



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

Hugvísindadeild

# **Postmodernism and The Simpsons**

*Intertextuality, Hyperreality and Critique of Metanarratives*

**Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs**

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## **Abstract**

This essay offers a postmodernist reading of the popular television program *The Simpsons*, with special regard to the postmodern theories of intertextuality, hyperreality, and metanarratives. Before delving into *The Simpsons*, some major theoretical aspects of postmodernism in aesthetic production are outlined. Three of the most prominent theorists of postmodernism – Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson – are introduced, as well as their theories which will be brought into consideration in the following chapters. The objective of the essay is to apply these theories to *The Simpsons* and thereby reveal some of the foremost characteristics of the postmodern which are readily exhibited in the show.

The first section, on Lyotard's theory of metanarratives, explores the manifestations of anti-authoritative tendencies in *The Simpsons* and the methods used to express them. The following section covers the subject of intertextuality in *The Simpsons* through parody, pastiche and self-reflexivity. This section concludes by identifying parallels between *The Simpsons* and Jameson's theory on the loss of historical reality in the postmodern era. In the final section we examine how Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality can be applied to *The Simpsons*. Particular attention is given to the role of the mass media in the construction of postmodern hyperreality, in order to illustrate the media's influence on Springfield's most famous citizen, Homer Simpson.

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## **Introduction**

### *Postmodernism: Profile of a Cultural Movement*

Postmodernism is a term used to encompass a wide range of attitudes in the fields of aesthetic production and cultural criticism emerging in the 1980s. It is a unique critical movement due to the extent of its reach; it can be said to be immediately relevant to the realms of the arts, philosophy, politics and sociology. The *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory*'s definition of postmodernism is indicative of its massive scope:

“[Postmodernism] is now used to describe the visual arts, music, dance, film, theatre, philosophy, criticism, historiography, theology, and anything up-to-date in culture in general” (“Postmodernism”, 1993). It is a label given to a time period in which the abrupt influx of technology and ever-increasing cultural multiplicity must be met with new methods of representation. Under the banner of postmodernism a number of the most influential thinkers of the academic world have found innovative ways to describe the shifts of this new cultural condition labeled postmodernism.

Ever since its rise to academic popularity in the 1980s, postmodernism has sparked heated and long-standing intellectual debates, which can be interpreted as a validation of its vast influence. Some of the debates relate to the definition of the term itself, often centering around the question of its connection with modernism. The main question may be said to be: is it a continuation of modernism or a reaction against it? According to Hal Foster (1983: ix), postmodernism aims to deconstruct or rewrite modernism in order to open its closed systems. Although both movements draw out techniques that essentially challenge tradition, the sentiment and motivation behind the employment of these techniques differ in important ways. Fragmentation is an example of a feature which characterizes both modernism and postmodernism, but literary critics such as Peter Barry argue that the modernist employs fragmentation with a tone of lamentation and nostalgia

for an earlier, more intact age, while the postmodernist employs it with a tone of exhilaration and liberation (Barry, 2002: 84). Postmodernists also draw a distinction between modernism's and postmodernism's perception of the relationship between "high" art and "low" art. Whereas the modernist would generally eschew the mixing of high and low art, in the postmodern realm it is not infrequent that these elements are conflated in one expression. Postmodernism stands in strong opposition to the kind of aesthetic elitism that postmodernists regard as inherent to modernist aesthetics. Postmodernists regard popular arts as no less crucial to our culture than the more classic arts. This is often perceived as a provocative view and has instigated many of postmodernism's more austere criticisms.

Although postmodernism is a notoriously difficult term to generalize, there are several common features which can be said to characterize postmodern art forms. Intertextuality is a prominent aspect in many postmodern art forms, in which works of art or literature frequently refer to each other through parody or pastiche. In the case of parody, a work is imitated with playful satire, whereas pastiche openly imitates a work in order to make use of its original style. Self-reflexivity also characterizes many postmodern works, which explicitly refer to themselves in order to indicate how aware they are of their own constructive character. Intertextuality gives rise to irony, another common trait of postmodernism. Irony and imitation are frequently used together to break down conventions, which is one of postmodernism's distinct anti-foundational tendencies. Many of postmodernism's features stem directly from a disdain of both aesthetic and political authorities that are in the practice of imposing norms. Postmodernism has reacted to the authoritarian hierarchization of culture by subverting conventions, blurring previously distinct boundaries and rejecting traditional aesthetic values. If the postmodern spirit were to be summed up in simple terms, it might lie in this inherent struggle to avoid hierarchy in any way it manifests itself.

### *Key Terms and Theories of Postmodernism*

The beginning of the postmodern debate essentially began in 1979 with the publication of the essay “The Postmodern Condition” (translated into English in 1983) by French literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard. By now, Lyotard is widely regarded as one of the most influential postmodern theorists. Essentially he conceives postmodernism to be a war against cultural and theoretical consensus and ideological unity, as propounded by social theorist Jürgen Habermas in his defense of modernity (“Modernity – an Incomplete Project”, 1980). In his essays “The Postmodern Condition” and “What is Postmodernism?” (1982), Lyotard attacks the totalizing sensibilities of the Enlightenment, which is the catalyst of the modern movement according to Habermas. Lyotard targets the Enlightenment’s authoritative explanations of the world and challenges Habermas’s call for an end to “artistic experimentation” and for “order, ... unity, for identity, for security” (Lyotard, 1993: 40). The unity which Habermas desires is dismissed by Lyotard as an illusion which represses the ever-increasing plurality of contemporary culture. This dismissal is the basis for his theory of grand narratives, or metanarratives.

Lyotard believes knowledge has become a commodity and consequently a means of empowerment. He sees knowledge as being communicated through narratives, or different ways of interpreting the world. Grand narratives are authoritative, establishing their political or cultural views as absolute truths beyond any means of criticism. They have a totalizing effect on the culture, reducing it to universal codes which usurp their local counterparts. In a culture driven by grand narratives, the ideology of the predominant regime essentially has a monopoly on knowledge, which Lyotard opposes by calling for a new world of knowledge based on mininarratives. Mininarratives do not contain any universal truths but together they form a body of knowledge more adept at

describing the contemporary condition than the generalizing ideologies of grand narratives. For Lyotard, the postmodern culture distances itself from this centralizing effect on knowledge, thus removing the need for the epistemological hierarchy which cultural or political movements such as modernism and Marxism seem to enforce. Lyotard announces that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility” (Lyotard, 1984: 37), praising local and temporary knowledge instead. This is the stage onto which the postmodern artist or writer emerges, each contributing her or his own mininarrative in the form of liberating postmodern expressions.

