purity. Because of its status as a completely constructed reality, the insertion of magical elements into animation is seamless, like the picture painted by the mind’s eye.

Although *Family Guy*’s comedic style does not completely dispense with narrative structure, it does not place as much importance on plot as some other shows have done, such as *South Park, King of the Hill,* and *The Simpsons.* Instead, *Family Guy* takes a more fractured approach, relaxing or completely deconstructing the rules of narrative structure to allow for pop-culture references and non sequiturs. Non sequitur translates from Latin as “it does not follow,” and the term signifies a conclusion that defies the logic of the preceding events. A perfect example of the comic non sequitur occurs in the second-season episode “Holy Crap.” This episode centers on Peter’s attempts to get closer to his stridently Catholic father, Francis Griffin, who believes Peter is work-shy and resents him for marrying Lois, a “Protestant whore.” All of Peter’s efforts have failed, however, and he has even been fired for his troubles. While sitting miserably at the kitchen table wondering how to reconcile with his father, he sees a news report on the television about the Pope’s arrival in Quahog. At the end of the report, Peter exclaims, “Hey, I just got a crazy idea!” The viewer makes the logical assumption that Peter has formulated a plan to get closer to his father, inspired by the news.
of the Pope’s visit. Instead, Peter clamps his hand in a red-hot waffle maker. After screaming in pain, he exclaims, “Hey, I just got another crazy idea!” This is the plan that the viewer was expecting all along: Peter will kidnap the Pope and ask him to convince Francis of his son’s worthiness.

There is a big difference between this logical diversion and the narrative disruption of magical realism, however. Family Guy’s non sequiturs can be even more dramatic, cutting away from the main story to another place or time, as the plot is interrupted and segues into unrelated, self-contained sketches of variable length. These are often introduced when a character refers to a past event, using such phrases as “I haven’t felt like this since . . . ,” “This is worse than the time . . . ,” or “Like that time when . . . .” An example of a dramatic cut-away occurs in the same episode, “Holy Crap.” When Peter does kidnap the Pope, he brings him back to the Griffin home. Lois is furious with Peter over this foolish stunt and declares that this is the most reckless thing he has ever done. Peter challenges her on this, however, saying, “What about the time I was on that airplane?” The scene cuts to Peter standing in the cabin of the aforementioned airplane, next to the emergency exit. Beside the door handle is a large sign warning “DO NOT PULL.” Peter stares at the sign, obviously contemplating the warning and the ramifications that will ensue if he chooses to ignore it. He decides to pull the handle anyway, certain death proving to be an insufficient deterrent. He plummets to the earth, giggling all the way. And of course there is also the type of magical non sequitur that occurs when a whimsical figure, such as the Kool-Aid Man, breeches the narrative. This central event around which I have formed my impression of Family Guy as “magical realism” was almost cut from the episode. In the DVD commentary for “Death Has a Shadow,” executive producer David Zuckerman tells how he had to fight to save the Kool-Aid Man because the network thought that this narrative transgression would “totally alienate the audience.” In fact, it has become one of the “most popular” and “most often-cited” gags on the show.

Before speculating about the underlying issues related to the use of magical realism in Family Guy, it is important to look at the major stylistic criteria that Faris recommends as indicative of magical realism. She suggests five primary characteristics of magical realism that serve as a way of identifying the mode: the text must contain an “irreducible element” of magic; the descriptions of magical events are strongly grounded in the phenomenal world; the reader may have difficulty reconciling contradictory understandings of events; different realms or dimensions impinge on the narrative; and accepted beliefs about time, space, and identity are disrupted.

