



Family Guy and the Characteristics of Popular Culture

Anca Anton

Assist. dr., Department of Communication Sciences, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT

Family Guy is an animated series developed using the sitcom recipe, directed at adults, that reflects modern popular culture with its absurd humour feeding on an incredible diversity of cultural products. It is inspired by *The Simpsons*, but draws heavily on other animated series, originated especially in the Hanna-Barbera universe: *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*. *Family Guy* is an excellent example for what a product of American popular culture is as it basically is a TV show that stores, lists and reinterprets an enormous quantity of other cultural products; it makes the best out of that stock of products that circulate the media channels of the industrialized world, forming the mass culture (Fiske, 1989).

KEYWORDS : Family Guy, popular culture

INTRODUCTION

Family Guy is an animated series developed using the sitcom recipe and directed at adults. One of the most difficult tasks that was set out for the producers was to define and promote an identity because, from the first time it aired, the series was considered a bad and tasteless replica of *The Simpsons*, deemed as one of the top 3 series of the 20th century. The fact that FOX, the network that promoted the show, constantly changed its airing day and time slowed the process of developing a TV identity. Nevertheless, *Family Guy* managed, despite it being pulled and then reintroduced, to create its own style, recognized even by the creator of *The Simpsons* (Ryan, 2009). Although *The Simpsons* is a TV and popular culture institution, some journalists and analysts consider that there was a transfer between the two series, a passing-of-the-torch between *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* (Dahl, 2006) as the latter better reflects modern popular culture with its absurd humour feeding on an incredible diversity of cultural products. It is inspired by *The Simpsons*, but draws heavily on other animated series, originated especially in the Hanna-Barbera universe: *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULAR CULTURE AS SEEN IN FAMILY GUY:

Family Guy reflects popular culture, but its reflection is one that should be understood in a Roland Barthes paradigm, one of mythologies. The TV show made out of pop references a distinct trait but, by using them extensively, it wore them out, made them more and more ordinary. *Family Guy* does to the myths of the American culture the same thing Barthes (1997) did in his *Mythologies*: take them down from their pedestal, dissect them to see how they are built, and present their anatomy in order to offer defence. But the use of various pop products in episodes of the TV show follows a path characteristic to social media and defined by the relationship between predictable and unpredictable. The initial feel is that of perfect reflection but, very quickly and suddenly, the image is distorted and the mirror appears to be subjected to a very powerful heat that can deform or break it.

The main characteristic in *Family Guy* is **super-signification**; it is programmed for a very diverse audience that can choose what it wants, when it wants, turning the TV show into a non-stop supermarket of meanings. The audience is very heterogenic, with various centres of representation, but *Family Guy* contains so many pop references that it can satisfy even the more niche consumer.

The myths of *Family Guy* are in a continuous *mélange* with various popular culture products. There are a few central myths, completed by so many references that this can easily be called a "blink and you'll miss it" narrative. The central myth is that of **the head of the family**, and it is one that will be repeated in another TV show, *American Dad*, but with a political twist to it. But this is a flipped myth, as Peter Griffin is far from being a **model father** or having a **model family**: although the Griffins live in the suburbs and respect the all-American dream family recipe (a father, a mother, 2.5 children – two teenagers and a baby – and a dog), each episode brings elements that contradict the myth and whistle-blow it as fake. Peter Griffin, the father, is a

social and financial loser, extremely lazy, who works at an assembly line at a toy factory but has no problem being unemployed or not being able to provide for his family; he often appears not to recognize or understand his own children, sometimes even to them (he does not understand why Chris, his eldest, does not want to be part of the scouts and forces him to continue; he does not remember Stewie's, his youngest, name and when he changes his diaper he intentionally uses paprika powder instead of baby powder; he constantly mocks and humiliates Meg, his daughter etc.). As a paradox, he is sometimes very preoccupied with the feelings of his family, particularly those of his wife, and tries to mend things, but his stupidity, arrogance and lack of decency make him fail most of the times. The so-called American myth of the father that protects his family, works hard, is smart and successful is reflected in the distorted mirror that is Peter Griffin.

Another myth is that of the **American mother**. She is, according to the myth, a good housewife, with faith in God, devoted to her family and her household. Lois embodies, at first sight, all these characteristics; but through the constant referral to products of popular culture we discover a nymphomaniac Lois, former lesbian, a practicer of S&M, drug user, sometimes lacking maternal instincts. Nevertheless, she is the voice of reason for Peter and the equilibrium and responsibility factor in the Griffin family.