The French academia can be said to be the cradle of the postmodern movement as a theoretical discipline, with Lyotard having first established the significance of the postmodern condition in the late 1970s. Debates in academic circles in France on the meaning and importance of postmodernism further escalated when cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard appeared on the scene in the early 1980s. Although never explicitly discussing ‘postmodernism’ by name, Baudrillard’s writings have been no less instrumental in shaping our understanding of postmodernism than Lyotard’s. Baudrillard is most often associated with the postmodern “loss of the real”, which, he proposes, relates to the problem of representation and stems from the impact of mass media’s relentless play with signs and images. In his book *Simulacra and Simulation*, fully translated into English in 1994, Baudrillard describes the problems we are facing in contemporary reality in which the distinction between what is real and what is imagined is continually blurred and meaning is systematically eroded. This is Baudrillard’s most important contribution to postmodernism: the theory of hyperreality.

According to Baudrillard, the world, which once consisted of signs that could be associated with their actual referents in reality, has been replaced by the postmodern simulacrum, a system in which signs have lost their association with an underlying reality. The postmodern world consists of simulations of reality, or hyperrealities,

wherein signs refer not to an external reality but to other signs. The result is a culture in which surface and depth become indistinguishable and superficial appearance is all that can be achieved. Under the bombardment of images from the dominant media of popular culture – TV, film and advertising – the real becomes subordinate to representation. Whereas the media once mirrored, reflected or represented reality, the postmodern culture faces the problem of media constructing a *hyperreality* (see Douglas Kellner, 1989: 68). Baudrillard proposes that simulations of reality end up becoming “more real than the real”, pointing to Disneyland as a hyperreality which tries to convince us that the rest of America is real. This is a prime example of the kind of radical and sometimes playful rhetoric which Baudrillard has contributed to postmodern theory.

In 1984 Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson emerged as one of the most prominent critics of postmodernism with the publication of his essay, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, which he later expanded into a book. In the essay, Jameson merges aesthetic criticism with social and economic theory, with the objective of proving that “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally”. He describes postmodernism as a *cultural dominant* driven primarily by the forces of consumer multinational capitalism.

Jameson has also played an integral part in defining various stylistic features of postmodernism, describing the postmodern condition as “a new kind of flatness, of depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense”. In “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, Jameson describes the loss of historical reality in writing, claiming that the historical novel “can no longer represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about the past” (Jameson, 2001: 79). In the postmodern era our historical past is represented “not through its content but through glossy stylistic means, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image” (Jameson, 2001: 75). Jameson notes a shift in private styles, whereby instead of creating

our own unique styles we look to the past and imitate old, dead styles through pastiche (Jameson, 2001: 74). In the postmodern era the unique styles, which were such a fundamental feature of modernist art, have now been integrated into the masses as common techniques with which to represent the world.

Upon examination of the writings of Jameson, Baudrillard and Lyotard, a number of the characteristics of postmodernism as described in their theories can be seen in abundance in the American animated television program *The Simpsons*. The following chapters seek to explicate several aspects of this show in light of the principal theories developed by the aforementioned theorists. We will begin by looking at Lyotard's theory of metanarratives and its connection with *The Simpsons*.

## **Critique of Metanarratives in *The Simpsons***

*The Simpsons* is a TV program dedicated to portraying contemporary society in all its multi-faceted glory. The creators allow us to experience the entire spectrum of society in Springfield by employing a staggering number of characters to represent its fictional world. Wikipedia lists nearly 1000 characters with lines in *The Simpsons*, noting that this is by no means an exhaustive list. Given the sheer magnitude of episodes and appearances, listing every character in *The Simpsons* would be a virtually impossible task. Despite the farcical, tongue-in-cheek nature of *The Simpsons*, it comes perhaps closest of all contemporary television shows to representing society as a whole. Few aspects of society have been left untouched by *The Simpsons*' treatment, due to the enormous stock of characters used to symbolize different types of people in the world. By focusing entire episodes on the trials and tribulations of such contrastive characters as Indian immigrant Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, neglected youth Nelson Muntz, local drunk Barney Gumble and lonely senior Abraham Simpson, *The Simpsons* manages to reflect the pluralism of postmodern society in a parodying yet symbolic manner. *The Simpsons* does not limit its subject matter to particular age groups, ethnicities or social classes, but merges all the binary opposites of society together to form the chaotic, diversified town of Springfield. But it is not only the composition of characters that affects this seeming chaos 'melting pot', but also the subject matter itself. An episode may begin with a portrayal of elementary school banality and end on the issue of gay marriage, blindsiding the viewer entirely with its unforeseeable shifts in trajectory. The inability to pin the program down to one genre is indicative of its representation of America as framed by the postmodern paradigm. The conscious decision has been made not to localize *The Simpsons* to any distinct region besides America, nor to any one period of time besides

the postmodern era. The creators of the program have gone to great lengths to *not* demarcate Springfield within any region such that it has become a running gag through the episodes. What's more, the Simpson children never age or progress in school. In 17 years the Simpson's infant has not learned to walk or talk, and has yet to give up her pacifier. The family is as timeless as they are placeless. In this understanding the creators' efforts are such that *The Simpsons* are nowhere, living at no time, and representing no specific family – but paradoxically they are every American family everywhere at any point in the postmodern era.

Despite these efforts, the show inevitably focuses more on white middle-class America than other sectors of society. But few mainstream programs have featured these other sectors as prominently as *The Simpsons*. The popularity of the Apu character in the early 1990s marked the appearance of the first recurring South Asian character in a major American sitcom who is not only featured regularly but has been made the center of several individual episodes (Chris Turner, 2005: 355). The show's refusal to adhere to the norms of accepted sitcom subject matter is one of its foremost postmodern traits. It is an attitude that corresponds well to postmodernism's aim to celebrate cultural differences and bring them to the surface. *The Simpsons* is a testament to the postmodern de-centering of contemporary mass consciousness, by embracing diversity of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status as part of the heterogeneity of society.

The proliferation of characters representing such a broad spectrum of cultures and subcultures in *The Simpsons* reflects a fragmentation of the subject, as is commonly associated with postmodern art forms. Subjectivity in *The Simpsons* dissolves with the multiplicity of characters that appear in each show. The appearances of characters embodying so many differing individual identities tend to bring forth contradictions in the program's messages, resulting in a mood of objectivity instead of subjectivity.

