

## POST-9/11 AMERICAN IDEOLOGY AND ADULTHOOD: THE CASE OF *AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study explores the ideological and cultural transformations in American society following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and examines the impact of these changes on the perception of adulthood. Using the animated series *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* as a case study, the article investigates how the series contributes to redefining the concept of adulthood in post-9/11 American society. This production, part of the Adult Swim platform, employs absurd humor and a narrative style that challenge traditional social norms, reflecting the individualistic and questioning youth culture of the time. The article argues that *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* is not merely a form of entertainment but also a reflection of broader ideological and cultural shifts in American society. In this context, the series provides viewers with both a reprieve from political and social pressures and an opportunity to question traditional concepts of adulthood and identity. By highlighting the ideological implications of media products, this study seeks to enhance the understanding of post-9/11 American society and culture.

**Key Words:** Adult Swim, Animation, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, September 11, Ideology, Adulthood.

### 11 EYLÜL SONRASI AMERİKAN İDEOLOJİSİ VE YETİŞKİNLİK: *AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE* ÖRNEĞİ

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, 11 Eylül 2001 terör saldırılarının ardından Amerikan toplumunda yaşanan ideolojik ve kültürel dönüşümleri, bu değişimlerin yetişkinlik algısı üzerindeki etkilerini incelemektedir. Örneklem olarak *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* adlı animasyon dizisini ele alan makale, dizinin 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumundaki yetişkinlik kavramının yeniden tanımlanmasına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu araştırmaktadır. Adult Swim platformunun bir parçası olan bu yapıım, absürd mizahı ve geleneksel toplumsal normlara meydan okuyan anlatımıyla, dönemin bireyci ve sorgulayıcı gençlik kültürünü yansıtmaktadır. Makale, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*'ün yalnızca bir eğlence aracı olmadığını, aynı zamanda Amerikan toplumundaki geniş çaplı ideolojik ve kültürel değişimlerin bir yansıması olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, dizi hem izleyicilere politik ve toplumsal baskı-lardan uzaklaşma imkânı sunmakta hem de geleneksel yetişkinlik ve kimlik anlayışını sorgulamaya teşvik etmektedir. Çalışma, medya ürünlerinin ideolojik etkilerine ışık tutarak, 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumu ve kültürünün anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Adult Swim, Animasyon, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, 11 Eylül, İdeoloji, Yetişkinlik.

<sup>1</sup> Makalede Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği'ne uyulmuştur.

## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu çalışma, 11 Eylül 2001 terör saldırılarının ardından Amerikan toplumunda yaşanan ideolojik ve kültürel dönüşümleri, bu değişimlerin yetişkinlik algısı üzerindeki etkilerini incelemektedir. 11 Eylül saldırıları, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde derin etkiler bırakarak toplumun tüm kesimlerini etkileyen önemli bir dönüm noktası olmuştur. Saldırı, Amerikan toplumunda ideolojik ve kültürel bir dönüşüme yol açmış ve toplumdaki yetişkinlik tanımını büyük ölçüde etkilemiştir. Örneklem olarak Aqua Teen Hunger Force adlı animasyon dizisini ele alan makale, dizinin 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumundaki yetişkinlik kavramının yeniden tanımlanmasına nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu araştırmaktadır. Adult Swim platformunun bir parçası olan bu yapı, absürt mizah ve ge-leneksel toplumsal normlara meydan okuyan anlatımıyla, dönemin bireyci ve sorgulayıcı gençlik kültürünü yansıtmaktadır. 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumu yetişkinlik, ekonomik istikrarsızlık, artan borç yükü ve belir-sizlikle şekillenmiştir. Geleneksel olarak kabul edilen evlilik, aile ve kariyer gibi yetişkinlik kriterleri, bu dönemde genç yetişkinler tarafından sorgulanmış ve yerini daha esnek, bireysel ve doğrusal olmayan bir yaşam tarzına bırakmıştır.

Aqua Teen Hunger Force, antropomorfik yiyeceklerden oluşan karakterleriyle, bu dönüşümün bir met-aforu olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Programda yer alan Shake, Frylock ve Meatwad karakterleri üzerinden, Amerika'da kültürel kimliklerin çatışması, yetişkinlik kavramı ve 11 Eylül sonrası değişen toplum yapısı ele alınmıştır. Pro-gramda otoriteye olan mesafeli yaklaşımı ve aykırı kişiliği ile öne çıkan Master Shake karakteri, toplumsal normları ve toplumun yetişkinlik kriterlerini reddeder. Karakter, ABD'de 21. yüzyılda genç yetişkinlerin içerisinde bulunduğu kimlik bunalımının bir dışavurumudur. Karakterlerin sorumsuz ve amaçsız yaşam tarzları, 11 Eylül sonrası dönemde genç yetişkinlerin toplumsal normlardan kaçışını ve kendi yollarını arayışlarını temsil etmekte-dir.