The first characteristic—that the text must contain an “irreducible element” of magic—describes an event that cannot be explained in accordance with logic, experience, and the laws of the universe. Key to this is the fact that the irreducible element of magic is accepted as normal, even humdrum. “The narrator’s presentation of the irreducible element on the same narrative plane as other, commonplace, happenings means that in terms of the text, magical things ‘really’ do happen” (Faris 8). This matter-of-fact attitude facilitates the assimilation of extraordinary incidents into the fabric of the realistic text and, in turn, encourages the reader to follow by example and accept as real what seems magical. There is a paradox at work here because even as these strange happenings confound the reader, they are so bold in their presentation that they say “in [an] almost existential fashion, ‘I EKsist,’ ‘I stick out’” (Faris 8). The case of the Kool-Aid Man is a good example of this. A gigantic, anthropomorphized jug bursts through a courtroom wall, and the characters react more out of annoyance than out of shock or amazement. This happens often in Family Guy, as figures from advertising, film, television, pop music, and religion (including Jesus and God) regularly intrude on the Griffin family’s everyday reality. In the episode “Screwed the Pooch,” Jesus appears to help Peter out, but he also indulges
in less savory activities, such as hustling pool, cheating at golf, and turning water into “funk” as a party trick. God is seen using his power to light a cigarette with a bolt of lightning for a woman he is trying to pick up in a bar (“Blind Ambition”). Unfortunately, a stray bolt of lightning causes her to burst into flames, and God and his wingman Jesus have to make a quick getaway in their Escalade. In “Kiss Seen Around the World,” Peter films a plastic bag floating in the wind while rhapsodizing about its magnificence (a parody of a scene in the film American Beauty). The scene shifts to Heaven where an irate God shouts down at Peter, “It’s just some trash blowing in the wind! Do you have any idea how complicated your circulatory system is?” God’s regular appearances and everyday emotions and motivations help naturalize his appearances in the genre of animated sitcoms, which are a violation of the “rules” as established by The Simpsons.

The second characteristic of magical realism is that “its descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world. This is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory” (Faris 14). Family Guy owes much of its air of realism to The Simpsons; it is on the basis of The Simpsons’ hard-won realism that Family Guy can take the comic risks that it does, utilizing elements of fantasy and the absurd. The Simpsons’ adherence to realism elevates TV animation’s cultural value, making it acceptable as a form of adult entertainment, rather than perceived as only for children. Animation will always have a connection to childhood, however. Creator Matt Groening recognizes that a generation reared with Saturday morning cartoon shows reached adulthood around the time The Simpsons first came to air, which could account for the some of the popularity of prime-time animation. Groening says, “Cartoons are invariably a celebration, the colors bright and simple. There’s a whole generation of people in power at the networks who were exhilarated by great cartoons as kids and are ready to emulate them” (qtd. in Kellogg 8). Although adults tend to be more difficult to convince than children where the fantastical is concerned, animation could prove to be a very suitable medium for magical realism because of its links to a child’s willingness to believe. Magical realism’s beginnings are entrenched in the early days of childhood “with its attendant wonder at the splendor of the world, whose multitudinous variety of actual and potential manifestations within it engenders extraordinary corresponding flights of the human imagination” (Danow 70).

Despite Family Guy’s frequent flights into fantasy, there are, surprisingly, those who commend it for its realism. M. Keith Booker argues that it is in fact one of the most realistic animated shows, even more so than The Simpsons in some respects. For example, there is the issue of location; the Simpsons live in the fictional town of Springfield (called this because it is one of the most common town names in the United States) in an unspecified state. It could be argued that living in Anytown, USA, makes it easier for viewers to relate to the Simpson family. The Griffins might live in the fictional suburb of Quahog, but that is within the very real setting of Providence County in Rhode Island. Booker points out a visual reference in Family Guy: “the skyline of Providence can be seen in most of the series’ establishing shots of the Griffin home” (86). Some of the characters have recognizable New England accents, and in “Lethal Weapons,” they complain about “leafers” from New York City invading every fall. Much of this is attributable to the fact that creator Seth MacFarlane used to be a resident of the state, and “rather than being a limitation this specific setting adds richness of the show, which gains considerable texture from its overt immersion in Rhode Island culture” (Booker 86). This detailed engagement with a real place helps establish the phenomenal world and, in contrast, throws any magical elements into sharp relief.

Faris’s third characteristic states that the reader may have difficulty reconciling conflicting explanations of events (7). Family Guy wanders the line between realism and fantasy with such aggression that often the viewer is left confused as to what exactly has happened or how to explain it. In its early years, The Simp-
sons, unlike *Family Guy*, had to be more careful about explaining seemingly fantastical happenings because it initially made a greater commitment to realism. During DVD commentary for the fourth season episode “Homer the Heretic,” George Meyer tells of the difficulties inherent in drawing clear lines between reality and fantasy. In the episode, Homer decides to stop going to church and begin his own religion. During the course of this experiment, he meets God and discusses his theological ideas in dreams several times. Meyer complains about having to manipulate the story for Homer to fall asleep so often because he did not want to imply that God was literally appearing to him. He jokes that it happens so often, it seems as if Homer is suffering from narcolepsy. If it were *Family Guy*, God could just meet Peter directly. God and Jesus appear fairly often in *South Park* too, and all the boys need to do if they want divine guidance is call into the show that Jesus hosts on their local cable access television station.