According to literary theorist Christopher Norris, postmodern fragmentation is “to be understood as marking an absolute and irreparable break with the unified subject” (Angela McRobbie, 1994: 28). *The Simpsons* displays this de-centering of the unified subject by focusing its subject matter on groups of people previously shoved into the background of traditional sitcoms – that is, if they were featured at all. Although episodes most frequently center around a member of the Simpson family, their progression throughout the narrative inevitably leads to the introduction of dozens of different characters along the way. Subject focus shifts so frequently in any given episode that we no longer have a limited number of dissenting voices, as is common in traditional television shows, but rather we are offered fragments of characters from diverse parts of society that together form the multifarious picture of Springfieldian society.

Postmodern fragmentation in *The Simpsons* is not limited to its subject matter but extends to its narrative form as well. The erratic structure of *The Simpsons*' storylines results in a broken-down, fragmented narrative, another characteristic of postmodernism. The episodes are deliberately “all over the place” and non-linear: the first five to ten minutes usually have little or nothing to do with the main storyline. The show makes rich use of the plot-drift technique, interjecting stories with so many tangents and digressions into non-related subjects that it can at times be difficult to determine what a given episode is “about”. In many of its episodes, *The Simpsons* breaks down its already short time period of 22 minutes into several shorter mini-stories. In the “Treehouse of Horror” Halloween specials, the writers have the chance to present a number of discrete stories instead of one, continuous story in more detail. This fragmented narrative style is taken to the extreme in the episode “22 Short Films About Springfield”, in which 22 individual stories are told at the astonishing speed of one minute per story. We are taken through a tour of the multiplicity of everyday life in Springfield, with a number of events occurring at the same time: Apu goes on a date while a pawnshop owner takes Snake and Chief

Wiggum hostage, while Smithers almost dies from a bee sting, etc. One of the episode's mini-stories, revolving around the domestic problems of the actor playing Spanish TV character Pedro the Bee, is portrayed entirely in Spanish. This episode is a good example of how *The Simpsons* tends to play with narrative structures, and is also representative of its frequent fusion of unlike genres and themes.

*The Simpsons* seems to distrust the wholeness and completion associated with traditional stories, as is characteristic of postmodernist writing (Stuart Sim, 2001: 127). The constrictions of the beginning-middle-end narrative structure are cast off by *The Simpsons* except for purposes of parody. If there is an unequivocal conclusion at the end of a *Simpsons* episode, it is usually done as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the re-enforcement of traditional family values which other sitcoms tend to place in the foreground. The historical role of sitcoms has been to tell stories which resolve happily at the end of the show, so a positive moral of some sort can consequently be established. *The Simpsons* parodies this format by making use of the re-assuring resolution methods of conventional sitcoms: the classic sappy strings are cued when the characters begin to express what they have learnt throughout the course of the story. But in *The Simpsons*, there is always a glint of underlying sarcasm that suggests the absurdity in assuming that concrete moral messages could be reached in a 22-minute narrative. In the episode "Burns' Heir", Homer offers Lisa and Bart some paternal advice typical of *The Simpsons'* satire on resolution: "Kids, you tried your best and you failed miserably. The lesson is: never try".

*The Simpsons'* use of postmodernist techniques, such as fragmentation, serve to highlight the diversity of our culture and the impossibility of establishing moral authority in the pluralism of postmodern society. It is a sentiment closely related to Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of metanarratives, which involves a distrust of totalizing explanations of the world. In effect, *The Simpsons'* stance is the same as Lyotard's – to reject systems

that aim to exert their authority in order to proclaim absolute truths. Lyotard's view is that these metanarratives, which purport to explain and re-assure, are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality (Peter Barry, 2002: 86). Through various implicit and explicit methods, *The Simpsons* essentially takes the same stance, criticizing any and all who perpetuate such metanarratives. One of the ways *The Simpsons* does this is by making anti-authoritarianism one of its most prominent recurring themes.

If a message is to be found buried underneath the highly satirical surface of *The Simpsons* it is opposition to authority, whether religious, political, academic or legal. A number of supporting characters in *The Simpsons* are figures traditionally associated with authority, such as politicians, policemen, teachers, principals, doctors, lawyers and ministers. The characters used to represent these figures in *The Simpsons* are depicted as either dangerously incompetent or criminally corrupt: Mayor Quimby, the most frequently featured politician on the show, seldom appears in a scene without taking bribes or lying to the public, and Springfield's Chief of Police, Chief Wiggum, has the mental ability of a young child. If these were the only unappealing authority figures in *The Simpsons*, one might be able to dismiss them as solely propellers of comedy. But the consistency with which *The Simpsons* puts a negative spin on its figures of authority renders it difficult to deny a fundamental distrust of authority. The inclination is often demonstrated in the subversive antics of the show's most ruthless rebel, ten-year-old Bart Simpson. Bart is an icon of youth's rebellion, fiercely opposed to those who exert power over him and might force him to obey their rules. His arch nemesis is his principal Seymour Skinner, against whom Bart has committed countless malevolent pranks. But Bart's antagonism towards anything authoritative is more instinctive than philosophical. When faced with a situation just begging for a rebellious act, such as Superintendent Chalmers bending over in front of him, he feels *compelled* to kick him in the rear, despite

actively trying to resist the temptation (episode “Whacking Day”). If Bart is a natural-born prankster with no apparent agenda, his more enlightened sister, Lisa, is the opposite.

Lisa Simpson embodies the show’s anti-establishmentarian tendencies with her unceasing onslaught of the totalizing systems abundant in Springfield. Throughout the series, Lisa’s innate critical disposition has exposed many of the wrongdoings committed by authorities in *The Simpsons*. In the episode “Lisa the Iconoclast” (a title descriptive of Lisa’s role on the show), Lisa uncovers a conspiracy orchestrated by the Springfield Historical Society, which has been forging documents and deceiving the public to propagate the false ennoblement of Jebediah Springfield. The entire town’s radical religious-like faith in the myth of Jebediah is illustrated throughout the episode. Lisa tries to inform her community that Jebediah was in fact a murderous pirate by the name of Hans Sprungfeld but everyone she turns to fervently denies the truth and become hostile upon Lisa’s insistence. Even Marge, who usually serves as the rational, moral center of the family, ends up yelling at Lisa: “Everyone knows Jebediah Springfield was a true American hero, end of story!” In the episode “Lisa the Skeptic”, Lisa puts herself in a similar position against the common beliefs of her community in Springfield. Everyone in the community is convinced of the authenticity of an angel fossil excavated near a shopping mall, while Lisa desperately tries to convince them of their ignorance. At the end Lisa is proved right when it is revealed that the whole thing was a publicity stunt.