Aqua Teen Hunger Force'un sahip olduğu çarpık ve rahatsız edici görsel kimliği, dizinin klasik anlatı yapısından uzak ve kaotik olay örgüsüne sahip anlatısını güçlendirir. Dizi aykırı politik tutumu ve alışılmadık görsel üslubuyla geleneksel animasyon estetiğine meydan okur. Programın görsel üslubunda hakim olan kötü estetik anlayışı, animasyon stilinde ve hikaye anlatımında yoğun bir şekilde gözlemlenir. Program, absürt ve aykırı mizah anlayışının yanı sıra aynı zamanda Amerikan toplumundaki değişimleri derinlemesine ele alır. Bu karmaşık ve belirsiz anlatı yapısında ele alınan dış kaynaklı saldırılar ve kötü karakterlerle mücadele formatı, Amerikan toplu-munun terör saldırıları sonrası içinde bulunduğu korku ve kaygı atmosferinin bir yansımasıdır. Programın absürt mizah anlayışının altında yatan sosyal eleştirilerle, günümüz dünyasının karmaşık sorunları ve çelişkileri mizahi bir dille yansıtılmaktadır. Makale, Aqua Teen Hunger Force'un yalnızca bir eğlence aracı olmadığını, aynı za-manda Amerikan toplumundaki geniş çaplı ideolojik ve kültürel değişimlerin bir yansıması olduğunu savunmak-tadır.

Araştırma, yöntem olarak Aqua Teen Hunger Force'u ve onun yetişkinlik ve ideolojik kopuş temsillerini incelemek için metin analizi ve kültürel eleştiriye birleştiren nitel, betimleyici bir yaklaşım kullanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, dizi hem izleyicilere politik ve toplumsal baskılardan uzaklaşma imkânı sunmakta hem de geleneksel yetişkinlik ve kimlik anlayışını sorgulamaya teşvik etmektedir. Çalışma, medya ürünlerinin ideolojik etkilerine ışık tutarak, 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumu ve kültürünün anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, 11 Eylül sonrası Amerikan toplumunun kültürel, ideolojik ve ekonomik dönüşüm sürecini anlamak için güçlü bir örnek teşkil etmektedir. Dizinin absürt yapısı ve toplumsal normlara meydan okuyan tarzı, hem genç yetişkinlerin yaşadığı bireysel ve toplumsal çatışmaları hem de Amerikan toplu-munun bu dönemdeki daha geniş ideolojik kırılmalarını etkili bir şekilde temsil etmektedir.

## 1. Introduction

This paper examines cinema as an intersection of media, ideology, and cultural shifts in the post-9/11 United States, focusing on the role of the animated series *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and its broader context within Adult Swim's programming. The study aims to explore how *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* reflects and critiques evolving notions of adulthood, identity, and social participation in American society shaped by the events of September 11, 2001. Following these attacks, the United States experienced heightened fear, nationalism, and ideological consolidation, which influenced not only politics and security policies but also cultural and entertainment landscapes. Within this framework, the study investigates how Adult Swim, as a late-night block on Cartoon Network, became a platform for subversive and alternative humor that sharply contrasts with mainstream media's often somber and politically charged content. Specifically, with its absurdist humor and unconventional character design, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* provides a form of escapism that resonates with a generation grappling with anxiety in a post-9/11 world. By focusing on absurd plots and employing animated food products as its protagonists, the show diverges from traditional narrative structures and, by extension, established social norms. Thus, an analysis of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* reveals how the series serves as a metaphor for the broader ideological disillusionment of American society during this period. The post-9/11 era brought significant changes in perceptions of adulthood, as individuals in their 20s and 30s increasingly questioned traditional milestones such as marriage, homeownership, and stable careers. The series adopts a humorous yet critical lens on these shifting perceptions, portraying its characters as symbols of stagnation, irresponsibility, and a rejection of conventional adulthood. In this way, the absurd and chaotic world of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* transcends comedic entertainment to reflect the complexities and uncertainties many adults face in post-9/11 America.

This paper also explores how Adult Swim, and by extension, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, functions as ideological counterprogramming, offering viewers a temporary escape from the era's pervasive political and social narratives. In contrast to the overtly political content of other media, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* presents a form of passive resistance, using humor to entertain while subtly critiquing the rigid structures of early 2000s American life. The research, therefore seeks to uncover how the series serves not only as a comedic reprieve but also as a commentary on the evolving cultural and ideological landscape of the United States.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative, descriptive approach that combines textual analysis and cultural criticism to examine *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and its representations of adulthood and ideological rupture. First, a historical and cultural analysis of post-9/11 American society provides the context for understanding how Adult Swim emerged as a significant influence in adult animation. Next, the study conducts an in-depth analysis of selected episodes of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* to identify recurring themes, character dynamics, and narrative structures that reflect changing perceptions of adulthood and mechanisms of social escape. This analysis is supported by existing literature on post-9/11 American ideology, cultural studies on media escapism, and academic research on adult animation. The article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how media, particularly animated programs, reflect and shape societal values during intense ideological transformation through this methodological framework.

