

From the vantage point of someone who watches a hell of a lot of TV (but still far less than the average American), the medium seems neither like a brain-liquefying poison nor a salutary tonic. Certainly for young children, who are fresh meat for the advertising industry, the idea of a week (or an entire childhood) without TV makes a lot of sense. But shouldn't grown men and women be trusted to judge their own dosages, just as they would decide on the number of drinks they can handle at the bar? And shouldn't we choose our favorite shows because we like them, not because they force our otherwise helpless cortexes to "manag[e] resources" and "recognize long-term patterns"? There couldn't be a better time to test Steven Johnson's theory than National TV Turnoff Week—just turn the set off till Sunday and see if you get any dumber. I'd participate in the experiment myself, but in my case, watching television is definitely a smart thing to do—I get paid for it.

Joining the Conversation

1. In her opening paragraph, Dana Stevens summarizes Steven Johnson's thesis statement from "Watching TV Makes You Smarter." How can you tell she is not speaking for herself here, but rather is describing a view that she disagrees with? What metacommentary signals her intent?
2. What specific criticisms does Stevens make of Johnson's essay? Which one is most persuasive to you, and why?
3. What exactly is Stevens's position?
4. How might Steven Johnson answer Stevens's objections?
5. Write an essay taking your own stand on the intellectual merits of television, considering the arguments of Dana Stevens and Steven Johnson and framing your essay as a response to one of them.

Family Guy and Freud: Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious

ANTONIA PEACOCKE



WHILE SLOUCHING IN FRONT of the television after a long day, you probably don't think a lot about famous psychologists of the twentieth century. Somehow, these figures don't come up often in prime-time—or even daytime—TV programming. Whether you're watching *Living Lohan* or the *NewsHour*, the likelihood is that you are not thinking of Sigmund Freud, even if you've heard of his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. I say that you should be.

What made me think of Freud in the first place, actually, was *Family Guy*, the cartoon created by Seth MacFarlane.

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(Seriously—stay with me here.) Any of my friends can tell you that this program holds endless fascination for me; as a matter of fact, my high school rag-sheet “perfect mate” was the baby Stewie Griffin, a character on the show. Embarrassingly enough, I have almost reached the point at which I can perform one-woman versions of several episodes. I know every website that streams the show for free, and I still refuse to return the five *Family Guy* DVDs a friend lent me in 2006. Before I was such a devotee, however, I was adamantly opposed to the program for its particular brand of humor.

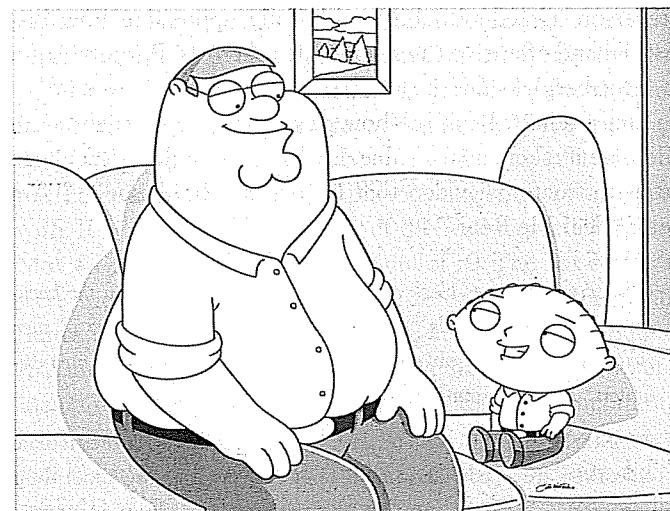
Before A
fan
opposed
show's
humor

Review
of Lit--
others
opposed
too

It will come as no surprise that I was not alone in this view; many still denounce *Family Guy* as bigoted and crude. *New York Times* journalist Stuart Elliott claimed just this year that “the characters on the Fox television series *Family Guy* . . . purposely offen[d] just about every group of people you could name.” Likewise Stephen Dubner, co-author of *Freakonomics*, called *Family Guy* “a cartoon comedy that packs more gags per minute about race, sex, incest, bestiality, etc. than any other show [he] can think of.” Comparing its level of offense to that of Don Imus’s infamous comments about the Rutgers women’s basketball team in the same year, comments that threw the popular CBS radio talk-show host off the air, Dubner said he wondered why Imus couldn’t get away with as much as *Family Guy* could.