Two characters in the show have highly developed language skills where they should have none at all: Stewie and Brian. Stewie speaks eruditely at an adult level with an English accent that MacFarlane based on the voice of Rex Harrison’s Henry Higgins in the feature film *My Fair Lady* (1964). In early episodes, Stewie relentlessly plots to take over the world and escape Lois’s matriarchal tyranny by murdering her, only to be thwarted at every turn, although that side of his character seems to have faded later in the series. Apparently, the family can hear his threats of world domination and Lois’s demise, but most (except the family’s dog, Brian) dismiss it as baby talk. Likewise, Brian displays marvelous linguistic skills; he is also the only member of the family who really engages with Stewie on an adult level instead of treating him like an infant. Brian displays all the characteristics of a sophisticated middle-aged human male: he walks on two legs, his favorite drink is a dry martini, he drives a car, he enjoys *The Utne Reader*, and he has attended Brown University. The family takes his ability to speak for granted, and it is only remarked on as unusual once. In the episode “Brian in Love” from season two, Brian and Peter are having a conversation when Peter exclaims apropos of nothing, “Oh my God! You can talk!” They stare at one another for a few seconds and then continue the conversation as if nothing had happened. Although both are very advanced for their age and species, Stewie and Brian still retain their characteristics as a baby and a dog, respectively. Stewie is still very dependent on Lois for feeding and diaper-changes, much to his chagrin. He still enjoys a complicated relationship with his teddy bear, Rupert, and a game of hide-and-seek. Occasionally, Brian will lapse into stereotypically canine behavior, usually for comedic effect. Like any normal dog, he has trouble standing up on the back seat of a moving car, drags his rear on the carpet (which Peter hates), and is afraid of the vacuum cleaner.

There is conflicting evidence throughout the series as to whether Stewie can be understood by adults or whether the audience and Brian are the only ones privy to his rants. It has been a source of much speculation for fans, and this fact was acknowledged in a meta-reference at the end of the episode “E. Peterbus Unum.” The action cuts away to a classroom 200 years in the future, and like the viewers, the class has just finished watching that particular episode of *Family Guy*. The teacher asks if there are any questions, and a student raises his hand, echoing the question on the minds of many viewers: “So, like, can the family understand the baby, or what’s the deal with that?” Although the ambiguous status of Stewie and Brian leaves viewers conflicted as to what is going on in the way Faris describes, one thing is clear: the characters of Stewie and Brian are certainly allusions to magicom stars of the past, such as Mr. Ed, the talking horse. Darrell Hamamoto suggests that the fantastic characters and premises in some magicoms were not just simple flights into fantasy but reflected societal tensions: *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* revealed conflicting viewpoints over women’s rights (62–65), and Mr. Ed was representative of black Americans struggling against a society that still saw them as second-class citizens (60). *Family
Guy has flirted with the concept of Brian as a symbol of black oppression. Driven to violence because of his social standing as a subordinate animal in first-season episode “Brian: Portrait of a Dog,” he is hassled by police for walking the streets without a leash, frowned upon for drinking from a human’s water fountain, and denied a fair trial for biting when called a “bad dog” one too many times.

According to the fourth characteristic of magical realism, different dimensions and fantastical realms overlap with reality, disrupting the narrative in some way (Faris 7). An alternative dimension is never too far away in Family Guy, and these are usually fictional worlds from popular-culture sources. For example, Peter finds the coffee mugs in the alternate dimension that is the “beyond” section of the homewares store Bed, Bath and Beyond (“North by North Quahog”). In the episode “Breaking Out Is Hard to Do,” Chris is pulled into a different realm while shopping for groceries when Lois asks him to get her a milk carton from the back of the refrigerator. Chris is beckoned into the refrigerator by a pencil-drawn hand that leads him to the animated comic-book world of the music video “Take on Me” by 1980s pop band a-ha. He dances with the band’s front-man, Morten Harket and is chased by crooked motorcyclists armed with wrenches, mirroring the plot of the video. He escapes through a hole torn in the paper wall and falls out of the refrigerator back into the supermarket. Lois asks where he has been, and scared and confused, Chris shrieks, “I don’t know!” In the third-season episode “One if by Clam, Two if by Sea,” Peter recalls the one time he has ever been defeated: in the fictional computer-system world of the 1982 film Tron. There he rode a light cycle and was “the green guy” beaten by “the red guy,” whom he recognizes as an old friend from high school. Interestingly, Marie Darrieussecq regards the feeling of living between worlds as symptomatic of certain aspects of contemporary life, for example, living in a suburb, given that it “is a rather undifferentiated in-between . . . a space of all possibilities, sometimes frightening, since one can forget where one comes from there and become lost” (qtd. in Faris 21). The suburb is, of course, a popular location in the vast majority of sitcoms; perhaps Family Guy’s depiction of dimensional slippage is symptomatic of the “placelessness” of American suburbs.