## 2. Post-9/11 American Ideology and Adulthood

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought about a profound transformation in American ideology, permeating all segments of society and altering citizens' perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, and futures. This shift prompted a deep societal introspection, particularly among young adults. The concept of "adulthood," traditionally defined by milestones associated with a conventional family ideology—such as marriage, career, homeownership, and family life—began to undergo significant re-evaluation. In this context, the aftermath of 9/11, coupled with mounting economic and social pressures, led to a redefinition of adulthood and numerous other societal norms in America. The neoliberal vision of the American Dream, once encapsulating promises of stability, success, and self-fulfillment, no longer appeared viable or appealing to the new generation. As explored in this chapter, the evolving perception of adulthood in the post-9/11 era reflects not only a generational divide but also a broader ideological transformation and cultural trauma shaped by fear, uncertainty, and disillusionment. This trauma is sharply captured in Smelser's (2004, p. 264) observation: *"If the screen industry's most talented scriptwriter had been asked to draft a scenario for a quintessential cultural trauma, that script could not have surpassed the actual drama that occurred on September 11, 2001."*

In the early 2000s, traditional expectations of adulthood increasingly appeared outdated and even oppressive to young adults navigating various new challenges. Following the trauma of September 11, American society entered a period of heightened vigilance and national unity, bolstered by political discourses emphasizing collective responsibility, patriotism, and resilience. Concurrently, cultural, social, and technological transformations began to exert influence worldwide. However, these ideals felt burdensome or unattainable for many, especially as economic instability became more pronounced. Stagnant wages, declining job security, and soaring student loan debt rendered financial independence and long-term planning distant rather than achievable goals. Consequently, many young adults distanced themselves from traditional pathways to adulthood, opting for more flexible, individualized approaches to life.

One of the most precise indicators of this shift was the emergence of terms like "extended adolescence" or "emerging adulthood," coined by psychologists and sociologists to describe young adults who delayed or abandoned traditional markers of maturity. This new phase of adulthood, analyzed through four distinct profiles by Arnett (2004, pp. 27–28), illustrates how young people redefined adulthood norms during this period. Unlike previous generations, who typically adhered to a linear progression from education to employment, marriage, and family life, this new generation showed reluctance to conform to these traditional milestones. As has become increasingly common, many young adults continued living with their parents well into their twenties or even thirties, pursued alternative or freelance careers rather than stable institutional roles, and either postponed or rejected marriage and parenthood. This lifestyle shift was not merely a matter of personal choice; it signaled a deeper societal redefinition of adulthood in an era of instability and unpredictability.

The shifting perception of adulthood also intersected with the political and social climate of the time. In the wake of September 11, the U.S. government initiated the War on Terror, engaging in extended military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that required prolonged troop deployments. These actions reinforced a culture of fear, loyalty, and vigilance, fostering an ideological environment in which national identity and security precede individual aspirations. As Klein notes, the impact of the September 11 attacks bore striking similarities to specific past events:

“profound disorientation, extreme fear and anxiety, and collective regression. Like the Kubark interrogator posing as a “father figure,” the Bush administration promptly used that fear to play the role of the all-protective parent, ready to defend “the homeland” and its vulnerable people by any means necessary.” (Klein, 2008, p. 42)

For many young adults, however, the ideals of unity and sacrifice promoted by the government felt increasingly disconnected from their realities. The pressure to embody and ideologically internalize these values clashed with their personal experiences of financial insecurity and limited opportunities, leading to a profound alienation from broader societal expectations. As Faludi (2007) argues, the media played a crucial role in shaping this dissonance. For instance, Faludi notes that women were gradually sidelined in media representations following the attacks, replaced by muscular firefighters and male security personnel. This shift reflected a broader emphasis on nationalism, resilience, and the fight against terrorism, which dominated American media in the aftermath of 9/11. These themes permeated news channels and popular culture, creating a near-constant focus on conflict, national security, and the specter of future attacks. This atmosphere of heightened vigilance infiltrated daily life, fostering a cultural climate in which fear and a sense of duty to national causes overshadowed other aspects of public life. In this context, the media mirrored these ideological tensions and actively contributed to their reinforcement.

As audiences searched for spaces to temporarily escape the anxieties and pressures of the post-9/11 world, the demand for media that provided relief from this intense atmosphere increased. While mainstream media focused heavily on these themes, alternative platforms such as Adult Swim offered a counter-narrative that appealed to young adults who felt disconnected from such ideals. Adult Swim's programming, mainly shows like *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, presented a form of ideological escape, allowing viewers to temporarily distance themselves from the pressures of American nationalism and the rigid expectations of adulthood. Unlike traditional family sitcoms or teen dramas, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* depicted a world in which traditional roles and responsibilities were irrelevant, and the characters existed entirely outside societal norms. The show's main characters—an anthropomorphic milkshake, a box of fries, and a meatball—live together in a dysfunctional house and exhibit none of the ambition, stability, or growth typically associated with adulthood. Instead, their chaotic and aimless existence is a parody of the traditional family unit, emphasizing the absurdity and arbitrariness of societal expectations. This alternative depiction of adulthood resonated with viewers, offering them a humorous yet critical perspective through which they could question the relevance of traditional adulthood in the post-9/11 context. Rejecting traditional family dynamics and career aspirations, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* provides a satirical lens for viewers to reflect on their disconnection from societal roles.