In both of these episodes, Lisa combats brainwashing powers in Springfield by criticizing the blind faith which people are wont to have towards myths. Despite Lisa’s valiant efforts, her voice is never heard because her community puts all its trust in authority. She does not coincide with the prescriptive rules that Springfield has established to separate authoritative knowledge from unverified knowledge. This is the kind of system that Lyotard describes and opposes in “The Postmodern Condition”. When knowledge becomes hierarchical, as it is in Springfield, only ideas from select

groups will be admissible into the collective body of canonical knowledge. It is in authority's best interest to encourage the consensus of ideas because this enables it to maintain its power, and with such consensus comes totalizing systems of knowledge, or metanarratives. Metanarratives exclude those sectors of society that are not situated at the top of the knowledge hierarchy, such as Lisa Simpson. Who would listen to an eight-year-old girl's protests when a much more qualified source, for example the Springfield Historical Society, has already legitimized its knowledge?

In "The Postmodern Condition", Lyotard proposes a different system of knowledge, wherein hierarchy is replaced by a "flat network of areas of inquiry", which would include contributions from the likes of Lisa Simpson. Instead of the homogenizing metanarratives, there would be a series of local narratives, or mininarratives, which are temporary and contingent, unlike metanarratives. Lisa would share the same belief as Lyotard, that "consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value" (Lyotard, 1979: 66), because all her non-conformist efforts throughout the series serve to condemn blind consensus. In the face of adversity she stays true to her belief that authoritative powers should not be able to deceive the public by brainwashing them into consensus. One could say that the war against totality is as much Lisa's as it is Lyotard's, as throughout the series she has always strayed away from popular universal principles in favor of the truth. She serves as the central mouthpiece for *The Simpsons'* implicit opposition to metanarratives.

Christianity is one of the most visibly predominant metanarratives in Springfield, as it is in the rest of America. *The Simpsons* regularly features religion in a critical spotlight: when Homer is asked what religion he is in episode "Homerpalooza", he replies; "You know, the one with the well-meaning rules that don't work in life. Uh, Christianity." Even Reverend Lovejoy, who should be Springfield's strongest advocator of Christianity, feels constricted by his religion's rigid set of rules. In "Secrets of a Successful Marriage",

he confides in Homer that just about everything is a sin. Pointing to the Bible, he says: “Have you ever sat down and read this thing? Technically, we’re not allowed to go to the bathroom”. Despite *The Simpsons*’ pokes at Christianity, the program manages to incorporate Christianity into its content quite frequently. As Mark I. Pinsky points out in his book *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World’s Most Animated Family*, the Simpsons spend more time in church than any other TV family. But of all the family members, Marge is the only one who goes to church out of a true adherence to the faith and not out of a pure sense of duty. The other family members follow Marge to church rather unwillingly, as if going to church is a bothersome chore. In the episode “She of Little Faith”, Lisa gets fed up with her church’s emphasis on revenue and renounces Christianity altogether, decrying it as a materialistic faith. This outrages Springfield’s Christian community, prompting a meeting to try to lure Lisa back to the Christian faith. Throughout the episode, Marge tries to convert her by denying her the material goods that Christianity rewards her with during Christmastime. At the end of the episode, Homer asks Lisa if she’s “back on the winning team”.

In this scenario *The Simpsons* depicts Christianity as a club in which one’s participation is demanded by that insidious consensus Lyotard describes in “The Postmodern Condition”. In *The Simpsons*, adherents to the metanarrative of Christianity deny any other possible conceptions of the world and are willing to do anything to force consensus upon non-believers. Fundamentalist Ned Flanders is the most extreme example of such a person. He is downright terrified when he hears Lisa proclaim her loss of faith. In a frenzy of fear, he grabs his sons Rod and Todd and locks them in the basement where they will not be able to hear Lisa’s sacrilege. In this episode and countless others, Ned Flanders is depicted in *The Simpsons* as such a faithful disciple of his religion that the thought of his children coming into contact with anything remotely non-Christian is petrifying. In the characters of Rod and Todd, we can identify an underlying criticism of

Flanders' overprotective Christian upbringing. Rod and Todd (whose names naturally rhyme with God), are depicted in the series as extremely naïve and utterly confused about the ways of the world. Their knowledge of the world is limited to what their Bible says and it has resulted in a skewed understanding of the world.

The downsides of Flanders' narrow-minded approach to life are highlighted in various other ways throughout the series. Although Flanders has the strongest moral convictions and the most "concrete" ethical system of anyone on *The Simpsons*, he is continuously met with a suspiciously high degree of misfortune. In "Hurricane Neddy", a hurricane demolishes Flanders' house while Homer's is left untouched. Furthermore, Flanders' wife, Maude, is the only recurring character on *The Simpsons* that has been permanently killed off (in a freak accident, of course). It seems that Flanders' strong adherence to Christian doctrines does not benefit him in the end.

*The Simpsons'* constant ridicule of Flanders' fundamentalist belief system reflects an opposition to metanarratives; Flanders' steadfastness ultimately serves no end in the pluralism of postmodern society. In a world that is constantly changing, you cannot hold on to totalizing explanations and avoid all the other possibilities. This is why *The Simpsons* has not only aimed its religious satire at Christianity, but has dedicated entire episodes to satirizing other widespread religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. Staying true to postmodernism's non-discriminating disposition, all religious metanarratives are equally vulnerable to attack by *The Simpsons*.