The fifth characteristic of magical realism states that logical notions about identity, space, and time are upset (Faris 7). In a postmodern world of the fragmented self and accelerated culture, these are themes that occur again and again in popular culture. Family Guy is full of instances when time becomes stretched or meaningless, space is distorted, and identity becomes questionable. Peter frequently appears in roles and at times in history when it should be impossible. In “Death Has a Shadow,” Peter joins the unknown rebel standing in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. He does not stand his ground, however, because he “just came over to buy some fireworks.” When Lois claims all British men are charming in “One if by Clam, Two if by Sea,” Peter counters, “Yeah right, that’s what they said about Benjamin Disraeli.” There is then a cutaway to Disraeli seated at his desk writing. He looks up at the camera and says, “You don’t even know who I am!” (Disraeli was prime minister of England in 1868 and again from 1874 until 1880). In “A Hero Sits Next Door,” it is revealed that the Griffin residence hides a full-size Batcave complete with Batpole in the basement, like fictional superhero Batman. In “Blind Ambition,” Peter pokes his head through the bowling ball return and finds actor Judd Hirsch building a nuclear weapon in the impossibly cavernous space. It is later revealed that Hirsch is building the nuke for the Keebler Elves, who plan to use it in an attack against the iconic Rice Krispies’ Snap, Crackle, and Pop. Unfortunately, the attack proves fatal for Snap.

Family Guy’s magical realism is a more extreme form of the referentiality that is very much in evidence in The Simpsons. The references to film alone in The Simpsons are far too numerous to list but include A Streetcar Named Desire, Rear Window, The Great Escape, The
Birds, The Graduate, Cape Fear, and Thelma & Louise. During a Web chat Groening even suggested that “you could probably construct an entire episode made up of the references to Citizen Kane.” This can help unite audience and writer via the shared experience of nostalgia. Tim O’Sullivan notes that “most people have memories of their early encounters with television. Many of these recollections function as quite powerful points of symbolic, biographical, and generational reference” (202). Family Guy trades heavily on pop-culture nostalgia, with most of the fantastic elements that intrude on the narrative coming straight out of television, film, or general pop-culture history. The show appeals to people who grew up with television, and episodes are steeped in the memories of old sitcoms and commercials. The payoff for the viewer is the pleasure that accompanies the “knowingness” of recognizing an obscure reference and the status elevation this can bring within a community of fans. There is also the delight and shock that can accompany the unexpected reminiscence of “when television viewing became ‘the essential social habit of the age.’” There are deep forms of cultural and emotional (in)security in play here, often in tension with the ‘kitsch,’ slightly disturbing or comic-archaic qualities revealed in the juxtaposition of the ‘dated’ old within the flow of the new” (O’Sullivan 203). Evoking nostalgia in this way closes the gap between television and its viewers, creating a type of “participatory” television, one that to my mind goes some way toward countering Garrett Rowlan’s complaint that visual magical realism lacks a sense of the conspiratorial between writer and viewer, as it does “away with the distance between itself and its viewers” (207), mocking itself and the viewers’ shared cultural history in an affectionate manner.

Although Family Guy is essentially a situation comedy, and comedy is the prime objective of the show, the concerns of the postmodern age are evident in the pop-culture magical realism it utilizes. The fact that Family Guy and many other prime-time animated sitcoms are so sophisticated intertextually is due to the anxieties that the postmodern writer experiences. The postmodern writer feels there is nothing left to say so resorts to “speech in a dead language . . . without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists” (Jameson 18). This is pastiche, famously described by Frederic Jameson as a toothless blank parody. Addressing Jameson’s main complaint about postmodernism—that it does not treat the past or present as fixed, ultimate objects—Linda Hutcheon contends that postmodernism and its related offshoots, such as magical realism, cast doubt on our ability to ever really grasp with certainty the reality of the past (24). The past is unstable (an important theme in magical realism), and although the postmodern text acknowledges this, it also acknowledges that it is a product of that past, which is open to interpretation and mischief, bringing to light “‘the historical, social, ideological contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist’” (24–25). Family Guy has been accused of all the crimes of blank parody: meaninglessness, plagiarism, banality, laziness, and being formulaic.

