

Olli Hellmann*

Animated satire and collective memory: reflecting on the American “history wars” with *The Simpsons*

<https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2022-0131>

Received March 7, 2022; accepted May 26, 2023; published online September 13, 2023

Abstract: Driven by the knowledge that how societies remember their past matters in the present, the field of collective memory studies has paid significant attention to the media’s role in contributing to the production of socially shared representations of history. The genre of satire, however, has so far remained largely neglected. My paper addresses this gap and argues that, compared to other forms of media, satire not only adds to the *production* of memories, but it also offers distinct rhetorical techniques to encourage audiences to *reflect* on the construction and maintenance of collective memories. I develop the argument about satire’s memory-reflexive function through a case study of how *The Simpsons* – by deploying the fictional persona of Jebediah Springfield as a metaphor of the Founding Fathers – critically comments on America’s hyper-polarized “history wars” between conservatives and liberals. I argue that animated satire is a particularly powerful vehicle for reflection on collective memory, not only because it subverts audience expectations, but also because the unlimited storytelling potential of animation makes it possible to imitate the politics of collective remembering with a high degree of realism.

Keywords: satire; collective memory; animation; *The Simpsons*; incongruity theory

1 Introduction

Democratic societies around the world have witnessed a “memory boom” in recent decades, characterized by heated public debates over how to collectively remember the historical past. This phenomenon is partly driven by identity politics, which pit different social groups against each other over “who owns the past and how it ought to be represented” (Blight 2009: 246). In the United States, the question of how to

*Corresponding author: Olli Hellmann, School of Social Sciences, University of Waikato, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand, E-mail: olli.hellmann@waikato.ac.nz

interpret the Founding Fathers – that is, the political leaders who helped win the War of Independence, crafted the U.S. constitution, and filled key government positions during the early years of the republic – has become a primary battleground in the “history wars” (Engelhardt and Linenthal 1996) between conservatives and liberals. Whereas the political right strives to show that the Founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation, secular groups advance a narrative of the Founders intentionally embracing a “wall of separation” between church and state. Meanwhile, multiculturalists advocate a “history from the bottom” perspective that seeks to redeem “the humanity of people previously swept away by traditional historical narratives that focused on the role of powerful white men” (Hartman 2015: 254). Hence, multiculturalist narratives draw attention to the Founding Fathers’ role in sustaining the enslavement of Black people – both as slave owners and as crafters of the constitution.

Different representations of America’s historical past are underpinned by competing political interests (cf. Berger 2012: 22–23; Wertsch 2002: 31–33). For example, portraying the writers of the constitution as devout Christians helps justify legislation that restricts women’s access to abortion, whereas narratives of the Founding Fathers as secular men support the protection of abortion rights. However, as various commentators have pointed out (e.g., Blight 2021; Kirsch 2022), the history wars are increasingly detached from practical policy questions, but instead operate mainly in the realm of emotion. Debates over how to remember the Founding Fathers – and the nation’s past more generally – have become highly polarized and antagonistic, which makes it increasingly difficult to solve the underlying political conflicts that gave rise to these debates in the first place.

It is in the context of America’s bitter memory politics, as I will argue in this paper, that *The Simpsons* offers the persona of Jebediah Springfield – the founder of the eponymous fictional town in which the show is set – as a satirical device to ridicule conflictual processes of collective remembering, with the aim to open up space for critical reflection and more productive discussion. Designed as a metaphor of the Founding Fathers, Jebediah Springfield allows *The Simpsons* to engage audiences in an absurd imitation of the hyper-polarized and emotionally charged history wars that mocks both conservative and liberal positions.

More generally, I put forward the argument that animated satire offers distinct rhetorical devices to draw attention to the operating mechanisms of collective remembering. While existing scholarship has variously considered how mass media *produce* memory, my case study of *The Simpsons* demonstrates that animated satire can enable audiences to *reflect* on the construction and maintenance of collective memory.

2 The memory-reflexive function of animated satire

Collective memory “refers to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals know, believe, and feel about the past” (Schwartz 2015: 10). Because “societies do not have a brain” (Neiger 2020: 2), the formation and maintenance of collective memory is necessarily exteriorized. As Wertsch explains, collective memory, “instead of being grounded in direct, immediate experience of events ... is based on ‘textual resources’ provided by others” (2002: 5).

This exteriorized reconstruction of the historical past creates space for competition and negotiation between different “memory entrepreneurs” (Conway 2010: 446). Collective remembering becomes a “dynamic, complex, and often conflicted process in which diverse and at times divergent groups dialogically engage with each other over the present meaning of our shared pasts” (Houdek and Phillips 2017: 3). While the state tends to employ its extraordinary control over cultural resources – such as the education system, museums, and commemorative events – to perpetuate a single “master narrative” of the historical past, it is important to highlight that such narratives are typically the outcome of political bargaining between different memory entrepreneurs, reflecting the relative power that these actors bring to the bargaining process (Berger 2012: 22). The media, meanwhile, not only provide a platform for memory entrepreneurs to participate in public debates over how collective pasts should be narrated and understood, but media outlets may also act as memory agents themselves, producing their own readings of the historical past (Neiger et al. 2011: 10).