## **Intertextuality and Loss of Historical Reality in *The Simpsons***

One of the primary features of postmodernism in aesthetic production is the use of intertextuality, which *The Simpsons* frequently embraces in its narratives. A significant portion of the show's comedy lies in its rich use of both explicit and implicit references to cultural icons from the past and the present. These are classic comedic techniques far from exclusive to *The Simpsons*, but to feature these references as prevalently as is done in *The Simpsons* was novel for any popular TV series, particularly in the animation genre. Watching any given episode of *The Simpsons*, viewers will find it difficult to ignore the bombardment of allusions to all kinds of cultural phenomena. Taking the episode "A Streetcar Named Marge" as an example, cultural references range from the Broadway play *Oh! Calcutta!* to the Russian philosopher Ayn Rand (Chris Turner, 2005: 65). The episode's story centers around Marge's participation in a local production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, to which numerous references are made and lines of dialogue are extracted from throughout the episode, as well as serving as an allegory for Homer's brutish Stanley Kowalski-esque treatment of Marge. Meanwhile, Maggie is left at the *Ayn Rand School for Tots*, from which she is forced to escape by re-enacting scenes from the 1963 films *The Great Escape* and *The Birds*. Ignoring the fact that most viewers will be completely oblivious to the philosophy of Ayn Rand, several references to Rand's central motifs are embedded in the episode (e.g., posters appear with the phrases "A is A" and "helping is futile").<sup>1</sup> "A Streetcar Named Marge" is demonstrative of *The Simpsons'* plentiful use of referencing, to the extent that the references are almost as significant to one's enjoyment of the show as its actual storyline. This hyper-allusive

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<sup>1</sup> Ayn Rand is best known for developing the philosophy of objectivism. Her philosophy emphasizes individualism and self-sufficiency, as alluded to in the phrase "helping is futile". "A is A" is a quote from her 1957 book *Atlas Shrugged*, used to describe her concept of individual rights. ([http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism\\_pobs5](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=objectivism_pobs5), visited 27 April 2006)

cultural awareness in *The Simpsons* is one of the most prominent characteristics of postmodern art forms.

Although esoteric references such as that to Ayn Rand are often made in *The Simpsons*, the writers usually tend towards those references most familiar with the public, such as popular film, music and other television programs. By limiting themselves to neither popular nor obscure references, the show ignores the distinction between the adult/child demographics. The diverse nature of the show's references occasionally alienate both adults and children at the same time but most viewers are easily able to recognize parodies of well-known celebrities such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. Although Schwarzenegger does not lend his voice to the Rainier Wolfcastle character, a long list of other celebrities have lined up to make an appearance on the show, either as themselves or as fictional characters. At times, the version of themselves to which they lend their voice is deliberately made to be a stereotype of their real persona. In "When You Dish Upon a Star", actors Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger enforce various stereotypes of the hard-to-please, vain Hollywood actor. This is a unique level of parody on television, in which the subjects of parody will gladly contribute an element of their real identity (i.e., their voice) in order to project their stereotypical personality. This is one of the ways in which *The Simpsons* embraces popular conceptions instead of accurate representations.

The Simpson family's vacations to foreign countries, England, Australia, Japan and Brazil, are perhaps the best example of the show's characteristic celebration of overly simplistic stereotypes. In episodes taking place in foreign countries, nearly every common stereotype associated with those countries is represented as the country's reality. In the Simpson family's vacation to Rio de Janeiro in episode "Blame It On Lisa", monkeys live in the streets and attack people, children mug tourists and all men are bisexual.

*The Simpsons*'s use of intertextuality is not only found in references to other works but in references to itself as well. The program displays an acute self-consciousness through frequent references to its own creations. Characters in *The Simpsons* occasionally reconsider their actions based on the storyline of previous episodes; they will suddenly stop in their tracks to point out that their actions would lead to glaring discontinuity with previous episodes (e.g., in the episode "Viva Ned Flanders"). In "Bart Gets Famous", Bart walks down the street humming the theme to *The Simpsons*. Characters often make self-aware comments that their existence is that of a television program: in the beginning of the episode "The Telltale Head" (a parody of Poe's *Tell-Tale Heart*), Bart informs the audience that the story will be over in only 23 minutes and 5 seconds, which is the exact length of the episode minus commercial time. The show makes more allusions to itself as a commercially dependent creation in "The Simpsons's 138th Episode Spectacular", which host Troy McClure concludes by reflecting on the family's future: "Who knows what adventures they'll have between now and the time when the show becomes unprofitable?" Furthermore, in two different episodes Homer turns his head to the "camera" after a dramatic cliffhanger moment and announces coolly to the audience at home: "We'll be right back." Fade to commercials.

*The Simpsons*' self-reflexivity is also apparent through numerous references to its relationship to other cartoons, as well as its status as an animated program for adults. In "Krusty Gets Busted" Lisa tells Homer: "If cartoons were meant for adults, they'd put them on prime time," alluding to the fact that *The Simpsons* is the first animated show in American television history to be aired on prime time. Throughout the series, different Simpson family members have repeatedly dismissed cartoons as cheap entertainment with various self-parodying pronouncements, e.g. "Cartoons are just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh" ("Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington") and "We're characters in a cartoon. How humiliating" ("Treehouse of Horror IX"). In addition to alluding to itself as

a cartoon series, *The Simpsons* has parodied several of its cartoon peer programs, such as *Family Guy*, *Tom & Jerry*, *The Flintstones*, *The Road Runner Show*, *The Jetsons* and *Yogi Bear*, to name a few. Through *The Simpsons*' especially frequent references to *The Flintstones*, the creators seem to implicitly acknowledge having borrowed the idea of the fat, dumb husband married to the slender, loving wife from *The Flintstones*. In recent seasons, *The Simpsons* has also meta-acknowledged *Family Guy*'s debt to *The Simpsons* with several biting criticisms of *Family Guy*'s lack of originality. There have also be a number of references to *The Simpsons*' creator Matt Groening's other animated series, *Futurama*.

While there are only a few examples mentioned here, they provide a good idea of the show's extensive and varied usage of parody and self-referencing as a comedic tool. But *The Simpsons*' broader uses of intertextuality are perhaps better exemplified in its repeated imitations of other cultural works or styles, or what the theorists of the postmodernism label as pastiche. In his essay "Postmodernism", Jameson describes pastiche as a central characteristic of postmodern cultural production. Pastiche, Jameson claims, is a kind of blank parody – mimicking without the satiric impulse that is identified with parody. Postmodern art forms are characterized by *reproduction* instead of production, as the trademarks of original authors in the past are reproduced in postmodern works. This postmodern emphasis on pastiche appears in *The Simpsons*' liberal usage of other author's works, be they classic or obscure. Many episodes of *The Simpsons* employ pastiche of other books, movies or historical events, from start to finish. The episode "Bart of Darkness" (an allusion to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), in which Bart is forced to spend his summer indoors due to a broken leg, is a pastiche of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Bart uses a telescope to look around his neighborhood and uncovers a mysterious murder plot in the Flanders' house, which becomes the episode's main storyline. Besides borrowing the storyline from *Rear Window*, many of the

