

## **Memes to A Darker Shade:**

### **Dark Simpsons, Un/Popular Culture and Summoning Theories of Darkness**

Elisa Armstrong<sup>1</sup> & Tara Brabazon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Student in Cultural Studies at Flinders University in South Australia

<sup>2</sup>Dean of Graduate Research and the Professor of Cultural Studies at Flinders University in Australia

Correspondence: Tara Brabazon, Flinders University, Australia.

Email: tara.brabazon@flinders.edu.au

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**Abstract:** This article enters the Dark Simpsons to provide theories of un/popular culture, while summoning models of dark pop. The piece commences with a conventional presentation of memes. However, their accelerated movement is probed and monitored to understand the agitated transformations between popular and un/popular culture. These models are then applied to an investigation of the Dark Simpsons and the rationale for this troubled and troubling cultural system.

**Keywords:** Dark Simpsons, Meme, Un/Popular Culture, Popular Culture, Dark Culture

#### **1. Introduction**

Grumpy Cat. Success Kid. Corona Lisa. Sad Keanu. Clearly, memes are part of popular culture. More significantly, they challenge popular culture. Operating at edges, boundaries and borders, they activate inversions, the grotesque, the obscene, the odd and the weird to shatter – at speed – clichés, assumptions and common sense. Summoning the carnivalesque on meth, memes are a carcinogen in the culture, slipping and sliding into and through social media in a way that is mobile, fast and innocuous. Most memes ruffle the feathers of propriety. Yet others offer a deeper, darker challenge. They are not hooked into the hegemonic cloth. They rip and shred. They fray and suffocate. They are memes of a darker shade. This article enters the Dark Simpsons to provide theories of un/popular culture and summon models of dark pop. We commence with a presentation of memes and their role in accelerating and cascading the movements between popular and un/popular culture. This model is then activated in an investigation of the Dark Simpsons and the rationale for this troubled and troubling cultural system.

#### **2. Un/Popular Cultures and Dark Pop**

Popular culture remains a volatile space. Aligning postdisciplinary knowledge and post identity politics, popular culture reveals the edges and margins of truth, reality, commitment and motivation. Those edges are sharp. Those edges are patrolled. Those edges are barricaded. The domestic spaces of consumption – through digitization, disintermediation and deterritorialization – become a hub of production. The online

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environment replaces the shopping centre, the gym, the pub and the university. Marinated by digitization, the home became a film studio, a radio station, photographic editing suite and a journalistic cluster. Digitization from the domestic sphere is made public and gains a public audience. Visual media dominate other popular cultural interfaces and sensory opportunities. Mobile phone footage, YouTube, Skype and TikTok carries personal media to a wide audience. Such interfaces and media platforms shake and shatter the nature of popular culture. What is mainstream? What is dominant culture? These questions agitate categories and hierarchies. The resultant culture can be described as the carnivalesque, simulacra, inversion, the interregnum or the grotesque. The banal is meaningful through its mobility. Content production and information literacy transform as the period for analysis or interpretation truncates.

Digital content is convenient and mobile. It is easily downloaded, uploaded, shared and heard. The diversity of genres, formats and forms expands, as does the category of popular culture itself. Ibe O. Ibe (2019) described the “delineations of popular culture” (p.175). A long tail is created. So is a colonizing, expansive present that grasps with desperation at the fodder of the past. This is not nostalgia. The past is wrenched into the present, foreclosed in its meanings, and shedding its context. Space and place also transform. Deterritorialization of texts ensures that popular culture gains layers and undulates in new ways through space and time, at increasing speeds. With hierarchies in flux, the relationship between popular and un/popular culture transforms. Un/popular culture discovers new audiences. Popular culture and subcultures were founded on inventing – and investing in - the authenticity of particular texts, whether punks, mods, the Kinks, The Jam or Elvis Costello. Yet all texts are equal before the download. All texts are popular culture in waiting. To create and / or return hierarchies to cultural forms, digitization has to be disrupted. Mobility must be blocked