Broader cultural and economic changes also shaped the redefinition of adulthood in post-9/11 America. As technology advanced and social media platforms emerged, young adults found new ways to express their identities and build communities outside traditional institutions. The rise of gig economies and remote working further contributed to this transformation, allowing individuals to pursue careers that did not conform to the typical nine-to-five job structure. These changes enabled a more flexible and fragmented approach to adulthood, where success was measured not by adherence to a particular life path but by the ability to adapt to an unpredictable and rapidly changing world. For many, adulthood became a journey of self-discovery and exploration rather than a destination defined by specific milestones.

Smith (2011), in his analysis of this uncertainty, portrays young adulthood as a phase marked by heightened individualism, moral ambiguity, and consumption-oriented behavior. In this new form of adulthood, personal

satisfaction and material gain define individual happiness and success. According to Smith, this model prioritizes self-interest, diminishing the importance of moral considerations and civic engagement while increasing indifference to social participation. As a result, a growing detachment from collective responsibilities and societal involvement has emerged, further redefining the concept of adulthood in contemporary culture. This form aligns with the tendency of the characters in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* to escape responsibility and define themselves within a world of media and consumption. The series portrays adulthood as a lifestyle centered on individual escape and entertainment rather than social roles and obligations. Similarly, the depiction of adult characters in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* who avoid social responsibilities and pursue individual fulfillment reflects Smith's findings.

In conclusion, the changing perceptions of adulthood in post-9/11 American society reflect a broader ideological transformation driven by economic instability, political repression, and cultural disillusionment. For a generation grappling with an uncertain future, traditional markers of adulthood no longer held the same appeal or significance. Instead, Jean Twenge (2014) described young adults as "Generation me," seeking to redefine adulthood on their terms, prioritizing individual freedom, self-expression, and adaptability over stability and success. This new youth culture, marked by the contradiction between high personal expectations and the limited opportunities provided by society, is captured in Adult Swim's programming. Shows like *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* challenge traditional notions of maturity and offer an alternative vision of adulthood that embraces chaos, absurdity, and nonconformity. In this sense, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* reflects the complexity of American adulthood in a post-9/11 world, giving voice to a generation navigating new definitions of identity and responsibility in an era of unprecedented change.

### 3. Adult Swim: A Historical and Cultural Review

The changing perception of animation in the media, digitalization, and society's search for new identities paved the way for innovative ventures in the animation industry. In 1991, Turner Broadcasting acquired Hanna-Barbera and Ruby-Spears studios, gaining the broadcast rights to the extensive Hanna-Barbera archive. This acquisition signaled the beginning of a new era in television broadcasting for animated programs. 1992, Cartoon Network was launched as the first Tv channel to broadcast cartoons 24 hours daily. Starting with a rich archive of animated content, Cartoon Network's founder, Ted Turner, specifically targeted adolescents and adults—audiences that had been largely ignored in traditional animation broadcasting (Mittell, 2004, pp. 81–83). However, when it first began, the channel lacked the budget for original productions. As a result, classic cartoons played a significant role in its programming. These classic cartoons resonated with multiple generations and became a critical element in attracting children and adults. The nostalgia evoked among adults who had grown up watching Hanna-Barbera cartoons in the 1960s and 1970s expanded the channel's audience base. By including classic cartoons and anime that older viewers had enjoyed in their childhoods, the channel successfully reshaped viewing habits by leveraging the strong connection this audience already had with the medium. This strategy reintroduced cartoon-loving adults to the habit of watching animated programs, fostering a renewed sense of reassurance and acceptance (Browsh, 2022).

Cartoon Network's extensive archive allowed it to reintroduce classic productions to audiences and enabled the production of new programs more quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively. By tapping into adults' past connections with cartoons and sparking their interest through its nostalgic broadcasting policy, the channel began producing content specifically aimed at this audience in search of alternative programming. Cartoon Network, catering to a wide demographic, including children and adults, established a distinct late-night identity geared

toward adults. This late-night block featured more edgy, unconventional, and bizarre content, offering an alternative to mainstream television and political correctness. It appealed to young adults seeking to express themselves and escape the intense political agenda of the time and societal expectations. Under the leadership of Executive Vice President Mike Lazzo, Adult Swim broke away from the conventions of traditional television broadcasting. He cultivated a unique brand identity characterized by its unconventional aesthetics, dark humor, and anti-establishment political stance. This creative formula became a model for content production within Adult Swim, the channel's adult-oriented division (Elkins, 2014).