While existing scholarship has doubtlessly improved our understanding of how the media contribute to the construction of collective memories,¹ one particular genre remains under-researched: *satire*. Certainly, a small number of studies have shown how satire helps social groups overcome traumatic events (e.g., Sheftel 2012; Zandberg 2015) and others have investigated the mnemonic functions of concepts that are closely related to satire, such as humor (e.g., Smirnova 2014) and parody (e.g., Setka 2015). However, satire sets itself apart as a distinct form of social commentary in that it combines four characteristics: aggression, play, laughter, and judgment (Test 1991). Among these properties, the one that most readily distinguishes satire from other types of political humor is the broader target of aggression. As Caufield explains (2008: 10; emphasis added), “conventional political humor is often geared at making the audience laugh at others, while satire is designed to make the audience *laugh at itself as well as others*, therefore allowing the audiences to realize a larger

1 For a comprehensive review of this literature, see Neiger (2020).

set of systemic faults.” Because of the broader target of attack, satire is able “to engage its audience in a more critical and cognitively engaging political and social experience” (Becker 2020: 274).

Most commonly, the satirist employs the technique of exaggeration, which typically involves replicating elements of a real-world situation before exaggerating them to amplify the absurdity of the original (Park-Ozee 2019: 589). Building on the mechanism of *incongruity*, absurdity falls into one of the three traditional theories of humor alongside relief and superiority. According to incongruity theory, “humor results from a mental reaction to something unexpected, unusual, or odd in a nonthreatening way when an accepted norm or pattern is violated” (Meyer 2015: 17). Specifically, humor is experienced when the audience “resolves” or “makes sense of” the incongruity between two scripts that intersect with each other: a first (conventional) script, which sets up expectations as to how things will (or should) unfold, and a second script, which does not conform to the predictions evoked by the first script (Young 2017: 875–876).

Broadly speaking, satire scholarship can be divided into two camps: the *effects* perspective, which examines the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral consequences of exposure to satire, and the *features* approach, which engages in a close reading of satire not only to reveal textual strategies, but also to discuss whether (and in what ways) satire contributes to the health of democratic public culture (Becker and Waisanen 2013). In this paper, I will adopt the latter to show how *animated* satire can be employed with the aim to shake audiences into awareness and encourage them to critically consider processes of collective remembering. Hence, while existing scholarship has revealed how media contribute to the *production* of collective memories, my paper shows that animated satire provides a medium of critical *reflection* upon the construction of collective memories.²

Animated satire sets itself apart from other satire subgenres in a number of ways – not least because animation carries with it certain audience expectations (Higgs 2019; Mittell 2001). To begin with, expectations regarding the artificiality of the animated medium provide ample space to play with plausibility. Even though absurdity is a key defining attribute of satire generally, animated satire – due to the fact that the audience’s disbelief is already suspended – can crank up the absurdity dial much more than other forms of satire (Caufield 2008: 11; Gray 2006: 66–67). Additionally, because animation is most commonly used in entertainment targeted at children, audiences expect content to be “cartoony” and “childish.” In the case of animated satire, this ingrained expectation helps to soften the blow of the satirist’s judgmental attacks (Gray 2006: 67; Thompson 2009: 44). Most importantly, the

² I borrow the distinction between memory-productive and memory-reflexive media from Erlil (2011: 137).

childlike nature of animated satire motivates critical reflection by placing political and social issues in a context that allows audiences to consider them from a more removed position.

However, notwithstanding that animation has “a sense of unreality built into its DNA” (Higgs 2019: 93), animated satire can in many ways be more real than live action. In particular, scholars have highlighted the realism of animated sitcoms, such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *King of the Hill*. These shows draw on traditional sitcom genre conventions, but use postmodern textual strategies to transcend genre boundaries and deliver satirical social commentary (Gray 2006). They derive their realism primarily from the fact that “animation allows for a much broader and more vivid world than live action” (Feltmate 2017: 3). Writing about *The Simpsons*, Crawford observes that “the ... family is free to roam around the fictional town of Springfield, allowing for a wider range of situations and larger number of characters than are available to any live-action situation comedy without a massive budget” (2009: 54; also see Booker 2006: 53–55; Henry 2012: 46).

Based on these theoretical claims about animated satire, I will argue in the remainder of the paper that *The Simpsons* employs the commemoration of Jebediah Springfield – the founder of the eponymous fictional town in which the show is set – as a satirical vehicle to critically reflect on processes of collective remembering, in particular in relation to the Founding Fathers. *The Simpsons* has been described as “a knowing and sharp satire upon the complex, excessive, hypocritical, and often idiotic state of contemporary American culture” (Henry 2012: 7). Consistent with the definition of satire offered earlier, *The Simpsons* not only attacks political elites and institutions, but also offers harsh criticism of the “uninformed, irrational, and disengaged American public” (Guehlstorff et al. 2008: 212).

It should further be noted that memory is a recurring theme in *The Simpsons*. To begin with, when viewed as a parodic riff on the traditional American family sitcom, it becomes obvious that *The Simpsons* not only regularly mocks the genre’s “reset rule,” but also departs from this convention “by providing overarching narrative elements and memory” (Fink 2019: 73).³ For example, “flashback” episodes develop a (not necessarily coherent) backstory for the main characters, and Grampa’s inconsistent and (seemingly) inflated wartime stories can be understood as a humorous take on inter-generational relations (Figure 1). What is more, “anthology” episodes allow the writers to cast Springfield’s citizens as prominent historical figures, thereby “offering alternative readings” (Ezell 2016: 42) of history – for example, of the Pilgrims’ journey on the Mayflower (“The Wettest Stories Ever Told,” s17e18).

3 In sitcoms with no overarching conflict or plot, episodic narrative events are usually forgotten by the end of every episode. That is to say, each episode of the series will open under virtually identical circumstances to the episode that came before.



Figure 1: Grampa reminisces about the war. From the episode “Let’s Go Fly a Coot” (s26e20). ©20th Century Fox Film Corp. All rights reserved/courtesy Everett Collection.