Dubner did not know about all the trouble *Family Guy* has had. In fact, it must be one of the few television shows in history that has been canceled not just once, but twice. After its premiere in April 1999, the show ran until August 2000, but was besieged by so many complaints, some of them from MacFarlane’s old high school headmaster, Rev. Richardson W. Schell, that Fox shelved it until July 2001 (Weinraub). Still afraid of causing a commotion, though, Fox had the car-

Cancelled
2x



Peter and Stewie Griffin

toon censored and irregularly scheduled; as a result, its ratings fell so low that 2002 saw its second cancellation (Weinraub). But then it came back with a vengeance—I’ll get into that later.

Family Guy has found trouble more recently, too. In 2007 comedian Carol Burnett sued Fox for 6 million dollars, claiming that the show’s parody of the Charwoman, a character that she had created for *The Carol Burnett Show*, not only violated copyright but also besmirched the character’s name in revenge for Burnett’s refusal to grant permission to use her theme song (“Carol Burnett Sues over *Family Guy* Parody”). The suit came after MacFarlane had made the Charwoman into a cleaning woman for a pornography store in one episode of *Family Guy*. Burnett lost, but U.S. district judge Dean

Pregerson agreed that he could "fully appreciate how distasteful and offensive the segment [was] to Ms. Burnett" (qtd. in Grossberg).

Face
Value
Ex.

I must admit, I can see how parts of the show might seem offensive if taken at face value. Look, for example, at the mock fifties instructional video that features in the episode "I Am Peter, Hear Me Roar."

[The screen becomes black and white. Vapid music plays in the background. The screen reads "WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE ca. 1956," then switches to a shot of an office with various women working on typewriters. A businessman speaks to the camera.]

BUSINESSMAN: Irrational and emotionally fragile by nature, female coworkers are a peculiar animal. They are very insecure about their appearance. Be sure to tell them how good they look every day, even if they're homely and unkempt. *[He turns to an unattractive female typist.]* You're doing a great job, Muriel, and you're prettier than Mamie van Doren! *[She smiles. He grins at the camera, raising one eyebrow knowingly, and winks.]* And remember, nothing says "Good job!" like a firm open-palm slap on the behind. *[He walks past a woman bent over a file cabinet and demonstrates enthusiastically. She smiles, looking flattered. He grins at the camera again as the music comes to an end.]*

Laughing at something so blatantly sexist could cause anyone a pang of guilt, and before I thought more about the show this seemed to be a huge problem. I agreed with Dubner, and I failed to see how anyone could laugh at such jokes without feeling at least slightly ashamed.

Soon, though, I found myself forced to give *Family Guy* a chance. It was simply everywhere: my brother and many of my

friends watched it religiously, and its devoted fans relentlessly proselytized for it. In case you have any doubts about its immense popularity, consider these facts. On Facebook, the universal forum for my generation, there are currently 23 separate *Family Guy* fan groups with a combined membership of 1,669 people (compared with only 6 groups protesting against *Family Guy*, with 105 members total). Users of the well-respected Internet Movie Database rate the show 8.8 out of 10. The box-set DVDs were the best-selling television DVDs of 2003 in the United States (Moloney). Among the public and within the industry, the show receives fantastic acclaim; it has won eight awards, including three primetime Emmys (IMDb). Most importantly, each time it was cancelled fans provided the brute force necessary to get it back on the air. In 2000, online campaigns did the trick; in 2002, devotees demonstrated outside Fox Studios, refused to watch the Fox network, and boycotted any companies that advertised on it (Moloney). Given the show's high profile, both with my friends and family and in the world at large, it would have been more work for me to avoid the Griffin family than to let myself sink into their animated world.

Popu-
larity
facts

With more exposure, I found myself crafting a more positive view of *Family Guy*. Those who don't often watch the program, as Dubner admits he doesn't, could easily come to think that the cartoon takes pleasure in controversial humor just for its own sake. But those who pay more attention and think about the creators' intentions can see that *Family Guy* intelligently satirizes some aspects of American culture.

Some of this satire is actually quite obvious. Take, for instance, a quip Brian the dog makes about Stewie's literary choices in a fourth-season episode, "PTV." (Never mind that a dog and a baby can both read and hold lengthy conversations.)

[The Griffins are in their car. Brian turns to Stewie, who sits reading in his car seat.]

BRIAN: *East of Eden*? So you, you, you pretty much do whatever Oprah tells you to, huh?

STEWIE: You know, this book's been around for fifty years. It's a classic.

BRIAN: But you just got it last week. And there's a giant Oprah sticker on the front.

STEWIE: Oh—oh—oh, is that what that is? Oh, lemme just peel that right off.

BRIAN: So, uh, what are you gonna read after that one?

STEWIE: Well, she hasn't told us yet—damn!

Explains
the ex's
connect
ion to
claim

Brian and Stewie demonstrate insightfully and comically how Americans are willing to follow the instructions of a celebrity blindly—and less willing to admit that they are doing so.