Adult Swim started broadcasting in 2001 as Cartoon Network's late-night programming block experiment. Initially broadcast only on Thursday and Sunday nights between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., it consisted of a three-hour program block targeted explicitly at adults aged 18–34. The block featured animated series characterized by themes of sexuality, satire, and slang (Lee, 2013). Continuing the aesthetic style and narrative strategies established with *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, the early programs were marked by pointless arguments among talentless, selfish characters, incoherent storylines, and parodies of popular culture. These elements collectively challenged conventional wisdom through an unconventional and absurd approach. The channel sought a name that reflected the new broadcast block's unique character to distinguish its adult-oriented content from Cartoon Network's programming for children. Names such as *Aviso* (meaning "warning" in Spanish), *Parental Block*, and *Insert Quarter* (a nod to video games) were considered (Bahr, 2021). Ultimately, the name *Adult Swim*, inspired by the designated time in swimming pools when children are excluded, was chosen. Short promotional videos were created to deter children from watching and announce adult content availability. Early late-night promos featured black-and-white footage of older adults taking aerobics classes, signaling that the programming was unsuitable for children.

The low production budget contributed to Adult Swim's distinctive amateur aesthetic. Due to these budgetary constraints, program durations were kept short, with 15-minute episodes becoming the standard for the channel's original programming. This format, which influenced the structure of the programs, emphasized shorter sequences, one-liner dialogues, and a reduced focus on coherent plotlines (Lee, 2013). The channel's content resonated with an audience dissatisfied with societal norms and mainstream media, seeking alternatives to formulaic programming. Adult Swim created a unique brand culture by adopting an anti-establishment and contradictory stance. Unlike traditional broadcasting organizations, the channel rejected mass culture and opposed conventional television norms. Its provocative original programming, characterized by "bad aesthetics" and a subversive political stance, alienated many viewers who did not align with its distinct absurdity. However, these qualities solidified its identity as a pioneer of low-budget animation that eschewed mainstream conventions.

The founding of Adult Swim coincided with a period in American culture when the concept of adulthood was undergoing significant scrutiny. Following nearly a decade of economic growth and prosperity in the United States, a recession emerged at the start of the new millennium. However, the benefits of the preceding period of economic growth were unevenly distributed due to persistent income inequality (Martin, 2003). The economic downturn, coupled with the September 11 attacks, precipitated a redefinition of adulthood within society.

The "ownership society," a vision promoted by then-President George W. Bush, further exacerbated the socioeconomic challenges facing young adults. This system emphasized individual property ownership as a foundation for future economic prosperity and placed significant pressure on young adults who struggled to acquire property in the prevailing economic climate. This framework tied key services, including healthcare and pension



funds, to personal ownership. For many young adults, rising unemployment rates, stagnant wages, and limited job prospects created substantial barriers to achieving the societal benchmarks of adulthood. The worsening economic situation forced many young adults to return to their parents' homes, earning them the label "boomerang generation." Media portrayals of this crisis in adulthood often depicted young adults as spoiled, aimless, and incapable of meeting traditional societal expectations (Crawford, 2006). With a volatile job market, soaring student debt from escalating tuition fees, and an unstable housing sector, many young adults could not align with the traditional definition of adulthood. These socioeconomic challenges underscored the shifting landscape of adulthood in contemporary American society. Unemployment and economic depression contributed to increasing individualization, hedonistic lifestyles, social indifference, and apolitical attitudes among young adults. At this juncture, Adult Swim provided an escape for adults struggling to adapt to societal norms and social life, offering absurd and contrarian humor alongside short, easily consumable content.

The channel's opposition to mainstream media, political correctness, and social norms cultivated an audience of adults seeking to escape responsibilities and the intense political agenda of the time. Through this political and ideological stance, Adult Swim positioned itself against mainstream cultural forms while offering subcultural content to its viewers. Despite its anti-system and marginal identity, the channel played a significant role in the media industry it criticized. Its anti-hegemonic, marginal persona aligns with what Turow (1997, pp. 3–5) describes as segment-forming media—media designed to create small, culturally similar groups with emotional ties to the brand. Adult Swim successfully established a subcultural identity, leveraging "bad aesthetics" and subversive humor to appeal to niche audiences. However, despite its taboo-breaking and contrarian identity, the channel perpetuated a male-dominated perspective that reinforced negative stereotypes about women, normalized gender norms, and perpetuated sexism in its content. The audience it attracted—primarily young, white, heteronormative males—stood in contrast to its outsider ethos. Although Adult Swim fostered a marginal and subcultural brand culture, it also served as a highly effective representative of the media industry and system it purportedly opposed.

As highlighted earlier in this study, Adult Swim functioned as a source of absurd entertainment and a subversive platform that enabled viewers to explore alternative ideologies and challenge societal expectations. The channel's programming, mainly shows like *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, created a space for audiences to engage with ideas that diverged from the dominant narratives of unity, patriotism, and resilience prevalent in American media post-9/11. By offering humorous, ideologically neutral, or even anti-ideological content, Adult Swim encouraged passive resistance to dominant sociopolitical discourses.