Trey Parker and Matt Stone are perhaps the most vociferous of Family Guy’s critics. When asked, “What’s the meanest thing ever said to you before, during or after a gig?” Stone answered, “When people say to me, ‘God, you guys have one of the best shows on television. You and Family Guy.’ That fucking hurts so bad.” Parker agreed, comparing it to “a kick in the balls” (qtd. in Dix). This issue comes up in the two-part episode of South Park collectively known as “Cartoon Wars Parts I & II,” which takes its inspiration from the furious reaction in the Islamic world to Danish cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammad. The main concerns of the episodes over the right to satirize religious beliefs and the importance of doing so even in the face of terrorist threats took somewhat of a backseat as the media became more interested in the perceived hostilities within the world of prime-time animation.
In “Cartoon Wars,” the boys watch a mocked-up episode of *Family Guy*, which parodies all the defining characteristics of the show: the non sequitur cutaways and quick-fire nostalgic pop-culture references, including *Knight Rider* and its star David Hasselhoff, Mr. T of *The A Team*, and *Star Trek*‘s Captain Kirk filling in as one half of 1970s pop duo Captain and Tennille (Peter plays Tennille). The Griffin family constantly has to recap the plot of the show, presumably because Parker and Stone deem it difficult to follow as a result of the cutaways.

Kyle, who enjoys *Family Guy*, assumes Cartman also likes it because he perceives Cartman’s humor to be similar to that of the show. This angers Cartman, and he expresses the source of his, and Parker and Stone’s, ire: “I am nothing like *Family Guy*! When I make jokes, they are inherent to a story! Deep situational and emotional jokes based on what is relevant and has a point, not just one random interchangeable joke after another!” Ultimately, it is revealed that *Family Guy*’s writers are manatees living in a tank in the FOX studios; the writing process consists of the manatees randomly choosing “idea balls,” each one representing a component of a *Family Guy* joke. The “writers” are shown choosing three balls, “Mexico,” “Gary Coleman,” and “date,” which, when combined, construct a joke about Peter going on a date with Coleman in Mexico.

Even though this seems like harsh criticism, ultimately Parker and Stone’s attitude to the show is basically “live and let live.” *Family Guy*’s struggle against censorship in “Cartoon Wars” is a metaphor for *South Park*’s own struggle; they also use the episode to satirize the ethos of their own show. For example, Kyle defends *Family Guy*, arguing, “I know it’s just joke after joke, but I like that. At least it doesn’t get all preachy and up its own ass with messages, you know.” This is clearly a self-reflexive joke at *South Park*’s expense, given that many of the show’s episodes deal with contentious issues, and some close with a moral or lesson of sorts, usually signified by Kyle’s comment, “You know, I’ve learned something today. . . .” This tendency toward self-awareness and self-criticism is a trait that runs throughout the animated sitcom genre; the writers are almost as ready to poke fun at themselves as they are at others in a suitably postmodern fashion.

Parker and Stone are not the only ones who have a problem with *Family Guy*. Parker claims that “the day after [‘Cartoon Wars’] aired, we got flowers from *The Simpsons*. We got calls from *King of the Hill*, saying we were doing God’s work. It’s not just our opinion” (qtd. in Goldman). *The Simpsons* has criticized *Family Guy* on more than one occasion. In the eleventh-season episode “Missionary: Impossible,” a telethon is held by the FOX Network to raise money. As she stands in front of a TV displaying the *Family Guy* logo, celebrity telethon participant Betty White says, “So, if you don’t want to see crude, low-brow programming disappear from the airwaves, please, call now.” In “Treehouse of Horror XIII,” Homer creates an army of clones that are each more dim-witted than the last. One of the clones appears to be Peter Griffin, suggesting that *Family Guy* is guilty of plagiarism. MacFarlane’s second animated sitcom—*American Dad!*—has also been in the firing line. In *The Simpsons* episode “The Italian Bob,” Peter Griffin is pictured in a book of criminals, charged with “plagiarismo” (plagiarism). On the next page, Stan Smith, patriarch of *American Dad!*, is pictured with the charge of “plagiarismo di plagiarismo” (plagiarism of plagiarism). In the next “Treehouse of Horror” episode, the fourteenth, Executive Producer Al Jean is credited as Al “Family Guy” Jean in the Halloween tradition of giving the staff horrific, scary, or unpleasant name variations; the writers of *The Simpsons* seem to think *Family Guy* qualifies as all three. Kevin Smith and David Mandell, creator and coproducer of the short-lived *Clerks: The Animated Series*, described MacFarlane as a “nemesis” and *Family Guy* as “Emmy-nominated shit” during the *Clerks* DVD commentary for “The Last Episode Ever.”