episode's "camera angles" directly emulate some of the film's well-known shots. In several of the mini-episodes in *The Simpsons*, particularly those appearing on the Halloween specials, storylines and styles have been borrowed from a seemingly endless list of works, such as *Tron*, Homer's *Odyssey*, *Citizen Kane*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Henry VIII*, *The Shining* and Poe's "The Raven". These are only a few examples of works whose entire storylines have been compressed into 8 minutes and somehow superimposed onto the cartoon world of Springfield. The main characters are replaced by members of the Simpson family and details are altered for the sake of comedy, but the storyline in these short narratives basically remains the same. *The Simpsons* is easily able to represent its borrowed works' visual styles by taking full advantage of the medium of animation. The endlessly mutable forms of animation allows *The Simpsons* to mimic particular settings, moods, lighting techniques and camera angles with accuracy, and incorporate it into their story in any way they please. This distinguishes *The Simpsons* from live-action television shows employing similar intertextual techniques: its possibilities of representation are seemingly infinite.

Although *The Simpsons* is primarily occupied with contemporary culture, the past comprises a significant portion of its parodies and pastiche. References to historical events and figures are frequently assimilated into the story and parodied. The visual looks of certain eras are often adopted in order to reflect the setting of a historical event being represented. When Homer reminisces about his childhood we are transported into the 1950s through stereotypical images of that era, as the vivid colors of the present are faded to the black-and-white symbolic of the time period in which the story takes place. The black-and-white is chosen to represent this time period because it is an image we naturally associate with it. The lack of color gives an impression of the era because it conveys "1950s-ness" to us living in the present. Presenting the 1950s in color would appear less authentic to the postmodern viewer than black-and-white, a mode in which

the viewer is more accustomed to seeing that period represented, even though colors were just as vivid then in reality as they are now.

*The Simpsons'* deliberate dismissal of realism in favor of common perceptions of the past is consistent with Jameson's theory of loss of historical reality. In his essay "Postmodernism", Jameson claims that the addiction to the photographic image in the postmodern era has a growing tendency to modify the past. We acquire our impression of the past from images we see in the media, films, books, magazines, etc. How we look upon the past is limited to these forms. History comes to be conceived in superficial forms and our understanding of the past ends up being based on an image of an image. For example, our understanding of Pocahontas may be based on the Disney film, which in turn was based on 17th century paintings of the actual woman. *The Simpsons* seems to take advantage of this environment which Jameson describes by depicting historical figures as clichés instead of real people. In a flashback in "Homer vs. Sexual Inadequacy", a young Homer watches female reporters swoon over John F. Kennedy's charm while he makes flip remarks with an exaggerated New England accent. Historical events are portrayed in a similarly clichéd manner: a civil war re-enactment in "The PTA Disbands" has a wounded soldier cry out: "We need leeches and hacksaws to saw off our gangrenous limbs!", reducing 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine to medieval medicine. These inaccurate portrayals of history are typical of the heavy irony with which *The Simpsons* revisits the past. In the postmodern era historical accuracy plays second fiddle to the more stimulating pseudo-history. For better or worse, the postmodern consumers' preference for recycled images of history wins over any attempts for accurate historical depiction. What we are left with is, in the somewhat fatalistic words of Jameson, "a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history..." (Jameson, 1993: 79). *The Simpsons* finds itself in a uniquely postmodern position: it adopts pop images from outside sources

but at the same time contorts them into the wildly fictional world of Springfield, thus producing new pop images of its own. Due to its immense popularity all over the world, *The Simpsons* has been cast as a major contributor to the simulacra of history to which Jameson refers. In order to illustrate the *The Simpsons*' influence on the public's historical consciousness, let me refer to a conversation I recently had with a friend of mine. After an exchange of disagreements over the historical details of Lewis and Clark's expedition, my friend eventually confessed that his entire knowledge of this historical expedition was limited to its re-telling in *The Simpsons* episode "Margical History Tour". With the proliferation of references to 'real' history in *The Simpsons*, the show has begun to alter their viewers' historical consciousness, by replacing accurate knowledge with its semi-fictional Simpsonian counterpart.

When *The Simpsons*' numerous allusions to past and present reality are incorporated into their fictional content, viewers will immediately recognize their referents as the real things, thus automatically separating the real from the fictional in their minds. But once viewers have made the association with reality, these referents from reality are altered in *The Simpsons* so that viewers are left unsure of how authentic the portrayal really is. It becomes difficult to identify which parts are taken directly from reality and which parts are completely fictional. This is one of the ways in which the imagined and the real are continually conflated in Springfield, eventually resulting in a hyperreality wherein the viewer is detached from real emotional engagement and artificial stimulation is all that can be achieved. This is a distinctly postmodern condition – and the subject of my next discussion.

## **Mass Media and Springfieldian Hyperreality**

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard develops his theory of hyperreality, a symptom of the postmodern era caused by the increased infiltration of technology into the masses. As postindustrial technology, particularly the mass media, becomes more integrated into our lives than ever before, the imitations of reality represented in these media come to be given more credibility than the realities they are intended to imitate. The media once transmitted representations of reality that could be associated with a fixed referent from the real world, but the postmodern era sees media representations entirely losing their association with their referent. The mass media begin to dominate our consciousness with a superabundance of images disassociated from the signs they were meant to represent. What we are left with are not representations of reality in the literal sense but *simulations* of reality, which are essentially copies of copies. The mass media have such an influence on the public that the information it exchanges is based on copies of copies instead of the original referents. Due to mass media's usurpation of the individual, these copies take precedence over the original referents in daily discourse, and Baudrillard sees this situation as eventually resulting in the disappearance of the real. With reality giving way to hyperreality, our understanding of the world becomes increasingly supplanted by mass media's objective simulations instead of subjective experience.

Baudrillard describes the media as a form of communication with no response from the individuals on the receiving end. The information provided by the media thus becomes difficult to question, because there is no opportunity for dialogue. The masses' faith in information supports the media and causes them to produce more and more information, until an endless excess of information dominates the culture. Baudrillard

theorizes that because we believe information produces meaning, the abundance of information eventually collapses and implodes into itself, until its meaning is lost. Information does not create meaning, says Baudrillard, but instead exhausts itself in the *staging* of meaning. With our incautious faith in the authenticity of media-generated information we are unknowingly contributing to the creation of more meaningless signs and images that appear to be associated with reality but are not. Mass media's faster and more effective circulation of information allows these hyperreal images to proliferate into our society without obstruction. Those of us on the receiving end of this unidirectional form of communication are not compelled to expose the media's manipulation of reality because it would result in a brutal jolt back to the less desirable, de-simulated reality. The hyperreal simulations are more appealing to us because they serve to stimulate as well as to inform.

