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Intergenerational Rupture and Prefigurative Culture

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Lisa, in these crazy times who knows what's right or wrong?
My gut's telling me: Bleed Gramps dry.
Bart Simpson (*The Simpsons*, S2E20)

As a television series that has been running for over a quarter of a century, and that has family relationships at his heart, *The Simpsons* provides a unique case study to explore the connection between childhood and old age in American popular culture. In this chapter, we interpret the intergenerational relationships in *The Simpsons*, specifically those between grandchildren and grandparents, as an instance of "prefigurative culture"—a concept introduced by Margaret Mead in her classic work *Culture and Commitment* (1978), where she contrasts it with so-called "postfigurative culture," where changes are gradual and slow. When the technological paradigm for subsistence tends to reproduce itself without significant changes over time, when the community is not under the control of another community with different rules or when there are no drastic ecological changes, accumulated experience throughout the generations is validated as common knowledge for a specific society (Mead, *Culture* 76). As a consequence, power relations in such postfigurative cultures center around those who have the most accumulated experience and whose knowledge is hence associated with more legitimacy. Indeed, in postfigurative cultures, the oldest people, the elderly, are respected for the knowledge that has been gathered in their own, relatively long life and accumulated through various generations. The more a society relies on spoken language to pass on its knowledge, the more it will depend on the memory of its old people to bring it up to date. In contrast, access to written sources makes it possible for anyone with the requisite political or reading competences to refer to past sources. As such, Mead argues, in prefigurative cultures, the monopoly of knowledge no longer lies in the hands of the elderly.

Mead raises the expectation that in postfigurative cultures, the elderly are loved and revered. The old people, as adults who represent accumulated knowledge, are consulted and obeyed. An asymmetry arises that is not necessarily based on domination but rather relies on collective certainty. The young no longer want to be young: it is in adulthood and old age where the most exalted values are to be found. The first years are a phase marked by the perception of lack. Childhood, adolescence and youth are defined by the absence of maturity, knowledge and experience, among

others; absences that the mere passing of time will solve. The children simply have to wait (and prepare themselves) to become adults. This does not mean that the power of the elderly cannot be questioned. In *Culture and Commitment*, Mead notes that at certain times, young people may try to displace the old people from their powerful position. However, due to the postfigurative nature of their own cultural background, these young people do not contribute elements (whether technological or political) that help solve the problems of the present more efficiently than the traditional way. They cannot separate themselves from the inherited traditions that they share with the old people who they try to supplant in the exercise of power. In this sense, such rebellions, in fact, consolidate the existing criteria of power and confirm that senior citizens are most competent to rule.

In postfigurative cultures, education is understood as intergenerational interchange in broad terms, not only schooling. Emile Durkheim defines education as

> "the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined." (237)

As this definition makes clear, intergenerational transmission depends on the conservation of a tradition in which old people are active ambassadors and the young are passive recipients until they grow old and assume the position which their elders pass down. A problem arises when the asymmetric and lineal model that is characteristic of postfigurative cultures (including the theoretical educational models based on Durkheim's definition) is applied to cultural models where violent and constant technological development, ecological changes and/or migration have led to a decline of the adult-centered monopoly of knowledge.

From postfigurative to prefigurative cultures

In fact, Mead studies the cultural changes typical of big western cities in the 1970s, a time when a relative decline could be perceived in the weight of traditions and the importance of the elderly as social models or regulatory figures. Young adults and even children and adolescents became operators of greater legitimacy, as youth was established as a counterculture that challenged the power of the adult. In other words, in the context of prefigurative cultures, youth becomes the generalized parameter of legitimacy, while the old are rejected. In societies where rapid changes can only be effectively processed by those that have been directly brought up in them, accumulated experience becomes an obsolescent burden. As a consequence, the outlook, sexuality, and body aesthetic of adolescence receive social preeminence. In

the American culture analyzed by Mead, the 1960s and 1970s became the watershed moment in which the young's clothing, musical taste and physiognomy shifted from the margins to the centre, from being residual to nuclear. Cultural icons such as The Beatles, the protesters of May 1968, the leaders of The Black Panthers or Che Guevara stood out for their anti-authoritarian stance, and they gradually disseminated their young aesthetic in all the regions of their culture. In this vein, in *L'empire de l'éphémère* (1987), Gilles Lipovetsky describes the cultural scenario of the new prefigurative culture: the generalized ideal of a body immune to the passage of time and the concealment of white hair and wrinkles. A carefree attitude has replaced the rigid and inflexible symbols of a tradition that did not adjust to the violence of the current changes.