In this context, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and other Adult Swim programs provide fertile ground for examining Smith's concept of young adulthood, redefined along the axes of consumption and individualism. Adult Swim and its programming acted as cultural mirrors, reflecting the values and anxieties of a generation reshaping the concept of adulthood. Shows such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* went beyond entertainment to deliver cultural commentary that resonated with viewers who felt "out of place" in the Deleuzian (1980) sense within a society that no longer offered clear paths to stability or success. By embracing absurdity and rejecting conventional narratives, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* embodied resistance to the rigid structures of post-9/11 American society. Its characters, living aimlessly and without ambition, symbolized a generation that sought meaning not through social approval or personal achievement but in the freedom to exist outside traditional expectations.

Additionally, the show's surreal humor and absurd plots offered viewers a temporary escape from the ideological pressures of American life. Unlike other media, dominated by patriotic narratives, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*



presented a world where nothing was sacred, and everything could be ridiculed. The show facilitated ideological escapism by avoiding overt political commentary and instead focusing on bizarre situations and character interactions detached from reality, allowing viewers to reject, ridicule, or invert traditional values and norms.

Similarly, Adult Swim's broader programming challenged what was considered acceptable or valuable in media. Its content frequently defied traditional narrative structures and aesthetic conventions, embracing chaos, dark humor, and absurdity. This break from conventional storytelling was not merely stylistic but an ideological statement questioning the necessity of conformity, duty, and collective action. In doing so, Adult Swim reflected a broader desire for individual freedom from the politically charged and oppressive atmosphere of the time.

#### 4. Aqua Teen Hunger Force: Humor and Ideological Escape

*Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (ATHF), the first project produced by Williams Street Studios to move beyond the direct influence of Hanna-Barbera, initially appeared in *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. As Adult Swim's first original program, ATHF set itself apart from other network productions. The series explored the interactions between anthropomorphic food characters—Master Shake, Frylock, and Meatwad—and their human neighbor, Carl Brutananadilewski, through a lens of social criticism and satire (Browsh, 2022). ATHF offered an innovative and experimental approach to animation by integrating subcultural elements into its audio and visual narrative, notably incorporating a hip-hop soundtrack into its storytelling. The series developed a unique narrative style and visual identity characterized by its provocative tone and subversive aesthetic.

Although the title and opening sequence suggest a superhero narrative similar to popular culture, ATHF defied such conventions. Initially conceived as a mystery-solving format, the series quickly moved away from this traditional framework, favoring a more experimental and satirical storytelling approach. While the first season leaned toward planned and coherent narratives focusing on mystery, subsequent seasons abandoned this format in favor of episodic storytelling that glorified the absurd and the chaotic. Despite lacking a definitive overarching narrative, the series established a recurring structural pattern that became one of its defining features. This pattern combined absurdist comedy with incisive social critique, typically beginning with scenes of everyday life that soon escalated into unexpected and illogical scenarios. The series generally followed a consistent pattern, transitioning from stasis to chaos and problems to solutions. While the audience became accustomed to the show's tone during the initial moments of stasis, the following absurd events were designed to unsettle and engage viewers. This approach broke away from traditional animation conventions, creating a more original and experimental narrative.

American humor is shaped around the concept of incongruity, which lies at the core of Louis D. Rubin's "Great American Joke" theory. According to this theory, the stark contrast between the lofty ideals of American democracy—such as freedom and equality—and the mundane realities of everyday life creates a fundamental incongruity that serves as the foundation for comedy. This incongruity is recognized as one of the primary factors in the emergence of absurd humor within American culture. Additionally, the tradition of exaggeration, closely linked to the exploration ethos, has contributed to the formation of humor by emphasizing the contrast between the vast geographical scale of America and the insignificance of the individual, as exemplified by tall tales. Early American humor featured the Jonathan figure (a rural character symbolizing national purity), which later evolved into the Yankee (a cunning, unrefined yet witty traveling salesman), and rebellious characters like Sut Lovingood, who engaged in irrational and destructive behavior, thereby laying the groundwork for absurd humor. Stand-up comedians similarly employ socially unacceptable personae to articulate sentiments that

audiences may privately feel but not openly express, often through absurd narratives. In this context, "The Best American Humor" anthology editor Moshe Waldoks argues that contemporary American life has become so overwhelmingly absurd that comedians struggle to create material that competes with everyday news, leading him to assert that "life disregards parody." Consequently, absurdity has transcended its role as a mere comedic device and has become a phenomenon that is culturally interpreted and analyzed (Walker, 1998, pp. 20-28).

This provocative style and absurd humor alienated some viewers but strengthened the bond with its core audience. Unlike traditionally animated series, *ATHF* focused on disconnected events, eschewing narrative integrity in favor of absurd humor. The show's tone temporarily subverts social norms and hierarchies, giving viewers a sense of liberation. Its fast pace reinforced the comedic narrative by not allowing audiences to adapt fully to each new scene. The series also addressed social issues, such as immigration, substance abuse, adulthood, and terrorism, weaving aggressive humor with sharp societal critique.