But all this criticism is a fertile source of satire for MacFarlane and the *Family Guy* writers. Although they have not directly returned *South Park*’s fire in an episode, MacFarlane has taken the opportunity to address the ac-
cusations during speeches at various American universities. At Stanford, he took the criticism with good humor, recognizing that “they shit on everybody like we do” (qtd. in Fitzgerald). During a speech at the Harvard Class Day 2006, MacFarlane took the opportunity to respond in kind to South Park’s satirical barbs in character as Stewie Griffin:

You’re wondering to yourselves: what can I expect from the outside world? Will I find my niche? What should I know about the vast territory that lies beyond the confines of my little sub-cultural textbooks, ramen noodles, coin-operated laundry and TV shows that seem to think they can skate by with random jokes about giant chickens that have absolutely nothing to do with the overall narrative? The boys at South Park are absolutely correct: Those cutaways and flashbacks have nothing to do with the story! They’re just there to be “funny.” And that is a shallow indulgence that South Park is quite above, and for that I salute them.

Family Guy has, however, directly responded to The Simpsons in kind. The opening scene of “PTV” shows Stewie riding his tricycle through Quahog (a reference to the opening of The Naked Gun) until he pulls into his driveway, much in the way that Bart does on his skateboard during The Simpsons’ famous opening sequence. Homer is standing in the driveway until, catching sight of Stewie, he screams and turns to run out of the way of the oncoming tricycle. But rather than running into the family home as he would do to avoid Bart at the beginning of an average episode of The Simpsons, he collides with the door and is knocked unconscious. Peter then opens the door, looks down at Homer, and asks, “Hey Stewie, who the hell is that?” The episode “Mother Tucker” features a cutaway joke in which Brian mentions the time Stewie “sold out” by advertising Butterfinger candy bars, as The Simpsons did in the early 1990s. In the commercials, Stewie repeats Bart’s line from the commercials, “Nobody better lay a finger on my Butterfinger,” before adding a very pointed “D’oh!”

Because The Simpsons has become venerated to the extent that it is now part of the establishment (as opposed to the “outsider” status that being animated and irreverent once afforded it), it was only a matter of time before it felt the sting of satire unleashed by a newcomer, especially one as precocious as Family Guy; although Parker and Stone expressed their frustrations that plot ideas they had had already been done on The Simpsons in the South Park episode “Simpsons Already Did It,” they have never openly criticized the show.

Despite this, however, Matt Groening and Seth MacFarlane have both claimed to share a friendly relationship. In an interview with Nathan Rabin, MacFarlane said that The Simpsons, “at its best, is up there with the best episodes of All in the Family, Mary Tyler Moore, and Dick Van Dyke,” and Groening has acknowledged that “Family Guy and American Dad! have definitely staked out their own style and territory, and now the accusations are coming that The Simpsons is taking jokes from Family Guy. And I can tell you, that ain’t the case” (“Web Chat”). Perhaps there is an element of truth in the criticisms of Family Guy. Since the show was recommissioned in 2004 as a result of strong DVD sales after being canceled in 2002, it could be argued that an air of cockiness and complacency has surrounded it, as the non sequiturs and pop-culture references have become more frequent while the storylines have become looser. The other animation creators and producers seem to reject Family Guy in the same terms as Jameson would, as “blank parody.” It is worth speculating, however, that this criticism could be the result of jealousy and resentment. The writers of The Simpsons continue to toil away at what has become a tired concept while audience numbers dwindle after two decades, and Parker and Stone, veterans themselves with the seasons of South Park stretching into double digits, perhaps resent any comparison at all to the relative newcomer threatening their show’s uniqueness.