While research under the *effects* paradigm predominantly relies on experimental designs to analyze how audiences respond to satire, my case study of *The Simpsons* employs qualitative methods of textual analysis to decode “the author’s intention as well as his or her specific rationale for the creation of a text” (Brennen 2017: 210). This qualitative approach is in line with existing *features* scholarship on satire as well as with much of the literature on collective memory (see Conway 2010).

3 Jebediah Springfield as a metaphor of the Founding Fathers

3.1 The American history wars

In the early 1990s, a new front opened up in the decade-old American culture wars: a history front. To answer the question of what it means to be an American, both conservatives and liberals turned to the historical past, offering fundamentally different interpretations of how the nation had arrived in the present. These history wars erupted into very public controversies in the media – for example, around the Quincentenary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas (Paul 2014: 68–75), plans for a critical exhibition on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima at the Smithsonian Museum (Hogan 1996), and the content of the National History Standards for elementary and secondary school students (Nash et al. 1998).

The Founding Fathers – that is, the statesmen involved in establishing the United States as a political entity, including such figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John and Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton –

were also dragged into the escalating history wars. The Founding Fathers turned into a “battle ground” between different definitions of America because they provide a “usable past” (Wertsch 2002: 31) that can be harnessed to support political agendas in the present. Not only can memory entrepreneurs point to a specific event when the United States became an independent nation, but – while other countries often rely on ethnicity or language as markers of national identity – the United States traces its origins to the establishment of a particular political system. As Schocket argues, “the United States retains its governmental form from the federal constitution that served as the Revolution’s crowning achievement, and so its citizens look to the people who established that form as authorities on it” (2015: 6).

Conflict over how to remember the Founding Fathers centers around two main questions. First, there is the question of religiosity. The conservative right, seeking to claim America as a Christian nation, pushes memories of the Founding Fathers as men of deep religious faith, based on the assumption “that if the founders were Christians, then they must have opposed the separation of church and state and favored the establishment of Christianity as the official national religion” (Fea 2016: 68). In contrast, secular groups on the left end of the political spectrum maintain that the Founders sought to build a strict “wall of separation” between church and state. They vehemently dispute the claim that America’s first generation of statesmen were devout Christians, accusing the conservative right of historical distortions and falsehoods (e.g., Seidel 2019). Second, there is the question of whose voices matter in the retelling of history. This question has been raised by liberal multiculturalists who argue that narrating America’s revolutionary past exclusively from a singular perspective – that of white male elites – merely amplifies the voices of already powerful groups while negating the identities of politically and economically marginalized parts of society (Hutchins 2011; Nash et al. 1998: 77–79; Schocket 2015: 8). Instead, multiculturalists stress the importance of acknowledging multiple experiences and narratives of history. This does not mean that multiculturalists deny that the Founding Fathers are significant to understand the course of American history. However, they insist that “giving voice to history’s voiceless” (Hartman 2015: 254) makes it necessary not only to show how the Founding Fathers were influenced by the ideas and protests of other actors – including women, African Americans, and Indigenous Americans – but also to recognize that many of the Founders owned slaves and that the institution of slavery was formally sanctioned in the 1789 constitution.

Despite the taint of slave ownership and continued attempts by multiculturalists to relativize the historical role of the Founding Fathers, George Washington et al. have experienced a popular revival in recent years. Since the early 2000s, a wave of “Founders Chic” has been supplying general audiences with comforting, celebratory portraits of the Founding Fathers that skip over the uneasy questions raised by

critical historians (Bernstein 2009: 138; Schocket 2015: ch. 2). Apart from new biographies of the Founding Fathers, this cultural phenomenon has also expanded through other media genres, including novels, cookbooks, and TV shows (such as the HBO series *John Adams*). The hit musical *Hamilton*, too, has been described as “Founders Chic” – mainly because it glosses over Alexander Hamilton’s connections to slavery (e.g., Monteiro 2016). One possible interpretation of the “Founders Chic” trend is that the moral and political uncertainties of the post-9/11 era have led many Americans to seek solace in nostalgic narratives of the revolutionary past, in which “great statesmen” confidently navigate a perilous situation to change the course of history (Paul 2014: 234).

In short, the frontlines in the conflict over how to narrate the Founding Fathers and America’s historical past more broadly are deadlocked. Memory entrepreneurs do not recognize the complexities of history – for example, that “every leader, especially those who lived hundreds of years ago, is flawed” (Bailey 2020: para. 5) or that the Founding Fathers most likely drew from *both* Christian *and* secular ideas (e.g., Frazer 2012). This leaves little space to tell a common story about how the nation arrived in the present and turns collective remembering into an emotionally charged zero-sum game, in which social groups have to fear that other groups’ histories will be prioritized.

3.2 A universal hero: “He built our first hospital out of logs and mud”

Springfield, the fictional town in which *The Simpsons* is set, collectively remembers its founder, Jedediah Obediah Zachariah Jedediah Springfield, in numerous ways. Not only is the town littered with physical sites of memory (such as a statue in front of the city hall, Jedediah Springfield Park, and the Birthplace of Jedediah Springfield), but citizens also celebrate a number of commemorative events. Examples include Whacking Day (“In a tradition that dates back to founding father Jedediah Springfield, every May 10 local residents gather to drive snakes into the center of town and whack them to snake heaven.”) and the Springfield Marathon (“... commemorating the time Jedediah Springfield ran across six states to avoid his creditors.”).