Dave Willis, one of the show's creators, described the series: "*There's no story to it. They're just entertaining characters. They're obnoxious.*" The social and cultural challenges faced by adults in post-9/11 America—including hedonistic lifestyles, uncertainty about the future, and conflicts with societal norms—were mirrored in the show's atmosphere. The characters, immature and hedonistic, lived in opposition to the social structure around them. For example, the three low-income roommates sharing a dilapidated house in a New Jersey suburb reflected the realities of economic instability and unemployment in the new millennium. This depiction resonated with adults forced to live with their families or roommates due to housing crises, being unable to fulfill traditional social roles, and retreating from urban centers. The unplanned and chaotic nature of the series mirrored the societal atmosphere of uncertainty, anxiety, and war in the post-9/11 era.

The recurring presence of aliens attacking the city symbolized the paranoia and fear of attacks that permeated society after September 11 in the show. This atmosphere of insecurity and war strengthened the bond between viewers and the show's protagonists, who battled threats and protected the city. The show's format was not focused on delivering a specific message but instead employed a subversive and aggressive attitude toward social norms and values. The unpredictable, absurd, and surreal narratives provided an escape for viewers overwhelmed by issues such as war, economic depression, and terrorism in post-9/11 America. Immature adults who rejected traditional roles constituted most of the program's audience.

This thematic atmosphere is exemplified in Season 2, Episode 8, which critiques consumer society and the diminishing sense of individual responsibility. The episode begins with Frylock reminding Shake to pay the bills. Frylock, representing a responsible parental figure, attempts to instill responsibility in Shake, who is selfish and irresponsible. Shake procrastinates instead of fulfilling his obligation, disrupting the household's utilities. Shake's reaction to losing television access—blaming a terrorist attack—parodies the widespread paranoia and fear that characterized post-9/11 America.

Shake has a hedonistic and selfish nature idealized by consumer society. He prioritizes material comfort, avoids responsibility, and prefers to live in the moment. Shake also reflects the youth's search for identity and indecision during this process. Tendencies such as rebellion, denial of responsibilities, and defiance of authority—common traits in adolescence—are evident in the character. He avoids adult responsibilities, such as paying bills, working, and earning money, rejects traditional adult roles, and conflicts with social norms. This depiction reflects the difficulties and identity crises experienced by young people in the United States during the transition to adulthood. Instead of taking a straightforward approach and paying the bills, Shake complicates matters by

being stubborn. He breaks into his neighbor Carl's house uninvited to continue watching television. Carl responds by pointing a shotgun at Shake and asking him to leave. This scene reflects the widespread individual armament, tendency toward violence, and strained social relations that became prominent in the post-September 11 societal atmosphere. The ease with which individuals resort to violence illustrates the pervasive insecurity and heightened aggression in society. Ultimately, Shake stubbornly resolves the problem by illegally drawing electricity from Carl's house. His persistent refusal to accept the rules and responsibilities imposed by the system underscores his rejection of societal norms.

Season 2, Episode 6 of the series explores the impact of globalization, which accelerated in the 21st century, on society and the transformation of social roles and identities. The character Travis, an alien who arrives on Earth from another planet, speaks Japanese and struggles to adapt to society. The episode humorously addresses the challenges people from different cultures face in interacting with one another. Travis's difficulty in learning English underscores the language and communication barriers inherent in globalization. Travis takes control of Shake's body to communicate with the team and explains that he was born thousands of light years away and wishes to pursue a career. He expresses interest in business, states that he is looking for a job, and mentions his willingness to work as an insured staff member. Travis serves as a metaphor for the cultural hybridization brought about by globalization in America and the identity confusion experienced by immigrants. The deteriorating economic conditions in the United States, exacerbated by wartime expenditures and heightened security measures, worsen job prospects for the younger population, particularly in the face of uncontrolled immigration. Shake represents young individuals discontented with these circumstances, taking a political stance against immigration. His attachment to established cultural norms, prejudice against foreigners, and sense of superiority reflect the broader sentiments of the youth. Shake's attitude exemplifies the post-September 11 atmosphere of insecurity, attack paranoia, and rising xenophobia in society; he prevailing political climate and national agenda further fuel societal alienation from immigrants and foreigners.

Frylock, the authority figure in the household, represents state institutions. While Shake remains unaware that Travis is using his body, Frylock allows it to happen. As the alien inhabits Shake's body, Shake's perception of time and cognition deteriorates. Frylock notices the harm caused but permits Travis to continue using Shake's body to communicate. This dynamic reflects a critique of state authorities in the United States, suggesting they often neglect societal well-being in favor of pragmatism. Frylock maintains an authoritarian stance, exerting control over Travis. Travis, in turn, listens to educational tapes to learn English and manages to speak a few sentences. When Travis opposes Frylock and uses slang, Frylock seeks to educate him through punishment. Despite Travis's attempts to conform to rules, he remains prone to rebellion, secretly expressing discomfort with Frylock's impositions. His deference to authority during his education process represents a pragmatic attitude rooted in self-interest. This tension between the need for authority and the desire for individual freedom mirrors the contradictions individuals face in a globalizing world, a theme reflected in the series' characters.