So is Family Guy merely blank parody? I would argue that it is not for two reasons. Yes,
on first inspection, *Family Guy*, especially in its earlier episodes, is strikingly similar to *The Simpsons*. It revolves around the antics of a not-so-bright, blue-collar American patriarch, his long-suffering wife, and their children, a boy, a girl, and a baby. It is set mostly in the suburbs and deals with everyday problems, like the breadwinner losing his job, the ability of parents to relate to their children and one another, and the problems children have at school. On the other hand, it is precisely these close similarities that make the differences, such as the “magical realism” of the Kool-Aid Man’s interruption, all the more effective when they occur. Second, the show is indicative of how the majority of people receive information in the technological world, whether it is by watching television after the advent of multichannel cable or browsing on the Internet. The vast number of intertextual references in a single *Family Guy* episode and the relative suddenness of their interruptions mimic the fragmented experience of “channel surfing,” all the more effective when they occur. Not everyone is quite so enthusiastic, however, even with hundreds of channels to choose from. Richard Appignanesi sees what he calls zapping or zero-consciousness as “a postmodern symptom of impatience without depth. The traditional richness and subtlety of nature, art and religion have faded away before our eyes and we are left with a ‘recession of reality’” (150). The stereotypical perception of the channel surfer is someone mindlessly flicking through television channels, shell-shocked by the stress of modern life and information overload. But Douglas Rushkoff believes that the channel surfer is actually an extremely savvy and aware individual, deftly skipping over persuasive advertising and assessing narratives in a short space of time, the very antithesis of a passive receiver of images. For him, channel surfing is indicative of a great awareness and intellect because the viewer who can “pull himself [sic] out of a linear argument while it is in progress, re-evaluate its content and relevance, and then either recommit or move on, is a [viewer] with the ability to surf the modern mediaspace” (*Playing the Future* 49–50). *Family Guy* certainly provides many opportunities for viewers to exercise this kind of mental agility because program parodies and interruptions provided by characters from other shows come thick and fast. The episode “I Never Met the Dead Man” is particularly rich in this “channel surfing” style. Peter recalls his trip to the southwest United States when he hit Warner Brother’s cartoon character Road Runner with his car. His passenger, Wile E. Coyote, assures Peter, “He’s fine; keep going.” In a parody of *NYPD Blue*, Andy Sipowicz threatens a suspect, “Are you going to tell me what I want to know, or am I going to have to show you my ass?”—a reference to the numerous instances of nudity on the show. Peter watches a *CHiPs* episode in which Officer ‘Ponch’ Poncherello ignores blatant drug and go zap! (flips imaginary remote control) Zap! Zap! Zap! It’s like an art form, where you have this weird collage, you see, of completely discontinuous images. (416)
dealing and gang warfare in favor of chatting to an attractive woman. This quick-fire direct referencing also includes fictional shows where a subversive element of black humor is added. For example, in “The Scooby Doo Murder Files,” the gang is looking for a killer who gutted his victim, strangled him with his own intestines, and dumped him in a river or, as Fred remarks, “One sick son of a bitch.” Another children's program is given similar treatment in the episode “Mind over Murder.” Sesame Street is combined with the gritty crime drama Homicide: Life on the Street to create Homicide: Life on Sesame Street, in which one of its puppet stars, Bert, is an alcoholic cop investigating violent crime and engaged in a homosexual relationship with fellow puppet Ernie. By mimicking channel surfing, Family Guy may make the restless cycle through channels an unnecessary activity for the viewer. But ironically, “cable and remote controls may have changed channel surfing into the most exercise many Americans now get” (Robinson and Godbey 153), which may be bad news for the health and waistlines of the nation.

