American life (and who always need to be tipped). Understanding such humor requires much knowledge of everyday life in the United States. Understanding The Simpsons, on the other hand, mostly requires knowledge of the United States as seen on TV. And this America hasn’t been the exclusive territory of Americans for a long time.

The Simpsons’ brand of humor plays on the particular cultural capital that comes with living in a highly mediated society: recognizing styles and references, but also being able to see through the media logic. From this point of view, it’s easy to see why there’s less of this intertextuality in the movie version. By definition, blockbusters are supposed to require less cultural capital than other media products in order to reach larger audiences. On the other hand, this intertextuality and media savvy probably has been crucial for The Simpsons’ intellectual cachet, even persuading snobby Europeans.

A final feature of The Simpsons contributing to its international and intellectual appeal is its irreverence and subversiveness. By international standards, American comedy often comes off as excessively sentimental and moralizing. In my research, I found Europeans have a preference for American comedies with darker humor focusing on dysfunctional families such as the Bunkers, the Bundys, and the Connors (Roseanne’s family). The popularity of The Simpsons fits this pattern neatly. Its humor is sharp and at times dark. And the members of the Simpson family, while (ultimately) loving and loyal, are also known to be mean, selfish, angry, and unpleasant—and in this respect, despite being cartoon characters, probably more human than most human sitcom characters.

Moreover, this irreverent humor also is used to satirize, ridicule, and criticize American society. The televised version of America seems to be populated mostly by people who are proud to be Americans—and their one-dimensional enemies. In this orderly and patriotic media landscape, the Simpsons are refreshingly subversive.

This critical bent is also evident in the movie. The plot centers on the dangers of pollution. The villain, Russ Cargill, is an American government official gone mad, manipulating a movie star-turned-president who doesn’t want to read and yearns for Danny de Vito. Typically, Cargill has the best line in the movie. When one of his associates warns that he seems to have gone mad with power, Cargill responds: “Of course I have. You ever tried going mad without power? It's boring. No one listens to you.” Many non-Americans may have felt like Cargill’s underling at times when contemplating America’s enormous cultural and political power. To see this smug and powerful country ridiculed from the inside is gratifying for outsiders, who see their criticisms and suspicions corroborated by a reliable source. This means that sometimes, non-Americans like The Simpsons for exactly the same reasons some Americans (including George H.W. Bush, at least during his presidency) don’t—it makes fun of America.

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the lie of heroism

by matthew desmond

That was one mean fire season. In October and November dozens of plume-dominated fires—those are the ones that burn so hot and fast they create their own weather patterns and wind currents, the ones that give off that sonorous, otherworldly reverberation: a line of a tanks thundering forward in unison—ripped through Southern California. They scorched half a million acres, destroyed thousands of homes, and snuffed out at least 10 lives.

Although these fires claimed fewer acres and lives than those that ignited the Golden State in 2003, they garnered significantly more media attention. In fact, according to a report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, nearly 40 percent of all news coverage between the California fires a mega story. There was, first, the awe and beauty of destruction. “You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not,” Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien once wrote of combat. The same is true for the majesty of wildfire—as well as for the devastation it leaves in its wake. Add to this the hunt for the arsonist (who later was found to be a firefighter chasing down the Frankenstein he had brought

In referring to firefighters always and only as heroes, do we not look straight through them?

October 21 and October 26 was devoted to the California fires, making them the “second biggest story of 2007,” trailing only the Virginia Tech massacre, which accounted for 51 percent of coverage in a single week.

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to life), the hundreds of thousands evacuated, the tormenting Santa Anas (which well reminded people why they’re called the “devil winds”), the tragically burned-over border crossers, and the seemingly unstoppable flame front—not to mention the endless comparisons to Hurricane Katrina—and you have the makings of a major media event.

There were stories of FEMA’s redemption, of community solidarity, of wealthy homeowners hiring private firefighters to protect their mansions, and of homeowners of more humble origins ignoring evacuation orders and facing down the flames with garden hoses and shovels. There were countless reporters wrapped in oversized yellow fire shirts standing amidst the rubble, including San Diego-based Larry Himmel, who marched through the remains of what days before had been his home: “This was our garage. The living room was over there. There was a porch right there.”

And, of course, most prominent of all, there were stories of firefighters, stories that, for the most part, treated “hero” and “firefighter” as synonymous, led by headlines like “Courage under Fire,” “Heroic Firefighters Told against California Inferno,” and “Heroes Tackle Fires.”

“Braving ferocious, fast-moving wildfires to save property and lives,” began an Agence France-Presse article, “California’s weary firefighters are once more being feted as the heroes of the crisis ravaging the region.” CNN’s Rick Sanchez tendered this venerable observation:

Suddenly in the dark, I see a row of people, about 30 of them, marching in a line carrying chainsaws over their shoulders. They are climbing the mountain . . . with one purpose, one goal—to put themselves between a monstrous fire and the people whose homes are just a football field away. I’m awestruck. I can’t even make out their faces. Just shadows walking into the belly of the beast. The men and women of “Cal Fire,” as they like to be called, like to do their jobs anonymously. Most people don’t know who they are. But as I watched them climb up the mountain I thought to myself, those are heroes, the genuine article.