There can be little doubt that the *Simpsons* writers created Springfield’s eponymous founder as a metaphor of the Founding Fathers – an observation that is shared by other scholars (e.g., Brook 2004: 187; Ezell 2016: 72). The hints are plentiful and apparent. For one, not only does the year of Springfield’s founding (1796) place the event in the same time period as the writing of the constitution, but – as various scholarly analyses of *The Simpsons* have pointed out – Springfield is an allegorical

representation of America, condensed into a small town (e.g., Fink 2019: 74; Henry 2012: 46).

Moreover, it is notable that episodes that raise the subject of Jebediah Springfield's commemoration are clustered in the first half of the 1990s – that is, the exact time period during which the history wars between conservatives and liberals escalated. These include “The Telltale Head” (s1e8; first aired in 1990), “Whacking Day” (s4e20; first aired in 1994), and “Lisa the Iconoclast” (s7e16; first aired in 1996). “I’m Just a Girl Who Can’t Say D’oh” (s30e20), which can be read as a parody of the *Hamilton* musical, was first released in 2019, thus coinciding with the wave of “Founders Chic” after the turn of the millennium. Taken together, this suggests that the *Simpsons* writers deploy Jebediah Springfield as a satirical device to critically comment on the conflictual processes of collective remembering that have plagued America.

While the next section will – through the application of incongruity theory – develop a detailed analysis of *how* Jebediah Springfield works as a vehicle for critique, it is worth making a few general points at the outset. To begin with, the *Simpsons* writers have refrained from associating Jebediah with a particular camp in the American history wars. Certainly, there are moments when the town founder is described as a man of religious convictions. For example, in “Lemons of Troy” (s6e24), Grampa tells the story of how the towns of Springfield and Shelbyville came to be located right next to each other due to a disagreement over morality: while Shelbyville Manhattan wanted to establish a settlement that allowed marriage between cousins, Jebediah sought to “live a life devoted to chastity, abstinence, and a flavorless mush [called] rootmarm.” However, for the most part, Jebediah is commemorated by the citizens of Springfield because of lifetime achievements that can be described as near-universally heroic, such as protecting a group of settlers from a charging bison (“Lisa the Iconoclast”) and building the town’s first hospital from logs and mud (“The Telltale Head”). Both Marge and Lisa – who have been described as caricatures of America’s Christian heartland and liberal activism, respectively (Fink 2019; Turner 2004) – have tremendous admiration for Jebediah. This depoliticized portrayal turns Springfield’s founder into a generic hero figure and maximizes the reflexive potential in two ways: it encourages reflection on the commemoration of historical figures more broadly and it allows the *Simpsons* writers to avoid accusations that they are attacking one particular interpretation of the American past.

Moreover, even though it is pretty evident that Jebediah is a metaphor of the Founding Fathers, the ingrained audience expectation regarding the “cartoony” character of the animated medium removes the metaphor from its “real world” context. Jebediah is simultaneously connected to and detached from reality. This enables the *Simpsons* writers to critically comment on the history wars over the

Founding Fathers, while at the same time bypassing debates over whether claims about the Founding Fathers are factually correct or not. In addition, the realism that derives from the unlimited storytelling potential of animation makes it possible to turn the town of Springfield into a metaphor for the memory politics that surround the commemoration of the Founding Fathers. Springfield, as a microcosm of America, not only helps audiences to critically examine how different memory entrepreneurs – including political actors, public organizations, and the media – seek to manipulate memories of the historical past, but audiences can, through the main characters, also reflect on their own role in processes of collective remembering.

4 The emotions of the history wars: “Your hero phobia sickens me!”

Through the persona of Jebediah Springfield, the *Simpsons* writers encourage audiences to playfully consider why the history wars have spiraled into an emotionally loaded conflict that makes a reasoned debate about how to narrate America’s historical past impossible. Ridiculing humor, which is indiscriminately directed at both conservatives and liberals, results from incongruity between two scripts: a first script that sets normative expectations as to how the story should unfold and a second (highly absurd) script that contradicts these expectations. Audiences can resolve the incongruous situation by reflecting on how both sides – groups attacking the reputation of historical figures and groups defending their heroes – are to blame for escalating the history wars.

In “The Telltale Head,” Bart befriends the school bullies Jimbo, Kearny, and Dolph. One day, as they hang out in the park, they begin to recognize shapes in the clouds. Eventually, a cloud floats by that looks like the statue of Jebediah without the head. “I wish someone really *would* cut his ugly head off,” Jimbo blurts out. Kearny and Dolph agree, but Bart is not so sure. “Don’t you remember history class?” he asks. “Jebediah once killed a bear with his bare hands.” The three bullies respond with ridicule and tell Bart to “beat it.”

After leaving the park, Bart again walks past the statue of Jebediah. While staring at the bronze town founder, the bullies’ mocking laughter replays in his head. Suddenly, he has an “Aha!” moment. He runs home where he asks Homer whether “you could do stuff that you think is pretty bad so other kids will like you better.” Homer checks that he is “not talking about killing anyone” and gives him permission to “run along.” The scene cuts to three in the morning and Bart – dressed in a black ninja suit – sneaks out of the house. Under cover of darkness, he makes his way to the town square where he pulls out a hacksaw and cuts off Jebediah’s head.

It is at this point that a second script, which had silently been sitting in the background, openly intersects with the first script. The first script sets up the normative expectation that the town should forgive ten-year-old Bart for his prank – in particular, since it was encouraged by bad parenting from Homer. However, the second script runs against these expectations: the citizens respond as if Bart had actually killed someone.

When the Simpsons family gathers for breakfast the next morning, the radio reports the “act of senseless vandalism.” The town is shocked, even the reporter is unable to hold back his tears.