Artificial stimulation provided by the media motivates the public to receive all of its hyperreal images and constantly demand more stimulation. One of the ways by which this demand presents itself in postmodern society is in the masses' preoccupation with television. Historically, television has been the dominant medium of postmodern society, particularly before the internet age. Baudrillard describes television as the ultimate and perfect object for this new era. Watching television is a way to absorb images and enjoy hyperreal simulations with incredible ease. Due to its easy access to TV stimulation, the postmodern public literally begins to center its life around TV: our furniture is aligned around the TV set, not the other way around. The result is an "alarming presence of the [television] medium" in postmodern society, a condition which ultimately leads to the "dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV" (Baudrillard, 1981: 30). We become unable to identify the effect TV has on us because it is such an integral part of our lives. As the passive receivers of TV images, we gradually lose understanding of the distinction between the real and the imagined. The hyperreal images of TV are given more

credibility and power over the individual than the objects on which the images were based.

Because the Simpson family is in many ways a symbol of the typical contemporary American family, television is given the utmost prominence in the Simpsons' lives. The show's opening sequence is itself illustrative of TV's importance in the family's existence: all family members rush through their everyday lives in a frantic struggle to reach their ultimate destination as quickly as possible: the couch in front of their television set. The opening sequence sets the tone for the show's continual depictions of TV as both a unifying force and an instigator of the family's actions. TV is what brings these different age groups together as they watch the vast array of recurring TV shows broadcast in Springfield, from the political debates on *Smartline* to the mind-numbing violence of *The Itchy and Scratchy Show*. Bart and Lisa are binary opposites with regards to taste and intellectual capacity, but these differences immediately dissolve when an episode of *Itchy and Scratchy* appears on the TV screen. Any conflicts between the siblings are abandoned in order to enjoy the stimulating cartoon world in *Itchy and Scratchy* together.

The irony here is that these cartoon characters, Bart and Lisa, find more stimulation in the cartoon world on their TV screen than in their own cartoon world. Before them lies a world with endless possibilities of adventure, which they could just as easily go out and experience as *Itchy and Scratchy* can. But, much like the viewers at home watching *The Simpsons*, they prefer to live their experiences through the imaginary world on television. In this cartoon-within-a-cartoon, the complete disconnectedness from reality is what delights Bart and Lisa. *Itchy and Scratchy's* bodies are mutilated in countless gruesome ways, unimaginable in any other visual format than the obviously fictional pictures of animation. Bart and Lisa as animated characters revel in this hypercartoon world in which violence is non-consequential and the characters magically reappear in perfect shape after

every episode. Bart and Lisa seem to be unaware that their bodies are essentially as unreal as Itchy and Scratchy's are. These bright yellow figures in *The Simpsons*, with four fingers on each hand and bizarre, spiky hair, have not aged in 17 years, nor have any of their features changed despite numerous appearance-altering adventures. Homer regularly strangles his son in rage, yet viewers receive this as purely comical. They know that their bodies are not real and so no harm can come to Bart, exactly as Bart and Lisa know that Itchy and Scratchy's artificial bodies will regenerate after each of their horrific deaths.

The outrageously cartoon world in *Itchy and Scratchy* is in effect a simulation of the "real" world of Springfield – a hyperreality within a hyperreality. The non-consequential violence typical of cartoons ever since *Tom & Jerry* is displayed in *Itchy and Scratchy* as if to sharply distinguish between the real and the imaginary in Bart and Lisa's reality. *Itchy and Scratchy*, as a separate cartoon world independent of *The Simpsons'* cartoon world, masks the fact that the world outside the Simpson family's TV set is imaginary as well. By watching Itchy and Scratchy, Bart and Lisa reinforce their view that their world is real in comparison to the fictional world of their TV's images, as Baudrillard would have it that viewers of *The Simpsons* are reinforcing their view of the world as more real than the fictional world of *The Simpsons*. According to Baudrillard, our fascination with the imaginary, such as the cartoon world of *The Simpsons*, stems from wanting to disassociate ourselves from the imaginary, in an attempt to establish our world as more real. But the boundary which we foster between real and imaginary is actually an illusion; our world is no longer any more real than the fictional ones because the unstoppable proliferation of media images dissolves these boundaries. This dissolution can be seen within *The Simpsons* as well as outside it.

The pervasive influence of mass media in Springfield is also apparent in Homer Simpson's morbid obsession with television. Homer spends more of his life in front of the TV set than his son and daughter do. In recent years Homer has become an icon of the

couch potato, the archetypal person who chooses to live his life through television's constant image-production. Perhaps the most frequently recurring image in *The Simpsons* is that of Homer kicking back in the couch with a cool Duff beer, watching TV. He switches channels on the remote control in a robotic manner, occasionally crying out "boring!" when programs look particularly unappealing. But Homer flicks through the endless selection of channels so fast that he cannot really know what he is rejecting. His compulsive channel-changing behavior displays a symptom of postmodern TV culture, wherein the act of watching television revolves around constant consumption of superficial images instead of taking in an underlying meaning. The more channels one surfs, the more of these images can be absorbed, and the more stimulation can be achieved. The channel-changing fixation in postmodern TV culture essentially transforms television programs into trailers designed to satisfy the public's demand for instant gratification. The consequences of such a TV culture are exhibited in Homer's greatly diminished attention span. He switches channels feverishly in an attempt to satisfy his urge for image consumption, yet his expectations are never really met. His search for gratification in television ultimately fails and often results in a cry of frustration. In "Marge on the Lam", Homer does not understand a joke he sees on TV and reacts by slamming the TV set, exclaiming: "Stupid TV. Be more funny!" Here, Homer is confusing the medium of television with the message it transmits, which Baudrillard sees as "the first great formula of the era [of hyperreality]" (1994: 30). Baudrillard believes that this widespread confusion signifies the end of the message, as the medium and its message implode into each other and become part of a single hyperreal nebula whose truth is indecipherable (1994: 83). It becomes impossible to define what the medium is and thus it becomes difficult to determine whether it is the message that lends credibility to the medium or the other way around. The medium ceases to become an intermediary and becomes the message itself. This puts the medium of television into the position of

being able to present its messages as automatically credible to viewers such as Homer Simpson.