In one of the more gripping episodes from the fires, Los Angeles Times photographer Karen Tapia-Anderson looked on as 12 firefighters, who had worked 26 hours straight with no significant break, became trapped on the apex of a hill. With nowhere to run, they deployed their fire shelters—one-person tents made of aluminized material designed to deflect heat but widely distrusted by firefighters, who call them “shake and bakes”—and, after fire had danced over their prone bodies, made it out alive.

Tapia-Anderson snapped several eerie photos during the entrapment, including one of the firefighters bunched together (left), climbing into their silvery shelters as fire nipped at their heels and a black cloud of smoke loomed ominously above. Taken in by the photograph, NBC Nightly News ran a story about the firecrew who gambled death, featuring an interview with Tapia-Anderson.

“I can honestly say that I began to cry, myself,” confessed the photographer, her voice cracking, “because I felt that they weren’t going to make it.” After the flames subdued, she recalls, “Those guys starting coming out one at a time, one at a time, like a little cocoon. And they came out, and it was awesome. It was an awesome sight. And at that point, I said, ‘Those guys are heroes.’”

We’ve grown quite familiar with such words. The firefighter apotheosized, hallowed and revered, is the dominant image of firefighters we have nowadays. And with this image comes a set of beliefs about what makes firefighters tick, what makes them deploy themselves on the seam between life and death. Some believe they’re impelled by a sense of duty to country and citizen, having heard, as President George W. Bush put it in a speech in November to a group of off-duty firefighters and volunteers, “a call, and the call is to serve something greater than yourself.”

Others hold that firefighters are an especially tough and courageous lot, endowed with an extra dose of “gravel in the guts and spit in the eye,” to summon a lyric by the late Johnny Cash, that enables them to face down a destructive force of nature.
“These men and the women that are here, standing here, are absolutely extraordinary,” Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said two days before Bush’s speech, surrounded by uniformed, worn, and burly smoke chasers. “I mean, they are known, I think worldwide, as being the best firefighters literally in the world, the best trained, the most experienced, the toughest, the most courageous. . . They’re the true action heroes, I call them.”

Over and over again, journalists and political representatives—as well as citizens of threatened Southern California communities—heralded firefighters as heroes. In fact, poring over the media coverage generated by the California wildfires, one is struck by how little else was said about those men and women on the fireline.

Firefighting requires courage and selflessness enough, but in referring to firefighters always and only as heroes, do we not look straight through them? Or, better said, heroizing firefighters flattens their humanity, and all that is left are mythic creatures—virtuous, courageous, modern-day messiahs who offer up their bodies as living sacrifices for us. There is not one, but two ways to dehumanize. The first is to strip people of all virtue, the second is to cleanse them of all sin.

Of course, firefighters enjoy their hero status. It gets them out of speeding tickets, gives them 15 percent off at the local tavern, and offers them a sense of importance. And if the “firefighter pick-up line” works, it might even get them some fleshy rewards. Even more significant, it offers symbolic payment that compensates for their lack of material rewards, including a scarcity of resources and federal funding.

The overwhelming majority of the country’s wildland firefighters are volunteers, and the rest work for mediocre wages. (During my first season as a wildland firefighter back in 1999 I brought home $8.42 an hour.) Many Southern California firefighters who battled the fires were overworked and understaffed because in prior years major cities, San Diego in particular, refused to raise taxes to help pay for fire protection.

Firefighters’ hero status softens these mean facts. It helps them remain content, even pleased, with a job that leads to back surgeries, knee replacements, and premature funerals. But we should not forget that it gives us something as well: a comfort that comes from overlooking the social inequalities that help force firefighters on the line. For truly to see firefighters requires paying heed to the social conditions that created them. It is not “brave,” “thrill-lusting,” “heroic” women and men from all segments of society who staff firecrews; it is mainly working-class men from rural communities.

The distribution of America’s professional risk takers, be they firefighters, police officers, or soldiers, reflects the nation’s social order. Those “called,” and those killed, are rarely from wealthy, educated, privileged homes. When a fire overtakes some poor soul or when a soldier falls dead on the battlefield, more often than not, the bad news is delivered on the steps of a blue-collar porch.

Heroizing firefighters enables us to ignore the unsettling facts about precisely who is doing the protecting and who is being protected. Instead, we can simply say, as Bush put it to the families and friends of fallen firefighters a couple weeks before the California fires, “It takes a special kind of person to be a firefighter.” On that occasion, after once again likening firefighting to a divine calling, the president wondered, “Where do people like this get their courage?”

Where indeed? Perhaps it’s found in America’s paltry minimum wage, its menial, service-sector jobs, its unaffordable health care and higher education systems. To understand the reasons why firefighters sign up for a job that could kill them, we must examine how their motivations are molded by the widening gap separating the rich from the poor, the land loss taking place in rural communities, and the poverty stranding American Indian reservations, where the situation is so bleak that some firefighters, staffing temporary crews paid only when a blaze busts, have played arson in the evening to be breadwinner come morning. Explanations that forget this, reasoning that firefighters are motivated solely by an extraordinary helping of guts or valor, simply won’t do.

Behind the image of the hero called to duty is the truth that, in times of trouble, it is the poor and the working class who hold the line. As we reflect back on the beleaguered firefighters who battled the California fires, saving homes the likes of which most of them will never be able to afford, we should examine how in our society protection is far from equally distributed. It is only by denying the lie of heroism imprinted on firefighters—and on all those grunts who bear our society’s crosses—that we are able, finally, to see them.

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