Un/popular culture revels in the domestic, the messy, the funny, the uncomfortable, the frightening, and the odd. Why un/popular culture is such a useful phrase is that it confirms the speed of movement between categories and how un/popular topics, subjects and ideas can infuse the dominant environment. As an andragogical concept, un/popular culture activates an intricate space. Popular culture splinters and fractures despite digitization, and indeed because of it. Everyday cultures are shredded, and expectations are subverted. It is also framed by information literacy: how much knowledge is required to decode the text? How is specialist vocabulary, history and genre managed and negotiated? In these microcultures – like the Dark Simpsons – this knowledge is celebrated and recognized. The question is how this digital moment and text finds micro-audiences. The circulation speed of un/popular culture creates a differentiation that blocks and shreds the simple binary oppositions of high and low culture and instead creates undulating, digitized, smash cut, time-shifting, customized texts.

Un/popular culture captures, codifies and shares diverse and complex experiences and renders them meaningful. Un/popular culture is not ephemeral. It is weighted by the lived memories of the people that shared it. Before moving to an investigation of memes and Dark Simpsons, one more layer of analysis was required. Dark culture is most associated with goth or industrial subcultures. It captures art, music, fashion and philosophy. Its relationship with popular culture is undertheorized. It is inter-textual and has an early historical moment of convergence, of significance in this article. Peter Parisi, in 1993, located “Black Bart Simpson,” exploring appropriation and commodification (1993). In this initial interpretation of the programme, it was described as “crudely drawn television” (p.125). In other words, the binaries were agitated and resonated to unsettle consensual categories. Darkness is not only in a binary opposition

to the light. It casts shadows and reveals shapes and sensibilities that do not emerge from the surfaces of a culture. From low to high, from popularity to un/popularity, we now explore memes and the Dark Simpsons.

### **3. Memes, Platitudes of Participatory Culture and the Dark Simpsons**

Memes activate meaning systems beyond the remix or the inverted humour summoned through manipulation and reinscription. Yes, they can slot into legacy cultural studies theories such as the active audience, user generated content and what Huntington described as, “subversive communication in a participatory media culture” (2013, p. 1). Memes are acts of reframing, a jolt to the accepted and acceptable surfaces of popular culture. Alexander confirmed their role in secondary socialization, believing the, “shape the mindsets, forms of behaviour, and actions of social groups” (2008, p. 836). Such statements can tilt into platitudes. Visual literacy requires more complex tools and theories. However, the place of accelerated, hyper-contextualized humour in memes initiates alternatives, difference and defiance, becoming what James described as, “rethinking of ideological position taken by mainstream media” (2015, 29-30). Again, the simplistic theoretical connections emerge. The conceptualization of ‘mainstream media’ that emerged after disintermediated and deterritorialized digitization is simplistic. The fissures, ambiguity and liminality are marginalized. The micro-aggressions and critiques within the seemingly ‘mainstream’ is shielded. To summon another intellectual cliché, perhaps they are, as Huntington describes, “symbolic, persuasive texts.” (Huntington, 2013, p. 3). How that ‘persuasive’ imperative emerges, without theorizations of mobility or speed remains the mystery. The nature of persuasion without attendant theorization of media literacy means that the connection between text and audience, encoding and decoding, becomes automatic and assumed. Theorizing this persuasion is important and requires a considered understanding of humour, as it is a challenging textual journey to move between cultures, but confirms the knowledge, belonging and communication system of a group (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008, p. 809). As can be seen through this accelerated tour through meme scholarship, very conventional semiotic theory is summoned, with a marinade of Gramsci hegemonic theory, without the Perry Anderson recalibration (2017).

The Dark Simpsons matters because these memes are activated with the intention to offend, to use disgust and darkness to unsettle and anger. To move to offense - to jump the fence of quirky internet humour - is politically potent and important to understand. What is the status of a joke that is not funny? What is its political role? Offense and disgust are important, and far beyond what Lockyer and Pickering described as probing “how the ethical limits of humour can be negotiated” (2008, p. 809). While pleasure and risk have been studied throughout the history of cultural studies, disgust is a much more intricate formation that summons a wedge between popular and un/popular culture.