Homer puts his utmost faith in television and feels deceived when it fails him, yet he never loses his trust in it. Television remains to Homer *the* source of both entertainment and information. If a newsworthy event takes place in Springfield, Homer switches to *Channel 6 Action News*, whose coverage is characterized by a deliberate deviation from authenticity in favor of empty sensationalism. To *Channel 6 Action News*, it is more important to entertain the viewer than to deliver an accurate depiction of events. Passive viewers like Homer let such machines of the mass media interpret information for them and make judgments on their behalf, regardless of their inaccuracy.

The episode “Homer Badman” is particularly representative of the impact mass media has on public opinion. In this episode, Homer himself becomes the subject of the media spotlight when he is wrongfully accused of sexually harassing his babysitter. Homer’s faith in television compels him to agree to an interview with sleazy TV magazine show *Rock Bottom*.<sup>2</sup> Of course the interview is edited out of context so that Homer appears to be a sex-crazed pervert, because that is what makes compelling television. The Simpson house is consequently surrounded by hordes of television reporters who construe Homer’s every move as monstrously perverted. Matters get even worse when a TV movie, based on the “real events” of Homer’s harassment, depicts Homer as outrageously evil and even maniacal. Homer becomes the most hated man in Springfield, a victim of the media’s power over public opinion. Springfield’s residents receive the media’s false representations without criticism, and so their opinion of Homer is based not on Homer himself but on the false TV movie depiction of him. Even Homer’s children are hesitant to believe Homer’s side of the story. Bart tells Homer: “It’s

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<sup>2</sup> “Rock Bottom” is a parody of news program “Hard Copy”, known for sensationalizing its news stories. Focusing primarily on scandals and conspiracies, the show’s journalism closely resembles the kind of journalism practiced on “Rock Bottom”. In addition, the opening sequence in “Rock Bottom” is clearly duplicated from “Hard Copy”.

just hard not to listen to TV. It's spent so much more time raising us than you have." This leaves Homer, the only person qualified to recognize the truth of what actually took place, in doubt: "Maybe TV *is* right. TV's always right." In the end, the media has managed to conflate the real and the fictional so convincingly that even the subject of the false representation is duped, leaving no tenable version of the actual so-called harassment event. Reality has been lost in the media's play of simulations with no underlying truth to support their representations. The only version of the event left in the world is the one that the media have created.

This episode serves to remind the postmodern subject of its complete dependence on the media's perspective. Ironically, the only way to eliminate the lies television has produced about Homer is to broadcast the truth on public access television, which is how Homer eventually clears his name. Thus, television has both ruined Homer's life and redeemed it once again. Television's command over Homer's life is complete. At the end of the episode we learn that Homer's faith in television has not changed one bit, despite the fact that he has experienced first-hand how easily the medium can be manipulated. We can see the character of Homer Simpson as embodying the postmodern difficulty of separating oneself from the dominant medium of TV. Homer cannot abandon TV because his life would seem empty without the artificial simulations it provides. His inevitable submission to television is further suggested in the conclusion in "Homer Badman" – Homer embraces his TV set and pleads to it apologetically: "Let's never fight again." Homer has never let anything come between him and his television, and he is not about to start.

## Conclusion

If television is one of the media in which postmodernity is most clearly visible, *The Simpsons* must be regarded as one of the programs in which the postmodernization of television is most clearly exhibited. As we have seen throughout this essay, *The Simpsons* displays a multitude of the most prominent formal features that are commonly associated with postmodernism, such as self-consciousness, fragmentation, parody and pastiche, intertextuality, hyperrealism, multi-layered irony, and a strong opposition to hierarchy and authority. The abundant use of these elements, combined with the incredible diversity of themes and liberal mixing of genres, have put *The Simpsons* in the forefront of postmodern television and established the show as one of the best formal, albeit ironic, examples we have of postmodernism. A myriad of animated television shows have followed in *The Simpsons*' footsteps, such as *Family Guy*, *South Park* and *Drawn Together*, which employ some of the same techniques while intensifying them to achieve a more aggressively postmodern effect. What distinguishes *The Simpsons* from these programs is its unequalled universal appeal, having reached the status as the highest rated cartoon in history and longest running sitcom of all time. *The Simpsons* has transcended the global versus local demographic conflict by extending its subject matter beyond widespread appeal to esoteric parts of society previously untouched by mainstream television. *The Simpsons* further dissolves boundaries by being dependent on the commercially driven corporation FOX Broadcasting while overtly antagonizing it in its content, as is evident in their ongoing jokes about Rupert Murdoch's corporate empire. One of the more biting 'couch gags' in *The Simpsons*' opening sequences is when the family rips the FOX logo off the bottom right corner and angrily stomps on it. This kind of subversive act against the very institution that makes your artistic production possible

is representative of *The Simpsons*' disdain for corporate conglomerations. It is the perfect example of fierce anti-foundational postmodernity, right in the face of mainstream America.

Despite the show's subversive and rebellious tendencies, the impact *The Simpsons* has made on the landscape of television is undisputed. In a 1998 issue of *Time Magazine*, celebrating the greatest achievements in the 20th century arts and entertainment, *The Simpsons* was named the century's best television series. Bart Simpson was also named one of the 100 most influential people of the century in the same issue (the only fictional character on the list). *The Simpsons* finds itself in the unique situation of being known as one of the most influential shows in television history while at the same time largely owing its popularity and critical praise to its incalculable recycling of pop culture in the form of intertextuality and pastiche. Having extracted countless icons from pop culture into its content for over 17 years, *The Simpsons* has now become a pop culture icon of its own. Its imitations of pop culture are now being imitated by a growing number of new hyper-postmodern TV shows, such as the ones mentioned above.

The influence that *The Simpsons* has accumulated might owe to the timing with which it emerged into mainstream television. *The Simpsons* could not have thrived on prime-time network television unless it was embraced by an audience so advanced in "TV literacy" that they are able to recognize and relish the signs and symbols from TV culture which the show continuously throws at them. *The Simpsons* surfaced at a time when it could reach millions of viewers that grew up watching television and were ready for the kind of erratic, fast-paced mainstream programming that *The Simpsons* has to offer. It is one of the reasons why *The Simpsons* is a program that could only have materialized in the postmodern era.

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