Season 4, Episode 5 examines the effects of mass culture on nature and living beings. Consumer society and adult identity are addressed through an absurd lens. Frylock, again depicted as a parental figure, serves as the group's decision-maker. Shake, representing the younger generation, struggles financially and requests money. Frylock rejects this request, replying, "Get a job," which reflects societal expectations for young people to achieve economic independence and take responsibility.

In contrast, Meatwad embodies innocence with his childish and naive demeanor and lacks such concerns. Frylock is more empathetic toward Meatwad's desire to adopt a dog than Shake's financial struggles. These

dynamic highlight the societal distinction between the protected innocence of childhood and the expectation for young adults to stand on their own.

In the episode, the dog Frylock creates for Meatwad critiques consumer society's commodification of living beings. The dog is produced using a packaged kit, following specific instructions and environmental conditions. This process reduces the dog to an object of consumption rather than a biological entity, reinforcing that modern society views living beings as commodities molded to serve consumer culture. The artificial dog, created in Carl's swimming pool, offers a critical perspective on humanity's artificial and manipulative transformation of natural processes. Named "Handbanana" by the group, the dog-a formless mix of fruit and animal- critiques humanity's interventions in nature through cloning and artificial selection.

Shake's characteristics, transferred to the dog during its creation, result in Handbanana embodying the traits of a hedonistic and consumerist youth. Handbanana, who repeatedly sexually harasses Carl, exhibits an immature nature driven by uncontrollable impulses and instincts. This exaggerated depiction critiques negative traits associated with the younger generation. Handbanana's culinary skills inspire Shake, who sees an opportunity to monetize the situation by opening a restaurant where dogs serve as cooks. This plan highlights Shake's opportunistic and profit-driven mindset, critiquing mass culture and consumer society's exploitation of resources for financial gain.

## 5. Conclusion

This article comprehensively examines how *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* reflects the evolving ideological and cultural landscape of post-9/11 American society and serves as a critique tool within this context. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, brought about a fundamental transformation in American ideology, prompting individuals to redefine concepts of adulthood, identity, and social participation. In this framework, animated series with absurd narratives, such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, can be interpreted as reflections of the societal trauma and cultural shifts that emerged after this event.

*ATHF*, broadcast on the Adult Swim platform, challenges traditional notions of adulthood by embracing absurdism and sarcastic humor while offering a critical perspective on political and social norms. The show is a non-sensical and unstructured narrative metaphor for the chaotic and uncertain atmosphere of post-9/11 American society. The mundane yet chaotic lives of its anthropomorphic food characters symbolize the escapism sought by young adults facing economic and social pressures. Through its absurd humor and subversive storytelling, the series serves as a compelling critique for examining the changing perception of adulthood in this era.

In post-9/11 American society, adulthood has fundamentally lost its traditional significance. Economic instability, rising unemployment, and mounting student debt have made it increasingly difficult for young adults to achieve conventional markers of adulthood, such as financial independence, stable careers, and family formation. Concepts like "extended adolescence" or "emerging adulthood" highlight a new model in which young people prioritize individual freedom over conformity to societal norms. As a significant cultural product representing this transformation, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* portrays a lifestyle outside traditional frameworks, encouraging viewers to question established values.

The irresponsible and hedonistic lifestyles of the show's characters reflect the tendency of young adults to evade social responsibilities while also critiquing consumer culture. Master Shake's materialistic and selfish behavior

symbolizes a critique of contemporary American society's pervasive individualism and consumerism. In contrast, Frylock's moral and environmentally conscious demeanor acts as a counterbalance, emphasizing the importance of ethical responsibility within the community. These character dynamics provide a microcosm for understanding the tension between social norms and individual responses to those norms.

*ATHF* also offers a critical perspective on the role of the media in post-9/11 American society. The chaotic structure and humorous tone of the series can be interpreted as a response to the mainstream media's emphasis on themes such as patriotism and collective responsibility. Programs like those featured on the Adult Swim platform provided viewers with a space to escape political and social pressures while simultaneously serving as significant tools for critiquing broader ideological transformations within society. This study demonstrates that *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and similar programs provided an escape for audiences during periods of intense ideological change and enabled them to reconsider societal norms and values. The series should not only be seen as an entertaining narrative but also as a lens to understand the complex and volatile nature of post-9/11 American society. In this context, it is evident that further research is needed on the ideological effects and cultural reflections of media products.

In conclusion, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* is a powerful example for understanding the ideological, cultural, and economic transformations of post-9/11 American society. The series' absurd structure and defiance of societal norms effectively represent both the individual and social conflicts experienced by young adults as well as the broader ideological fractures of American society during this period.

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