### **4. A Darker Shade of Simpsons**

Created by Matt Groening, The Simpsons television show first aired in December 1989. It has moved through thirty seasons, with two more planned to air (Roffman, 2019; Wikipedia, n.d.). It is an influential comedy show with an international reach and has diversified the interfaces of its impact through merchandizing and memes. The show spawned books, a movie, many video games, theme park attractions, and an enormous range of commodities. It is part of popular culture and maintains popular cultural currency. It is rare that popular culture survives through the decades. Star Trek, Star Wars and

James Bond, alongside The Simpsons have moved through a great diversity of social, cultural, economic and political environments. Therefore, the trajectories of this popular culture, as it moves into popular memory and un/popular culture, offers a deep and unusual understanding of audiences, reception theory, and political alternatives.

Dark Simpsons is the term used to capture, gather and signify a parody series of videos, comics, memes, and GIFs that are made from screenshots and clips from The Simpsons. They are essentially a collage of clips or screenshots to create a new digital object. These are shared on Facebook and Twitter, for the mixed content, YouTube, for the videos, and a dedicated website, for the comics. A Patreon site channels financial support from fans, pledging various amounts each month to creators. These contributions gain fans exclusive content, early access to material, and a platform for dialogue with the creator.

The oldest comic on DarkSimpsons.com arches before March 2018, with both the origins and dates of production unclear. The YouTube channel commenced in September 2018. The first video is a remake of one of the comic strips, suggesting that the comics and their positive reception were a springboard and pathway into the videos. By March 2020, there were 116 videos on the YouTube channel. The channel has 72.9k subscribers and the top three videos have 1.4 million, 1.3 million, and 533,000 views each. The channel is not a small or specialized entity. It has a following. It is un/popular culture. The ideas are difficult and uncomfortable yet watched widely. Dark Simpsons has a significant following, produces regular content, and addresses contemporary issues.<sup>1</sup> It is a strong example of transgressive fan-created fiction that summons popular culture to create un/popular textual spaces.

Transgressive fiction is ignored, marginalized or labelled as “sophomoric, misanthropic and psychotic” (Hoey, 2014, p. 27). American Psycho is a popular example of transgressive fiction, but reviews at the time of its release described it as “deeply and extremely disgusting” and “sickening, cheaply sensationalist, pointless” (Hoey, 2014, p. 28). Hoey suggests that part of this alienation and disgust from viewer is because transgressive fiction is designed to “frustrate all the desires the reader brings to the text” (2014, p. 28). This is an activity of denial to entertain. A denial to create commentary and thought. Readers hoping for meaning, escape, or the pleasures of voyeurism are typically left unsatisfied and unfulfilled (Hoey, 2014, p. 28). Violence has a function to transgress. The incompleteness of this violent vista is important, failing to summon an expansive fantasy world. An element of dissatisfaction is produced when transgressive texts are viewed. Reflexive and critical spaces are compressed. Instead, transgressive fiction is designed to elicit an extreme and intense emotional response. The point of these texts is shock. Dark Simpsons suffers when viewed from a distance and without engagement.

The creator explains in an introductory video that this textual movement is created through research, watching “hundreds and hundreds of episodes” and “editing tiny clips together to make a new dark comedic story” (Dark Simpsons, 2019). In addition, no more than “12 seconds continuously from a single scene” is used to avoid stealing any jokes and keeping the humour original through the reconstruction. Further, there are copyright issues enacted through playing longer clips. He also used rotoscoping to replace backgrounds and enhance lip syncing. Audio is removed from another episode and then re-synched (Dark Simpsons, 2019). Each labour-intensive video takes over eight hours to create and lasts

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<sup>1</sup> On 28<sup>th</sup> March 2020, Dark Simpsons released a video called Coronavirus Hits the Simpsons

about two minutes (Dark Simpsons, 2019). There are two self-imposed rules: 1) “No storyline is off-limits no matter how dark or offensive” and 2) “No photoshopping the screenshots!” He offers no explanation of why these rules exist. They are likely to increase the challenge of making the videos. The creator aims to “maintain a solid storyline that does not require any dialogue to understand”: it should be possible to connect the dots to build the story (Dark Simpsons, 2020). These rules also create ambiguity and space to enable the articulation of ideas that the creator might otherwise be uncomfortable presenting. It also allows for storylines that would be impossible to develop due to the limits of the dialogue in the show. Dark Simpsons is not purely outcome-focused, but it has a specific approach and methodology. This complicates the videos. They are layered and considered. Time has been taken to produce them and curate the intricate selection of images, clips, and story.