In this new prefigurative context, "without models and without precedent" (Mead, *Culture* 7), the rejection of a straightforward intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills from grownups to children, leaves an enormous interpretive hole each time that adults know less than the children. The young appear as models to their seniors and the queries that arise cannot be effectively solved by tradition. This new fabric disrupts, as expected, the traditional family scheme and, within it, the bonds between grownups (parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents) and minors (children, nephews, nieces and grandchildren). These bonds are transformed according to the new prefigurative logic and are triggered by urban, domestic and technological mutations.

The Simpsons: A typical modern family

The place of the elderly, especially grandparents, in prefigurative times appears to be doomed to permanent revision. To gain a better understanding of how this idea is reflected in popular culture, we will analyze the intergenerational relationships in *The Simpsons*, a cartoon released in the US in 1987 that still runs to date. Our selection of *The Simpsons* as an interesting case study is based on two arguments. The first is the family structure that is central to the series. The nuclear family consists of Dad (Homer Simpson), Mom (Marge) and three children: Bart (ten years old); Lisa (eight years old) and Maggie, a baby who crawls. The extended family includes Homer's father, the 80-year-old Grampa Abraham, and two aunts. In addition, Homer's mother, Mona Simpson, who is divorced from Abraham, makes sporadic appearances. Marge's parents, Clancy and Jackie Bouvier, also appear in only a few episodes. Since they are rarely mentioned, we will not consider them as part of our analysis.[1]

The family structure of *The Simpsons* is conservative and traditional: a couple on their first marriage that has been together for several years, with three small children in a period of around ten years. They live in a classic American middle-class family house in Springfield. Homer appears to be the breadwinner of the family; however, the maintenance of the family with only Homer's salary seems quite tight.

Even though he barely finished primary school, he works as a safety supervisor in a nuclear plant; while Marge, who holds a university degree, works as a housewife. The division of tasks seems to be clearly defined as Homer never gets involved in household chores. As regards free time, the main activity of the family is to watch TV from their living room sofa. Except for Lisa, the family rarely displays any interest in cultural activities or politics. The exception is Sunday mass; religion is at the core of the everyday life of the family (Lewis). As stated by Paul Cantor, contrary to other mainstream American series since the 1960s, *The Simpsons* seems to have glorified the stable and traditional nuclear family. *The Simpsons* combines traditionalism with anti-traditionalism (Cantor 737): it continually makes fun of the traditional American family, yet it offers an enduring image of the nuclear family in the very act of satirizing it. It can be argued that *The Simpsons* is profoundly anachronistic since it hauls back family and political traditions that have been massively surpassed by American society. Even if it is possible, as Cantor (745) argues, that this anachronism is in harmony with Svetlana Boym's aesthetic construction of postmodern and reconstructive nostalgia, an awareness of the constant interplay between traditional and anti-traditional practices allows for a better understanding of the presence of Grampa Abraham as an ambassador of tradition, as opposed to the grandchildren, representatives of a revealing alternative that breaks with the past. The second reason for selecting *The Simpsons* as a case study is the duration and globalisation of the series. Born first as part of another series of the North American television network FOX, *The Simpsons* has been independent since 1989, with more than 500 episodes and a significant global impact. As a result, the series has been the subject of academic research, with countless studies covering various areas of research (Blakeboroug; Gray; Rhodes; Scanlan and Feinberg).