Bart: It’s just a statue.

Marge: The statue of the trailblazing founder of our town!

Lisa: It’s a symbol of what we can all do if we put our minds to it.

Homer: Just a statue?! Is the Statue of Liberty just a statue? Is the Leaning Tower of Pizza just a statue?

At the Springfield retirement home, Grampa cannot contain his outrage: “I hope they find the punk who did this! And I hope they cut *his* head off!” Krusty the Clown pleads with children to turn in the culprit: “I don’t care if it’s your brother, your sister, your daddy, or your mommy!” Even Jimbo, Kerny and Dolph want to find the vandal, so they can “break every bone in his stupid little body!”

Slowly, the guilt eats away at Bart and he decides to confess. He goes to find Homer and Marge in the living room where they are watching a TV documentary educating viewers that Jebediah killed a bear “with his bare hands. That’s B-A-R-E hands. Although modern historians recently uncovered evidence that the bear, in fact, probably killed him.” After first responding with anger, his parents agree to take the “head thing” back to the authorities. On the way there Bart and Homer run into a torch-wielding mob that chases them into the town square. The enraged crowd is only appeased when Bart places the head back on Jebediah’s statue.

The task of resolving the incongruity between the first (normative) and the second (contradicting) scripts encourages viewers to reflect on how social groups often respond with disproportionate anger when their historical heroes are – literally or figuratively – toppled from their pedestals. While making it clear that the citizens of Springfield regard Jebediah as the personification of their beliefs and self-conception, and thus exhibiting some empathy for the citizens, the *Simpsons* writers ultimately mock the reaction to Bart’s prank as too emotional and hysterical. Moreover, in line with incongruity theory, audiences are invited to reinterpret the first script in light of the second script (Young 2017: 876). This allows viewers to reflect

on how Bart – as an allegory of the attacking side in the history wars – is partly responsible for the escalation. What the *Simpsons* writers draw attention to is that attacks on historical heroes can have a particularly antagonizing effect when the attack is motivated by the objective to merely provoke the defending side – what Demetriou and Wingo (2018: 350) refer to as the “capture the flag” mindset. Bart beheaded Jebediah’s statue *because* he knew that this would cause public upset.

The “Lisa the Iconoclast” episode centers around Springfield’s bicentennial celebration. The students in Lisa’s class receive an assignment that requires them to write an essay about the town founder. After school, Lisa heads down to the Springfield Historical Society to begin her research. When the friendly curator, Hollis Hurlbut, leaves her unattended, Lisa takes a closer look at some of Jebediah’s belongings and finds a handwritten note hidden inside a fife:

Lisa: The secret confessions of Jebediah Springfield?

Jebediah: Know ye who read this, there is more to my life than history records. . . . I have not always been known as Jebediah Springfield. Until 1796, I was Hans Sprungfeld, murderous pirate. And the half-wits of this town will never learn the truth.

Lisa: Oh, my God! Our town hero is a fraud!

Lisa puts the note back in the fife when she hears Hurlbut return, but after leaving the museum she dives into a pile of history books to corroborate the content of the note. Among other evidence that seems to prove the authenticity of the note, she comes across an account of Sprungfeld trying to steal from and kill George Washington in 1781.

A first normative script is firmly established in this moment: Lisa presents credible evidence that Jebediah had a dark past as a pirate, people should at least listen to what she has to say. However, as the episode progresses, a second script emerges that runs against this expectation: rather than triggering a healthy public debate, the eight-year-old’s revelations are met with backlash and shunning from the Springfield community. Not only does Lisa fail the school assignment (“Lisa, for your essay ‘Jebediah Springfield: Super-Fraud,’ F!”), but the town’s bicentennial committee warns her not to investigate further (“You are tampering with forces you can’t understand.”) and strips Homer of his role as town crier. Her campaign to distribute “WANTED FOR TREASON” posters has her thrown out of the local Kwik-E-Mart and Moe’s Tavern (“Your hero phobia sickens me!”). Even Marge launches into a defensive rant: “When my family first came to this state, they had a choice of living in Springfield or Stenchburg. You know why they chose Springfield? Because everyone knows Jebediah Springfield was a true American hero, end of story!”

Audiences can resolve the incongruity between the two scripts by drawing parallels with the “real world” history wars. Springfield’s ridiculous response to the revelations about Jebediah is an exaggerated, but nevertheless easily understood, analogy of how social groups shut down debate when confronted with new information that threatens to tarnish their heroes’ reputation. However, the *Simpsons* writers blame such breakdowns of deliberation not just on emotionally immature responses on the defending side, but they also pin some of the responsibility on the attacking side. Specifically, by encouraging a reinterpretation of the first script through the frame of the second script, the writers want viewers to understand that *both* Springfield’s citizens *and* Lisa are guilty of adopting a “globalist” view of admiration (see Archer and Matheson 2022: 20). That is to say, both sides reduce Jebediah to a particular feature – his admirable and immoral features, respectively. Hence, Lisa ends up provoking anger and resistance because, against the background of blind hero worship in the community, she paints the town founder as a pure villain, ignoring all the good things that Jebediah did for Springfield after giving up piracy. She describes the town founder as “one of the vilest men of the 1780s” and fervently preaches to a captive audience at Moe’s Tavern: “Jebediah Springfield was nothing more than an evil, bloodthirsty pirate who hated this town!”