The creator’s “Welcome to Dark Simpsons (Parody Videos)” video serves as a paratext that influences how the videos are approached and understood. Such paratexts present a text, with this video formulating an epitext, as it sits external to the originating textual system (Genette, 1991, pp. 262, 264). The video autoplays when a visitor opens the Dark Simpsons YouTube channel, and as such it is likely to be the first viewed video. This means it is a frame through which the other videos are viewed. It provides context or explanation of the videos – even if only to explain how they are configured and constructed.

Dark Simpsons as a fan activity (a behaviour) or an item of fan fiction (an artefact) is tethered to vidding, where fans re-cut episodes of television shows to create music videos, new narratives, and edit parts with which they disagree. Originally, it was clips set to music that helped the viewer see the source text differently and serve as an “interpretive lens” (Coppa, 2008). Generally, these videos offer an argument or critique, rather being an act of praise or celebration (Coppa, 2008). The lineage of vidding can be traced back to 1975 with a Star Trek slideshow called *What Do You Do with a Drunken Vulcan?* by Kandy Fong (Coppa, 2008). Due to its roots in representational politics and feminism, many vids still feature issues of gender, “displacement, and marginalisation in visual culture” (Coppa, 2008). Therefore, Dark Simpsons can be tethered to this history, with some attention to gender and representation. But further, it continues the history of vidding to reconfigure arguments through inversion, horror, disgust and confusion.

## **5. Character Relationships**

Popular culture has many audiences, meanings and trajectories. Un/popular culture follows this plurality and complexity. The creator of Dark Simpsons has stated that the intended audience is “hardcore fans who grew up on the show” (Dark Simpsons, n.d.). This group has a pre-existing knowledge and literacy with the characters and the Simpsons discourse. Fan creators often have some level of attachment or affection towards the characters with which they are working (Alexander, 2008, p. 130). Their creations use these characters rather than creating new and “anonymous” flesh (Alexander, 2008, p. 130). Autonomy is being exerted over the fictional characters that arches beyond the performance of character, motivations, and relationships (Barnes, 2015, p. 76). The creator of Dark Simpsons is taking ownership of the characters, even temporarily, and making this borrowing and repurposing meaningful for new audiences. The consumption of fiction requires a level of “imaginative input on the part of the audience” where readers “contribute imaginatively” to the fiction they are consuming (Barnes, 2015, p. 70). Often, the story relies on the reader understanding the logic of the fictional universe being used, the characters, and the relationships between them. For example, Harry Potter fan\_fiction very rarely takes the time to explain

Hogwarts, muggles, or who Harry Potter is. Using a pre-existing work of fiction allows a “jump-starting” of the readers’ imaginations that can then be stretched beyond the bounds of the text (Barnes, 2015, p. 71). These literacies provide storytelling shortcuts that allows fan\_fiction creators to truncate extensive scene-setting and explanation. This smash cutting of a scene is important when configuring a narrative arch over a two-minute video.

Although Dark Simpsons claims to be comedy, trans-genre horror is also a marinade for the videos. The discomfort and disquiet jut and jolt from the texts. This horror – this dark pop – has a function. It unsettles and defamiliarizes the normative experience of watching The Simpsons. This familiarity creates assumptions. This familiarity also summons the humour. Homer may strangle Bart, but viewers read this violence within the context of a heteronormative family, with a loving father who would do anything for his family. Without this framework, the child abuse rife in the show would render it difficult viewing and facing legislative restrictions that would block its circulation within televisual schedules. The Dark Simpsons unsettles assumptions and slashes heteronormative ideologies about men, women, sex and violence. Importantly, within the parameters of the project, Dark Simpsons enacts minimal recognisable editing because the creator’s ethos is to leave the clips as original as possible. The voices of the characters are undubbed. Genuine audio from the show is deployed. This enhances the twisted authenticity of the Dark Simpsons. The familiarity and benevolent popular cultural memories are shredded, sliced and crushed, assembling horror and confusion. Horror is produced from this juxtaposition of the familiar (characters, settings, visuals) with the dark un/popular culture created in Dark Simpsons. The implausible is rendered shockingly plausible.