The more off-color jokes, though, those that give *Family Guy* a bad name, attract a different kind of viewer. Such viewers are not "rats in a behaviorist's maze," as *Slate* writer Dana Stevens labels modern American television consumers in her article "Thinking Outside the Idiot Box." They are conscious and critical viewers, akin to the "screenagers" identified by Douglas Rushkoff in an essay entitled "Bart Simpson: Prince of Irreverence" (294). They are not—and this I cannot stress enough, self-serving as it may seem—immoral or easily manipulated people.

Addresses
other
essays

Parallels
comparisons

Rushkoff's piece analyzes the humor of *The Simpsons*, a show criticized for many of the same reasons as *Family Guy*. "The people I call 'screenagers,'" Rushkoff explains, "... speak the media language better than their parents do and they see through clumsy attempts to program them into submission" (294). He claims that gaming technology has made my gener-

ation realize that television is programmed for us with certain intentions; since we can control characters in the virtual world, we are more aware that characters on TV are similarly controlled. "Sure, [these 'screenagers'] might sit back and watch a program now and again," Rushkoff explains, "but they do so voluntarily, and with full knowledge of their complicity. It is not an involuntary surrender" (294). In his opinion, our critical eyes and our unwillingness to be programmed by the programmers make for an entirely new relationship with the shows we watch. Thus we enjoy *The Simpsons'* parodies of mass media culture since we are skeptical of it ourselves.

why like
Simpsons

Rushkoff's argument about *The Simpsons* actually applies to *Family Guy* as well, except in one dimension: Rushkoff writes that *The Simpsons'* creators do "not comment on social issues as much as they [do on] the media imagery around a particular social issue" (296). MacFarlane and company seem to do the reverse. Trusting in their viewers' ability to analyze what they are watching, the creators of *Family Guy* point out the weaknesses and defects of U.S. society in a mocking and sometimes intolerant way.

where
Rushk
off
analysis
difficult

Taken in this light, the "instructional video" quoted above becomes not only funny but also insightful. In its satire, viewers can recognize the sickly sweet and falsely sensitive sexism of the 1950s in observing just how conveniently self-serving the speaker of the video appears. The message of the clip denounces and ridicules sexism rather than condoning it. It is an excerpt that perfectly exemplifies the bold-faced candor of the show, from which it derives a lot of its appeal.

Sexism
Video
explained

Making such comically outrageous remarks on the air also serves to expose certain prejudiced attitudes as outrageous themselves. Taking these comments at face value would be as foolish as taking Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" seriously.

Furthermore, while they put bigoted words into the mouths of their characters, the show's writers cannot be accused of portraying these characters positively. Peter Griffin, the "family guy" of the show's title, probably says and does the most offensive things of all—but as a lazy, overweight, and insensitive failure of a man, he is hardly presented as someone to admire. Nobody in his or her right mind would observe Peter's behavior and deem it worth emulation.

Family
Guy
Response
to
Censorship

Family Guy has its own responses to accusations of crudity. 15 In the episode "PTV," Peter sets up his own television station broadcasting from home and the Griffin family finds itself confronting the Federal Communications Commission directly. The episode makes many tongue-in-cheek jabs at the FCC, some of which are sung in a rousing musical number, but also sneaks in some of the creator's own opinions. The plot comes to a climax when the FCC begins to censor "real life" in the town of Quahog; officials place black censor bars in front of newly showered Griffins and blow foghorns whenever characters curse. MacFarlane makes an important point: that no amount of television censorship will ever change the harsh nature of reality—and to censor reality is mere folly. Likewise, he puts explicit arguments about censorship into lines spoken by his characters, as when Brian says that "responsibility lies with the parents [and] there are plenty of things that are much worse for children than television."

It must be said too that not all of *Family Guy*'s humor could be construed as offensive. Some of its jokes are more tame and insightful, the kind you might expect from the *New Yorker*. The following light commentary on the usefulness of high school algebra from "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein" could hardly be accused of upsetting anyone—except, perhaps, a few high school math teachers.

[Shot of Peter on the couch and his son Chris lying at his feet and doing homework.]

CHRIS: Dad, can you help me with my math? [My teacher] says if I don't learn it, I won't be able to function in the real world.

[Shot of Chris standing holding a map in a run-down gas station next to an attendant in overalls and a trucker cap reading "PUMP THIS." The attendant speaks with a Southern accent and gestures casually to show the different road configurations.]

ATTENDANT: Okay, now what you gotta do is go down the road past the old Johnson place, and you're gonna find two roads, one parallel and one perpendicular. Now keep going until you come to a highway that bisects it at a 45-degree angle. [Crosses his arms.] Solve for x.