The “I’m Just a Girl Who Can’t Say D’oh” episode begins at the local theater where Marge and other Springfield citizens are rehearsing for a community production of *Oklahoma!* – a musical that has been attacked by critics for presenting a romanticized version of the western frontier and concealing “America’s shameful treatment of its indigenous populations” (Knapp 2005: 124). The rehearsals soon break down when the actors get increasingly irritated by the director’s excessive and constant criticism. After showing him the door, they choose Marge as the new director, because – as Lenny, one of the cast members, puts it – “Marge makes us all feel good about ourselves.”

Back at home with her family, Marge mulls over ideas for a new musical. When Homer suggests that “the best kind of original show is one that rips off a big hit,” they decide to take inspiration from *Hamilton*. “All right, who is our Alexander Hamilton?” asks Lisa. After a very long pause, which also gives audiences time to think about the answer, Lisa gasps: “Jebediah Springfield! I’ll write a musical biography, warts and all!”

Lisa’s “warts and all” promise lays down the script of what should happen in the rest of the episode. As regular and attentive viewers of *The Simpsons* know, Jebediah was once a “murderous pirate” called Hans Sprungfeld. Hence, any musical biography that claims to portray the founder of Springfield in a truthful way has to acknowledge Jebediah’s piracy past. Lisa appears to double down on her “warts and all” promise when they have a first meeting with the community theater group to discuss the new play.

Marge: Our new production will be “Bloody Bloody Jebediah,” a hip-hop musical about our city’s founder.

Sideshow Mel: Is it respectful?

Lisa: Not entirely.

Sideshow Mel: WHAT?!

After Marge and Lisa overcome numerous challenges that seem out of proportion for a community production, the day of the musical's premiere arrives – and a second contradictory script presents itself to the viewers. Even though Jebediah proclaims in the opening song that “tonight my secrets are revealed,” the musical contains no references to his life as a pirate. All Jebediah admits is that he “didn't fight for equal rights” and wishes he had “done more for non-whites.”

The key to resolving the incongruity between the two scripts is this: the “Bloody Bloody Jebediah” musical sanitizes the town founder's past, as Marge and Lisa understand that audiences want to consume content that makes them feel good about themselves. The community production of *Oklahoma!* collapsed because the actors, who had been cast from among Springfield citizens, felt they were being criticized too much. Hence, in order not to offend audiences (and the actors), the Jebediah musical – much like the plot of *Oklahoma!* – whitewashes the historical past. Put differently, the *Simpsons* writers make fun of the viewers themselves who – as the consumers of popular entertainment – hinder informed debate about the historical past by avoiding mediated collective memories that may trigger feelings of guilt and shame, and instead seek out mediated memories that feed their need for emotional comfort.

5 Defusing the history wars: “Hooray for snakes!”

While the episodes discussed so far enable audiences to reflect on how affect and emotions prevent a sober conversation about how to narrate America's past, the “Whacking Day” episode provides a “template” for how to defuse the history wars.

The story starts off with Bart getting expelled from school after taking groundskeeper Willie's tractor for a joyride and running down the superintendent. Later, Bart and Lisa watch the local TV news reporting on the upcoming holiday. The report opens with a historical photograph of Jebediah Springfield, depicting the town founder as he takes a swing at a snake with the butt of his gun. This is followed by black and white footage from the mid-1900s that shows hordes of citizens clubbing snakes to death on a previous Whacking Day. Lisa is disgusted by the cruelty inflicted upon the snakes: “It's all so barbaric.”

The scene of Bart and Lisa watching TV introduces viewers to the first script. The normative proposition that is put forward is that Whacking Day should be abolished.

The TV producers saw it necessary to add a “file footage” label to the historical film material, which implies that – although animal ethics have progressed considerably since the post-World War II period – Whacking Day has not changed for decades. Even “a panel of hillbillies,” as the report notes, called the holiday “distasteful and puerile.” However, as the episode progresses, viewers become aware of a second script: Springfield is swept away by Whacking Day fever. Only Bart and Lisa maintain a critical perspective on the holiday.

Bart, having been expelled from school, is home-schooled by Marge who assigns him to read *Johnny Tremain* – a fictional historical novel about a teenage boy who joins the Patriot movement in colonial America. The book seemingly ignites a revolutionary spark in Bart, as he spends the rest of the episode questioning authority and conventional wisdom. Not only does he call out an inconsistency in the heroic story of Jebediah during a tour of Olde Springfield Town, but he also reads a book by investigative journalist Bod Woodward titled “The Truth about Whacking Day,” through which he learns that Whacking Day is nothing but a myth; in reality, the holiday “was started in 1924, as an excuse to beat up the Irish.”

In the end, Bart and Lisa come up with a plan to sabotage Whacking Day. Making use of the fact that snakes respond to vibrations, they lure the animals into their house by playing bass-heavy music. This incites an angry mob of citizens that descends on Evergreen Terrace. However, Bart and Lisa are able to calm down the enraged crowd, not only by informing them that the holiday is a “sham,” but also by appealing to their empathy and reminding them of all the good things that snakes have done for them. The mood swings from angry to happy and the crowd breaks out into impromptu “Hooray for snakes!” chants.

Audiences can resolve the incongruous events of the story if they critically reflect on citizens’ role as the “consumers” of collective memories. The Whacking Day holiday goes ahead – despite the flagrant cruelty against animals – because citizens passively absorb reconstructions of the historical past presented to them by the mass media and other memory entrepreneurs. Only Lisa and Bart scrutinize the messages in a more involved way. While Lisa, as the embodiment of countercultural ideals in *The Simpsons* (Fink 2019; Turner 2004), generally rejects much of what the media and other cultural institutions spew out, Bart’s punk character receives an intellectual boost of sorts by being home-schooled – that is, outside the public education system.