The out-of-character behaviour displayed in the Dark Simpsons is an exaggerated version of what began in season eight of The Simpsons (and contributed to the long decline in its popular cultural history). Zombie Simpsons – Principal and The Pauper episode – was a critique from within, providing the impetus for the darkly shadowed, disintermediated version on YouTube. The Homer in the Dark Simpsons may share the voice and appearance of the original, but not his behaviours, psychology, or relationships. It is a separate product that is built from the parts of The Simpsons. Such practices are common and have been logged through thirty years of cultural studies theorizing. For example, in the investigation of Harry Potter fan\_fiction, Cuntz-Leng (2014) raises this issue regarding Fred and George in the context of twincest fan\_fiction about them. Whilst the characters are familiar, “the erotic context in which these characters have been placed does not seem to be the world of J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter that we know from the books or the movies” (Cuntz-Leng, 2014). As configured through the early renderings of Star Trek fan fiction, sexual re-representations are frequent and virulent.

Often, the success of dark humour relies on a level of abstraction from the subject for it to be funny rather than distasteful (Gubanov, Gubanov, Rokotyanskaya, & Cheremnyh, 2019, p. 2137). The greater the level of abstraction, the easier it is to perceive the joke as humorous. In dark, un/popular culture, such abstraction is difficult to maintain. It is intimate. Hot. Confronting. Connected. Violence is enacted to children, whether through paedophilia, starvation or sickness (Gubanov et al., 2019, p. 2137). To summon humour from these transgressions – if possible – requires children to be rendered post-human and anonymized. Such an example exists in South Park, with Kenny dying in each episode. He is the “least disclosed” character in the programme: he has no face due to his hood, his speech is indecipherable, and he does not have a narrative arc (Gubanov et al., 2019, p. 2137). His role is to die. As a character he is abstract and

difficult to form an attachment to which makes his death is expected and comedic, with no sadness, guilt, or regret. Viewers are focused on the ‘how’ of the death, not the ‘who’. Dark Simpsons narratives do not demonstrate such techniques. Instead an horrific act emerges within a context and without abstraction. Therefore, viewers cannot remove or decentre themselves from the violence. It is authentically inauthentic. It is inauthentically authentic.

The inauthenticity of The Simpsons, Harry Potter or science-fiction settings enables diversity, plurality and the exploration of situations that would be challenging to execute in other genres. Animation intensifies this premise. Indeed, Alexander (2008, p. 120) found that there was more sadomasochistic fan\_fiction for sci-fi and fantasy canon than for fiction set within a realist frame. The defamiliarization summoned by the fan creators enables dark content to emerge (Alexander, 2008, p. 120). Similarly, Göbel (2017, p. 215) proposed that one reason rape is prevalent in fantasy is because it does not translate into contemporary culture, beyond motif, tropes and abstraction. The torture or rape does not unhook and rehook with ease between contexts. Characters from The Simpsons are cartoon animations, which visually distances them from real-life humans in the same way a medieval setting reshape the authenticity of characters. The fictions can be enjoyed without the burden or guilt that might be evoked when considering them as though they were real people. Watching the implied rape of Milhouse (a child in The Simpsons) by Homer Simpson in a Dark Simpsons video is quite different to the implied rape of a real child by a real adult on the news or in current affairs programming. Real people, brutalized and tortured, connote real victims suffering and consequences. These attributes can be marginalized or minimized in fiction thus neutralising some of the discomfort for viewers. This capacity to park ethics is part of un/popular culture.