As any channel surfer knows, there is also the possibility of encountering more commercials while clicking through the channels. This is taken into account by the writers of Family Guy, and well-known commercial figures disrupt the narrative of the show in fantastic ways. This brings us back to the Kool-Aid Man. He is not the only advertising icon to make an appearance. I have already mentioned the violent feud between the Keebler Elves and Snap, Crackle, and Pop of Kellogg’s Rice Krispies cereal. Another cereal icon, Sunny, of Kellogg’s Raisin Bran, also appears in “I Never Met the Dead Man.” He sprinkles two scoops of giant raisins over Quahog, crushing one car and setting off the alarms of others. Although there is a certain nostalgic delight in recalling these commercial figures, they are, nevertheless, disruptive. The family glares disapprovingly at the Kool-Aid Man when he bursts into the room. The Keebler Elves attempt to trigger a nuclear conflict, and Sunny causes a lot of damage to the town. Family Guy demonstrates the ubiquity of advertising and its intrusiveness, but there is an ambiguity to its attitude, given that commercials are a shared and sometimes treasured part of popular culture. Advertising and commercialism can be insidious, and Family Guy serves as a blunt reminder that it is very much there, even if we fail to notice it anymore. As in The Simpsons, when Homer’s mother sings him to sleep with the Fig Newton lullaby (“Mother Simpson”), or when the Simpson family sings along to the Chicken Tonight jingle (“Lady Bouvier’s Lover”), Family Guy takes advertising material and uses it for its own, mostly subversive, ends. John Fiske calls this an “excorporation of the commodity” that allows “a transfer of at least some of the power inherent in the commodification process. It is a refusal of commodification and an assertion of one’s right to make one’s own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system” (15). This recycling of cultural artifacts is taken one step further by a member of the Family Guy cast, who used the plastic ephemera of popular culture to create a stop-motion animated show called Robot Chicken.

Seth Green, who voices Chris Griffin in Family Guy, went on to create Robot Chicken for [adult swim], a block of adult-oriented animation on the Cartoon Network in the United States. This variety show comprises short, mostly unrelated scenes, separated by a burst of static, much like what used to occur when changing channels. It uses action figures, toys, dolls, and clay figures animated using stop-motion to parody and satirize various television shows in a fashion similar to Family Guy, although Robot Chicken completely dispenses with an overarching narrative. One particular motif involves fantastical characters being placed in a more realistic world or situation. For example, Skeletor, He-Man’s nemesis from He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, visiting his dentist Mo-Larr (“1987”), or Optimus Prime of the 1980s cartoon Transformers coping with prostate cancer (“Junk in the Trunk”). Robot Chicken very literally uses reclaimed commodities, in the form of toys originally advertised by Saturday morning animated cartoons and sold
to children, to subvert the dominant culture. The fragmented nature of *Family Guy* and *Robot Chicken* has proven very popular on sites such as YouTube because short clips unrelated to a main storyline are easily accessible, and they upload and download quickly. It is a symbiotic relationship, however, because popular aspects of online culture inform the humor of television animation. To cheer Peter up, Brian dons a banana suit and maracas to sing “Peanut Butter Jelly Time,” referencing a popular Flash animation short in “The Courtship of Stewie’s Father.” In turn, Brian’s version has become a popular clip on YouTube in its own right.

Ultimately, though, narrative disruption, like that of *Family Guy*’s “magical realism,” may not need rationalization in the form of postmodern anxiety, mimicry of the modern flow of information, or ambivalence regarding commercialism in the form of advertising. These are of secondary importance to the destabilizing effect of the sudden intervention of the fantastical, the “[textual] equivalent of deconstructionism.” These fantastical insertions lead viewers to question assumptions about language and experience, approaching them with skepticism rather than a belief in the complete understanding of reality and truth (Olsen 3). Deconstruction is the main objective when fantastical elements are introduced, and that in itself may be enough. Not only humorous, *Family Guy*’s breaking of the “rules” of the animated sitcom narrative as dictated by *The Simpsons* is indicative of the versatility and evolution of the medium. But now that television animation has begun mimicking the online experience, how much longer can the animated sitcom maintain a viewership on television? With its rapid-fire referentiality and YouTube-friendly structure, *Family Guy* and its stylistic kin *Robot Chicken* make *The Simpsons* seem somewhat passé. With *The Simpsons* now in its twentieth season, some have been complaining that the show has been failing for at least the last ten years (Bonné; Suellentrop; Williams and Jones, “Now Let Us Never Speak of It Again”). Increasingly, the Internet looks likely to be the next terrain for animation to migrate to, and that comes with certain advantages. MacFarlane’s newest project is a compendium of short cartoons dubbed *Seth MacFarlane’s Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy* and made exclusively for broadcast online. The shorts feature the same visual style and fantastical situations that *Family Guy* viewers are familiar with, but because of their Internet-only status, they are free of the restrictive censorship that dogs animated sitcoms on network television. In a recent interview with Fred Topel, MacFarlane describes this new situation as “the wild wild west.” With the *Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy* drawing more than fourteen million views in the space of a month (Weprin), this could signal, like the Kool-Aid Man bursting through a wall, animation’s unfettered arrival in its new home.

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