What is more, the “Whacking Day” episode charts a course towards resolving emotionally loaded conflicts over how to remember the past. To begin with, the *Simpsons* writers suggest that collective memories of historical heroes should only be challenged when these representations obscure or downplay injustices. One reason why Lisa’s campaign to expose Jebediah as a pirate in “Lisa the Iconoclast” provoked an antagonistic reaction from the community was that Lisa merely sought to reveal

the truth for the truth's sake; she did not seek to remedy any wrongs done to members of a marginalized group. For all we know, Hans Sprungfeld only stole from the rich landowning (and slave-owning) elite, such as George Washington – that is, social groups that were (and continue to be) politically and economically privileged. In contrast, the myth of the Whacking Day holiday endorses the subordination of groups that are presently or were historically subject to victimization (in this case, snakes).

Further, the episode proposes that heroic representations of historical figures need to be challenged in a way that can overcome emotional resistances and disavowals. For one, this involves fostering an empathetic understanding of the experiences of those groups that have been harmed by the community's historic injustice. In addition, the *Simpsons* writers give viewers to understand that heroic representations can be revised without necessarily purging the historical figure from collective memory. In contrast to the globalist vilification of Jebediah in "Lisa the Iconoclast," Bart and Lisa only attack the particular part of the Jebediah narrative that expresses disregard for the lives of a derogated group: the Whacking Day myth.

6 Conclusion

Based on a case study of *The Simpsons*, this paper has sought to show that animated satire provides distinct rhetorical techniques to encourage critical reflection on the politics of memory. The textual analysis – by applying incongruity theory – reveals that space for reflection opens up when viewers become aware of an intersection between a first (normative) script and second (absurd and contradicting) script. Animated satire maximizes the opportunity for reflection not only because audience expectations make it possible to push the absurdity of the second script to an extreme, but also because the "childish" connotations soften the satirist's critique. At the same time, the unlimited freedom of animation means that the politics of collective remembering can be imitated with a high degree of realism.

While the *Simpsons* writers deploy the persona of Jebediah Springfield as a metaphor of the Founding Fathers to mock the constructed nature of our collective memories, they also propose that constructions of historical heroes play an important role in providing communities with a shared sense of identity. At the end of "Lisa the Iconoclast," even Lisa recognizes that "the myth of Jebediah has value too," which leads her to abandon her campaign to expose the town founder as a pirate. What is more, the character of Jebediah invites audiences to reflect on why public debates over how to remember the Founding Fathers – and America's historical past more generally – have spiraled into an emotionally charged, hyper-polarized conflict. A

thread that runs through all Jebediah episodes is the simplistic view of history that is promoted by memory entrepreneurs and the mass media. Disagreements over how to narrate the nation's past descend into binary arguments, because there is little willingness to embrace the complexities of history or to accept historical figures as “a messy mix of good and bad traits” (Archer and Matheson 2022: 83). Instead, characters of the past are often divided into crude categories, such as “Christians” and “secularists” or “goodies” and “baddies.” And, to further fuel the fires of the history wars, attempts to revise the reputations of historical figures are typically not delivered in a way that would overcome emotional resistances from social groups who see these figures as moral beacons and as representations of their core beliefs.

By encouraging reflection on the conflictual processes of collective remembering, *The Simpsons* not only makes audiences aware of their own role in perpetuating and reproducing collective memories, but it also equips them with the critical skills needed to recognize the types of rhetorical claims that escalate the history wars. In doing so, *The Simpsons* seeks to generate better debates about America's historical past, in the hope to shift the focus back onto the underlying political disagreements that gave rise to these debates in the first place.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers as well as Neil Dooley and Jack Holland for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

References

- Archer, Alfred & Benjamin Matheson. 2022. *Honouring and admiring the immoral: An ethical guide*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bailey, Isaac J. 2020. We don't need to cancel George Washington, but we should be honest about who he was. *POLITICO*, June 28. Available at: <https://politi.co/3nMdtjM>.
- Becker, Amy B. 2020. Applying mass communication frameworks to study humor's impact: Advancing the study of political satire. *Annals of the International Communication Association* 44(3). 273–288.
- Becker, Amy B. & Don J. Waisanen. 2013. From funny features to entertaining effects: Connecting approaches to communication research on political comedy. *Review of Communication* 13(3). 161–183.
- Berger, Thomas U. 2012. *War, guilt, and world politics after World War II*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bernstein, Richard B. 2009. *The founding fathers reconsidered*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blight, David W. 2009. The memory boom: Why and why now? In Pascal Boyer & James V. Wertsch (eds.), *Memory in mind and culture*, 238–251. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Blight, David W. 2021. The fog of history wars. *The New Yorker*, June 9. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-fog-of-history-wars>.
- Booker, M. Keith. 2006. *Drawn to television: Prime-time animation from the Flintstones to Family Guy*. Westport and London: Praeger.