## 6. Why Dark Simpsons?

The trajectory of The Simpsons has not been straightforward and there are many reviews and discussion articles that argue that the show has been in decline since season nine. Such critiques have intensified since season twelve. This decline is reflected in decreasing viewer numbers and lower ratings on sites such as IMDB as the seasons progress (Sweatpants, 2012). The show began with an ambitious and experimental approach (Sepinwall & Seitz, 2016). The programme, like Beavis and Butthead, Pinky and the Brain, and Ren and Stimpy, configured narratives that were “cynical, anti-authority social satires that often bordered on nihilism” (Sweatpants, 2012). The antagonism to the powerful was packaged in slapstick comedy and animation that mitigated the bleak cynicism. These were complex and layered programmes, with a philosophical aftertaste (Sepinwall & Seitz, 2016). As the layering was lost in The Simpson, slapstick became the dominant comedic mode. Homer Simpson commenced the programme as a melancholy figure full of unpalatable qualities who genuinely loved his family (Sepinwall & Seitz, 2016). Over time, he morphed into a shallow imitation of his former self, someone lacking self-awareness. He was the butt of the joke rather than an active participant in it. These changes to The Simpsons led to the idea of the Zombie Simpsons – a term used to describe the version of the show from season nine. It was an empty shell of a programme. As Sweatpants (2012) writes in his book *Zombie Simpson*, “the only thing that makes *Zombie Simpsons* exceptional is its illustrious predecessor, *The Simpsons*.” This mutation intensified the fan dissatisfaction, summoning the space for the Dark Simpsons to emerge.

As the Simpsons died and was zombified, the audience aged, disintermediated interfaces such as YouTube emerged, and online fandom expanded. When these changes aligned, a deterritorialized and digital space

emerged to create not only resistance, but havoc. Dissatisfied with what was being produced by Fox, fans reinterpreted it to meet their changing needs, creating dark pop and an unsettling but productive relationship between un/popular and popular culture. The most obvious way that The Simpsons is manipulated and proliferated is in the abundant memes that serve basically every situation imaginable – one that has gained mainstream momentum is one where Homer edges backwards to disappear into a hedge (Know Your Meme, n.d.). This video clip is often used to express embarrassment and has been edited to have Homer disappearing into objects such as pizza and other food (Know Your Meme, n.d.). The meme is so iconic that it made it into the Museum of Moving Images in New York as part of a 2014 Reaction GIF exhibition (Museum of the Moving Image, 2014). The “Steamed Hams” scenes have been reanimated and recreated to give different perspectives on the scenes or change elements to explore the impact (Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2019). The sketch has been stretched to its limits (and beyond) with what started as cheap “shitposting” becoming well-thought out humour (Haysom, 2018). There are popular social media accounts dedicated to taking screengrabs of episodes with no characters and presenting them in a manner that means they take on a surreal sombre vibe imbued with dark nostalgia (Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2019). For a comedy show, these treatments of the show’s elements alter the way viewers are interacting with the content. This is not humour. This is deeper. Similarly, a comic series called “Marge Simpson anime” explores the tragic figure of Marge and the melancholia of her life (Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2019). These re-representations occupy different emotional, political and popular cultural spaces. Hegemonic incorporations are not the goal. Comfort in past popular culture is not the imperative. Instead, a shredding of assumptions is the outcome, with a bitter and zombified aftertaste.

Dark Simpsons maneuverers these reimaginings of The Simpsons into a twisted and disturbing direction. The creators activate issues such as incest (between Bart and Lisa), paedophilia (for example, Homer raping Milhouse in Milhouse Drunk, Really Drunk), cannibalism (Milhouse Comes Over for Dinner), prostitution (Marge Simpson Gets a Job), and animal abuse (Home Catches Bart with Cigarettes). In fact, due to YouTube policies around monetisation of videos, these videos and many others in the same vein had to be moved to a side-channel called Darker Simpsons. This is not textual poaching or fan negotiations. This is a cascading simulacrum, a toxic and hyper-mobile re-representation that is wilfully un/popular and horrific.