Another example of an American Myth is **the vigilante**, a person that seeks his or her own justice, outside the rule of law, the noble intentions validating the illegal actions. Numerous visual stereotypes related to the American society and the American family are exploited and explored; they are reflected especially in the construction of the characters: the paralyzed hero cop that courageously, albeit aggressively, goes on with his life, the unjustified aggressive attitude towards African American individuals and their elusive attitude towards policemen (in an episode the entire Quahog police department, the local police, is sent by the mayor in search of an 1980s movie character, and when people in the street find out about this they all take off their white skin, a costume, and they appear to be black in reality), the sexual predator, the obsessive search for popularity of the unpopular kid etc. All these stereotypes and myths represent the background on which all popular culture references are made, sometimes aided by soundtracks (for which *Family Guy* even received an Emmy).

Another characteristic of popular culture that can be, without a doubt, identified in *Family Guy* is its **repetitive nature**, based on recycled material. It begins with the family structure, one of the main arguments used by those criticizing the show: the similarity to the family structure in *The Simpsons* and then its repetition in *American Dad*, even though the sources for all of these shows are much older and go back to *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*.

Furthermore, *Family Guy* explores ever more boldly the type of self-referential television, whose interest lies with itself, a television about television, about its programmes, its conventions, with a strong narcissistic approach. That is the reason why in an episode the family talks about the fact that the show might get cancelled, in another episode it is invited in a show about dysfunctional families and sub-

sequently becomes the subject of a reality show. Furthermore, Peter becomes the presenter of his own show, awakening the jealousy of another TV host, Tom Tucker, who tries to discredit Peter by bringing forward the rivalries of the television world. Television is one of the central myths of the show, Peter being the strongest connection as he is an avid consumer of popular culture products; when the antenna of the local TV station breaks down, Peter cannot bear the separation from his TV set and starts wearing a carton TV frame, watching the reality of his family through that frame and mimicking the production process of his own show. In *Family Guy* the television plays the role of the narrator of the Griffin family activities. For example, in an episode anchor man Tom Tucker develops a relationship with Peter's mother. Peter does not approve and in order to explain the situation Tom presents the facts as he would have presented the news bulletin – this approach to narration is present throughout all of the seasons.

Turning everything into narration is another characteristic of popular culture and it too can be found in *Family Guy*. For example, in an episode Peter starts to narrate his life while living it, day by day. By narrating both the actions as well as his thoughts, he attracts the fury of his wife when he evaluates in a negative way her cooking and her looks, ignoring the fact that she was present. Also, by using the fact that turning everything into narration gives the opportunity to manipulate information as we want, in an episode the visit of Lois's mother is presented by announcing it and then by using the image of the family saying goodbye after a week. *Family Guy* is funny because it is funny, because it does not require its audience to make a big effort in order to understand, it only asks for a relatively decent knowledge on popular culture. *Family Guy* is funny because it brings forward, in the first line, all those cultural products the Americans (and not only them) lived with, were raised with; they are easily recognizable, familiar and familial, give a sense of quiet and control, but most of all, safety. Thus, *Family Guy* generates short term gratification for its public, offering in return the power of entertainment.

Alongside super-signification, the second most important aspect of the narrative of the show is **intertextuality**. We are talking about a primary intertextuality, developed between products transmitted using the same channel, the TV one. Of course, the references are too many in order to mention them all in this paper, but we can point out references that go from Bugs Bunny (killed by Elmer) to Britney Spears or to 1980s sitcoms.

Nevertheless, when compared to other satiric shows on TV, *South Park* is the one making the most out of sarcasm; we see in one episode Cartman (*South Park*) and Bart Simpson (*The Simpsons*) going to FOX headquarters in order to ask for the cancellation of *Family Guy*. Nevertheless, *Family Guy* has super-signification as dominant characteristic, *South Park* – intertextuality, *The Simpsons* is trying to establish an equilibrium as the more friendly among the three shows, being deemed "Family friendly".

CONCLUSIONS

Family Guy makes jokes about absolutely anything and everything, all in an schizoid, non-sequitur style, but by doing that it created its own identity and contributed, alongside *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, to a whole new genre. In this show and in this genre meanings can only be circulated within the societies familiar with their particular cultural production; the moment we take the meanings away from under the umbrella of popular culture, they are lost and *Family Guy* makes no sense.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ryan, K. (2009, March 25). Interview with Matt Groening. The AV Club. Retrieved from <http://www.avclub.com/article/matt-groening-25525>. | [2] Dahl, O. (2006, November 06). The Simpsons and Family Guy: A Tale of Two Eras. Buddy TV. Retrieved from <http://www.buddytv.com/articles/the-simpsons/the-simpsons-and-family-guy-a-2309.aspx>. | [3] Fiske, J. (1989). Understanding popular culture. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman. | [4] Barthes, R. (1997). Mitologii. Iași, Ro: Institutul European. |