- Brennen, Bonnie S. 2017. *Qualitative research methods for media studies*, 2nd edn. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Brook, Vincent. 2004. Myth or consequences: Ideological fault lines in The Simpsons. In John Alberti (ed.), *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the possibility of oppositional culture*, 172–196. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Caufield, Rachel Paine. 2008. The influence of “infoenterpropagainment”: Exploring the power of political satire as a distinct form of political humor. In Jody C. Baumgartner & Jonathen S. Morris (eds.), *Laughing matters: Humor and American politics in the media age*, 3–20. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Conway, Brian. 2010. New directions in the sociology of collective memory and commemoration. *Sociology Compass* 4(7). 442–453.
- Crawford, Alison. 2009. “Oh yeah!”: Family Guy as magical realism? *Journal of Film and Video* 61(2). 52–69.
- Demetriou, Dan & Ajume Wingo. 2018. The ethics of racist monuments. In David Boonin (ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of philosophy and public policy*, 341–356. Cham: Springer.
- Engelhardt, Tom & Edward T. Linenthal. 1996. Introduction: History under siege. In Tom Engelhardt & Edward T. Linenthal (eds.), *History wars: The Enola Gay and other battles for the American past*, 1–8. New York: Holt Paperbacks.
- Erl, Astrid. 2011. *Memory in culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ezell, Silas Kaine. 2016. *Humor and satire on contemporary television: Animation and the American joke*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Fea, John. 2016. *Was America founded as a Christian nation? A historical introduction*, Revised edn. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Feltmate, David. 2017. *Drawn to the gods: Religion and humor in The Simpsons, South Park, and Family Guy*. New York: New York University Press.
- Fink, Moritz. 2019. *The Simpsons: A cultural history*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Frazer, Gregg L. 2012. *The religious beliefs of America's founders: Reason, revelation, and revolution*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Gray, Jonathan. 2006. *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, parody, and intertextuality*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Guehlstorf, Nicholas, Lars Hallstrom & Jonathan Morris. 2008. The ABCs of The Simpsons and politics: Apathy of citizens, basic government leaders, and collective interests. In Jody C. Baumgartner & Jonathen S. Morris (eds.), *Laughing matters: Humor and American politics in the media age*, 211–228. New York and Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hartman, Andrew. 2015. *A war for the soul of America: A history of the culture wars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Henry, Matthew A. 2012. *The Simpsons, satire, and American culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Higgs, Sam. 2019. Exaggerated images: Animation and reality. *Screen Education* 93. 96–101.
- Hogan, Michael J. 1996. The Enola Gay controversy: History, memory, and the politics of presentation. In Michael J. Hogan (ed.), *Hiroshima in history and memory*, 200–232. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Houdek, Matthew & Kendall R. Phillips. 2017. Public memory. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.181>.
- Hutchins, Rachel D. 2011. Heroes and the renegotiation of national identity in American history textbooks: Representations of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, 1982–2003. *Nations and Nationalism* 17(3). 649–668.

- Kirsch, Adam. 2022. What's really at stake in America's history wars? *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11. Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/whats-really-at-stake-in-americas-history-wars-11644594993>.
- Knapp, Raymond. 2005. *The American musical and the formation of national identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Meyer, John. 2015. *Understanding humor through communication: Why be funny, anyway?* Lanham: Lexington.
- Mittel, Jason. 2001. Cartoon realism: Genre mixing and the cultural life of *The Simpsons*. *Velvet Light Trap* 47. 15–29.
- Monteiro, Lyra D. 2016. Race-conscious casting and the erasure of the black past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. *The Public Historian* 38(1). 89–98.
- Nash, Gary B., Charlotte Crabtree & Ross E. Dunn. 1998. *History on trial: Culture wars and the teaching of the past*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Neiger, Motti. 2020. Theorizing media memory: Six elements defining the role of the media in shaping collective memory in the digital age. *Sociology Compass* 14(5). e12782.
- Neiger, Motti, Oren Meyers & Eyal Zandberg. 2011. On media memory: Editors' introduction. In Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers & Eyal Zandberg (eds.), *On media memory: Collective memory in a new media age*, 1–24. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Park-Ozee, Dakota. 2019. Satire: An explication. *Humor* 32(4). 585–604.
- Paul, Heike. 2014. *The myths that made America: An introduction to American studies*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Schocket, Andrew M. 2015. *Fighting over the founders: How we remember the American revolution*. New York and London: New York University.
- Schwartz, Barry. 2015. Rethinking the concept of collective memory. In Anna Lisa Tota & Trever Hagen (eds.), *Routledge international handbook of memory studies*, 9–21. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Seidel, Andrew L. 2019. *The founding myth: Why Christian nationalism is un-American*. New York: Sterling.
- Setka, Stella. 2015. Bastardized history: How Inglourious Basterds breaks through American screen memory. *Jewish Film & New Media* 3(1). 141–169.
- Sheftel, Anna. 2012. “Monument to the international community, from the grateful citizens of Sarajevo”: Dark humour as counter-memory in post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Memory Studies* 5(2). 145–164.
- Smirnova, Michelle. 2014. What is the shortest Russian joke? Communism. Russian cultural consciousness expressed through Soviet humor. *Qualitative Sociology* 37(3). 323–343.
- Test, George A. 1991. *Satire: Spirit and art*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press.
- Thompson, Ethan. 2009. “I am not down with that”: King of the Hill and sitcom satire. *Journal of Film and Video* 61(2). 38–51.
- Turner, Chris. 2004. *Planet Simpson: How a cartoon masterpiece defined a generation*. New York: Da Capo Press.
- Wertsch, James V. 2002. *Voices of collective remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Young, Dannagal G. 2017. Theories and effects of political humor: Discounting cues, gateways, and the impact of incongruities. In Kate Kenski & Kathleen Hall Jamieson (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political communication*, 871–884. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zandberg, Eyal. 2015. “Ketchup is the Auschwitz of tomatoes”: Humor and the collective memory of traumatic Events. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8(1). 108–123.

Bionote

Olli Hellmann

School of Social Sciences, University of Waikato, Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand

olli.hellmann@waikato.ac.nz

Olli Hellmann is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand. His research on collective memory has been published in a number of peer-reviewed journals, including *Memory Studies*, *Visual Communication*, and *Democratization*. He believes that “Bart Gets an Elephant” is a criminally underrated *Simpsons* episode.