Melancholy, horror and darkness pervade many of the fan-produced works. They evoke a transgressive – world lost – nostalgia for those who grew up consuming The Simpsons (Super Eyepatch Wolf, 2019). Work, leisure, families, sexuality and politics remain a deep disappointment. When added to climate change, pandemics and endless war, avenues for political dissonance seem foreclosed. For many, The Simpsons is an anchor to a time when they were children or teenagers, and there was hope for the future and a sense of possibility. A sentimental desire for the past flourishes where there is “uncertainty and insecurity in present circumstances” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 925). Perhaps, at its inauthentically authentic core, Dark Simpsons demonstrates the necessity for anger, nastiness, bitterness, rage and disgust. Memes and fan\_fiction can express “the stress and endurance of the times” with healing or damaging results (Alexander, 2008, p. 134). Yes, such arguments from fan studies underestimates the scale of the despair. There will be no happy ending. There is no safe suburban life to emulate or embody. This is un/popular culture for end times.

Popular culture occupies an andragogical function in daily life. It can locate and circulate learning and politics in life (Jester, 2020). It teaches citizens about rules, parameters, hopes and expectations. When the gulf between these expectations and assumptions and the lived reality becomes too wide, un/popular culture emerges. There is no reflection model of the media to summon here. Popular culture and the media more generally are not real. They are representations that are re-represented at speed and then cascade into chaos, foreclose and claustropolitan inauthentic authenticity. Popular culture at the end of the world is dark, un/popular culture, shredding and slicing the hope, pleasure, passion and joy that juts from the best of pop. By bringing otherwise unspeakable fears into discourse, “it becomes a viable reality [that] is conceived and spoken about” (Marcus & Singer, 2017, p. 351). Yet un/popular culture is not hegemonic. A different theorization is required of this movement between popular culture and un/popular culture. It is a visualization of the unspeakable horror that the narratives, truths and assumptions by which we live our daily lives are not only lies, but phantoms configure to crush the present and the future. Put in a different way, paedophilia is unspeakable, illegal and invisible. The unspeakable cannot be managed outside of horror and discomfort. Dark Simpsons presents an opportunity to view at this issue, using the textual fodder of safe and dependable popular culture. From that safety emerges disgust and distress. In the Dark Simpsons, these depraved acts are also manipulated in a similar way to The Simpsons footage. Acts of violence and abuse are reproduced, reshaped, and represented in the episodes under the tight control of the Dark Simpson’s creator.

The post-humour component of the Dark Simpsons is also significant. This is not gallows humour. It is not as simple as comedy emerging from “catastrophes and making fun of the forces of death and destruction” (James, 2015, p. 28). Gallows humour can be a bonding type of joke that creates or reflects an “us and them” division (Moran & Hughes, 2006, p. 504). Gallows humour has existed in some form throughout history but has moved from devices of torture to memes (James, 2015, p. 28). These jokes are not necessarily laughing at the event themselves, but “one of the many incongruous meanings associated with that event” (Marcus & Singer, 2017, p. 349). With the proliferation of sexual violence through the #metoo movement, the acceptable boundaries around sex and consent are transforming. One challenge in managing this transformation is that the proliferation of cases and discussions may result in desensitization and cynicism (Üngör & Verkerke, 2015, p. 96). Therefore, transgressive fiction offers a “safe environment for the exploration of taboo that is free of consequence” (Hoey, 2014, p. 37). It is a sexualized war game. An environment for exploration is created and the reader can participate in “the most lurid of crimes” but with an element of safety (Hoey, 2014, p. 37). The horror is re-established through the separation and defamiliarization created through the reinscription of ‘safe’ popular culture.

Fan\_fiction through its forty-year history has explored topics such as non-consensual BDSM, rape, incest, sexual violence, and paedophilia. There is a category of fan\_fiction referred to as “angst” which “revels in tragedy” (Barnes, 2015, p. 76). Similarly, there is the “hurt/comfort” genre, which focuses on a character healing from a severe trauma with the assistance of another character (Barnes, 2015, p. 76). The focus is the relationship and bond that develops between the characters and the trauma is a tool for exploring the possibilities. Fan\_fiction has moved into dark spaces to assemble different narratives and their consequences. The Harry Potter fandom is a prolific producer of fan\_fiction, and the stories are rife with rape, violence, and paedophilia (Göbel, 2017, p. 216). As with Dark Simpsons, incest is common in