[Shot of Chris lying on the ground next to the attendant in fetal position, sucking his thumb. His map lies abandoned near him.]

In fact, *Family Guy* does not aim to hurt, and its creators take certain measures to keep it from hitting too hard. In an interview on *Access Hollywood*, Seth MacFarlane plainly states that there are certain jokes too upsetting to certain groups to go on the air. Similarly, to ensure that the easily misunderstood show doesn't fall into the hands of those too young to understand it, Fox will not license *Family Guy* rights to any products intended for children under the age of fourteen (Elliott).

Certain
Jokes off
Limits
like
what?

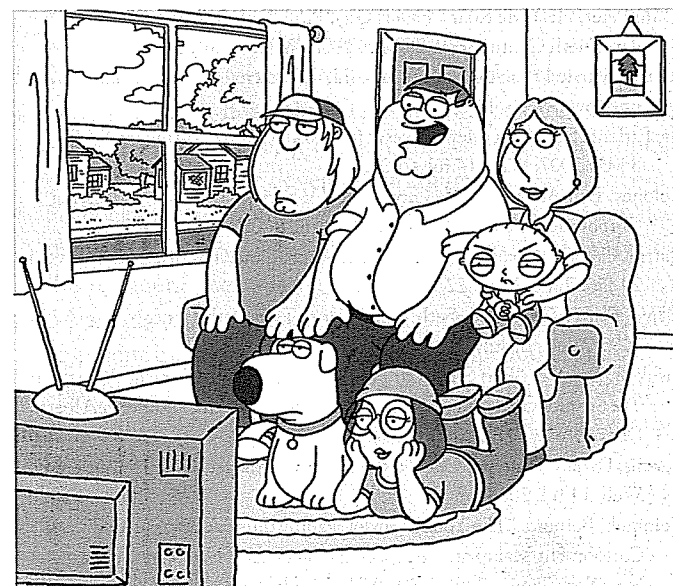
licensing
Products

However, this is not to say that MacFarlane's mission is corrective or noble. It is worth remembering that he wants only to amuse, a goal for which he was criticized by several of his professors at the Rhode Island School of Design (Weinraub). For this reason, his humor can be dangerous. On the one hand,

1 *Carrie*
humor

I don't agree with George Will's reductive and generalized statement in his article "Reality Television: Oxymoron" that "entertainment seeking a mass audience is ratcheting up the violence, sexuality, and degradation, becoming increasingly coarse and trying to be . . . shocking in an unshockable society." I believe *Family Guy* has its intelligent points, and some of its seemingly "coarse" scenes often have hidden merit. I must concede, though, that a few of the show's scenes seem to be doing just what Will claims; sometimes the creators do seem to cross—or, perhaps, eagerly race past—the line of indecency. In one such crude scene, an elderly dog slowly races a paraplegic and Peter, who has just been hit by a car, to get to a severed finger belonging to Peter himself ("Whistle While Your Wife Works"). Nor do I find it particularly funny when Stewie physically abuses Brian in a bloody fight over gambling money ("Patriot Games").

Thus, while *Family Guy* can provide a sort of relief by breaking down taboos, we must still wonder whether or not these taboos exist for a reason. An excess of offensive jokes, especially those that are often misconstrued, can seem to grant tacit permission to think offensively if it's done for comedy—and laughing at others' expense can be cruel, no matter how funny. Jokes all have their origins, and the funniest ones are those that hit home the hardest; if we listen to Freud, these are the ones that let our animalistic and aggressive impulses surface from the unconscious. The distinction between a shamelessly candid but insightful joke and a merely shameless joke is a slight but important one. While I love *Family Guy* as much as any fan, it's important not to lose sight of what's truly unfunny in real life—even as we appreciate what is hilarious in fiction.



The Griffin family watches TV.

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Joining the Conversation

1. How would you characterize Antonia Peacocke's argument about the television cartoon *Family Guy*? What does she like about the show? What doesn't she like? What would you say is her overall opinion of *Family Guy*?
2. Find two places in the essay where Peacocke puts forward arguments that she herself disagrees with. Analyze what she

says about these arguments. What would you say are her reasons for including these opposing views?

3. While making a serious argument, Peacocke frequently uses humor to make her points. Identify two or three examples where she does so, and explain the role that such humor plays in helping her develop her argument.
4. Peacocke cites a number of authors in her essay. How does she weave their ideas in with her own ideas? How fairly does she represent their views?
5. Some might see Peacocke's essay as proof of Gerald Graff's argument in "Hidden Intellectualism" (pp. 380–86) that pop culture can be a subject for serious intellectual analysis. Write an essay on this topic, using Peacocke's essay either to support or to refute Graff's argument.