fan\_fiction. In Harry Potter fandom, there is an abundance of “Weasleycest”<sup>2</sup> (Alexander, 2008, p. 121). Incest is approached as being acceptable where it is consensual, romantic, and committed by likeable characters (Göbel, 2017, p. 2017). Paedophilic relationships are common in fandom. For example, Snape and Harry pairings are common, despite the age and power gap (Göbel, 2017, p. 2017). Some fanfiction writers (especially where there are non-consensual encounters) will accompany their fiction with comments explaining and/or justifying their decision. Generally, the ethics of these issues are not questioned, and instead they are cloaked in romance and ignored. Dark Simpsons offers no justification or theorizing for the topics included in videos. The presentation of the outrageous and horrific is treated as banal and every day. This is the flattening of unspeakable and unmentionable, trivializing and normalizing the shocking and damaging.

The positioning of rape as humorous is not unique to Dark Simpsons. One example in the Harry Potter fandom is a fanfic called *The Sorting Hat’s Love* where Hermione is enchanted to have sex with the Sorting Hat and must have sex with Severus Snape to break the spell (Göbel, 2017, p. 215). Hermione’s rape by the Sorting Hat and Snape, as she is not able to freely consent, are configured as humorous through the ridiculous. Yet clear-headed theorizing is required here. The label of comedy is not a cultural condom that protects the creator from consequences and accountability. Meaning and interpretation is required. Therefore, the final stage of this article requires an understanding of audiences for this un/popular culture.

## 7. Un/Popular Audiences

Memes require popular culture literacy to summon humour. While such a maxim is true of all comedy, memes require a high level of popular cultural literacy, with the capacity to translate a textual system between discourses. Knowledge is required to summon comedy (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008, p. 810). There are extra degrees of in-joke or insider knowledge for memes. For example, knowledge of the source material or of other memes that are being referenced increases the intensity of this response. As such, they can be a form of “boundary work, where normality and deviance, inside and outside, are continually made and remade” (Alexander, 2008, p. 836). Dark Simpsons challenge the borders of dark pop and un/popular culture. Communities are created that hold the literacies in the popular culture, within its original location, but then have the media expertise to move signifying systems, while dumping the codes that provide certainty, clarity and context.

There are keys to understand the audience for Dark Simpsons. The creator summons “hardcore fans who grew up on the show” (Dark Simpsons, n.d.). Insiders and outsiders are configured. A hierarchy of fandom is constructed. This is not a project for the casual viewer. Admitting failure to find the videos funny, might make viewers feel like they would be revealing themselves to not truly be “hardcore fans”. So popular culture is heightened in value and difficulty, creating a textured and layered knowledge system. Then this literacy is used to exclude, undermine ridicule and shock. Friedman and Kuipers (2013) explored this hierarchy built on re-representation with regards to comedy. They found that respondents with “high cultural capital” expressed a preference for black comedy “where disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect” (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013, p. 184). Jokes have to be recognised as “deliberately transgressive” rather than accidentally for this to work – the ability to discern the difference and appreciate

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<sup>2</sup> The Weasley family is a large family that includes a set of male twins (Fred and George)

it creates a boundary of inside jokes (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013, p. 184). This is arrogance, and also an investment. A hierarchy is produced between those who find the dark content humorous and are supposedly more intelligent or able to understand the joke, and those who do not.

Dark Simpsons creates a community of people who claim to find the videos funny. Perhaps they do. Indeed, there may be a textual summoning of cultural superiority or distinctiveness through their shared literacy. Yet what is significant is that their assumptions are not theorized. They are normalized. They are banal. They are inauthentically authentic. Like a goth walking through an Australian Summer, there is a courage in the commitment, but a discomfort created via these decisions. Popular culture requires popular cultural studies. Un/popular culture requires un/popular cultural studies and new theories for disgust, horror and confusion. There is no depth to the rationale for their superiority or insider status. Therefore – and ironically – the re-representation in Dark Simpsons has resulted in a flattening of pop, rendering banal overly complex and intricate ideas and issues. It is time for the theorists to catch up to the fans and create a paradigm for un/popular culture to be understood.

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