***The Simpsons* and prefigurative culture**

Even if the Simpsons appear in the series as a now dated nuclear family, with clearly defined gender roles, the series does not freeze these features in all the characters but rather reserves them for the protagonists. The rest of the inhabitants of Springfield represent more diverse types of families. In the course of the series, the Simpsons' neighbor Ned Flanders becomes a widower and raises his two small children alone; Apu the shopkeeper, an Indian emigrant, enters into an arranged marriage and has eight children; Skinner, the school principal, is a middle-aged man living with his mother; the parents of Bart's friend Millhouse are divorced and constantly fighting over custody; aunt Selma engages in a same-sex relationship, and so forth. In Cantor's view (1999), *The Simpsons* thematizes both the resistance and the endurance of a traditional family in a context that is increasingly breaking with traditions.

Is this ambivalence also reflected when it comes to age norms? Grampa Abraham is—paradoxically—part of the anti-traditional stance of the nuclear family

in *The Simpsons*. Grampa lives in a retirement home where he shares his life with other senior citizens and is assisted by medical and paramedical staff. In one of the first episodes of the series, Lisa makes clear that Grampa did not move there voluntarily, when she asks "Remember the fight he put up when we put him in the home?" (S1E5). The move is not motivated by a lack of room at the Simpson's house (in fact, they host several long stays along the series), or by the absence of family members that can help in his everyday life. Nor is it the only form of rejection that Abraham suffers at the hands of his offspring: at the retirement home, he is constantly waiting for visits which rarely occur. When Grampa goes and visits the Simpsons, the family openly expresses its annoyance and complains loudly about the old man. Grampa Abraham wants to participate in family life, but his attempts are systematically rejected, with total disregard for good manners. Instead, the old man is met with aggression and peevishness.

The retirement home is portrayed as a dumping ground for old people, as a place of permanent confinement which differs significantly from the nuclear family's home. This treatment of the elderly is an important element of the Simpson's anti-traditional stance: the postfigurative logic to the nuclear family gets aborted at the moment when the old man is no longer treated as an authority for the family, but rather as a heavy burden, which is only eased through the confinement to a specific and clearly differentiated habitat (Mead, *Culture* 79). This displacement of the old man to the retirement home signals a transition to prefigurative logic in terms of cultural legitimacy and valuation. This shift is illustrated when the family discusses Grampa Abraham on the way back from a rare visit to the home:

> Bart: Grampa smells like that trunk with the wet bottom.
> Lisa: He smells like a photo lab.
> Homer: Stop it! Grampa smells like an old man, which is like a hospital hallway.
> Marge: That's terrible! We should teach them to value the elderly. We'll be old someday.
> Homer: My God, you're right! You kids won't put me in a home? Well…
> [Bart smiles sarcastically]
> Homer: [worried] Er, Marge, what'll we do?
> Marge: Well, I think we better set an example.
> Homer: Absolutely! Our Sundays should be a pleasure. Where's a fun place we can take Grampa? (S2E17)

Marge and Homer's sympathy for Grampa mainly seems to stem from the realization that they too will be old one day (a pattern that resembles the A-frame discussed in Sung Ae Lee's chapter) rather than from respect for the old man's knowledge or experience. In this context, and somewhat paradoxically, Grampa Abraham continues

to act as the ambassador of tradition, despite the mockery and rejection. Many of his lines start with "In my times…" and are loaded with an enormous moral weight. The letter that he writes to a TV advertising company illustrates Grampa's "that is how it ought to be" stance:

> Grandpa: Dear Advertisers, I am disgusted with the way old people are depicted on television. We are not all vibrant, fun-loving sex maniacs. Many of us are bitter, resentful individuals who remember the good old days when entertainment was bland and inoffensive. The following is a list of words I never want to hear on television again…. (S1E5)

The quotation makes clear that the bitterness that results from having his experience rejected over again, does not stop Grampa from insisting on the position of authority that the elderly hold in postfigurative cultures.

Grampa is not the sole major character in the series to represent his generation. Montgomery Burns, the owner of the nuclear plant that employs Homer, is of the same age. Both went through some similar experiences in their youth and share some features in senescence. Like Grampa, Burns's senility and general impotence represents a caricature of his old age, and the show frequently ridicules the way he perceives the past and articulates his memories. Unlike Grampa, however, Burns is not a grandfather and never raised a child: his son Larry grew up in an orphanage. He does not have family bonds, but hardly ever appears without his docile personal assistant Waylon Smithers, who fantasizes about a sexual relationship with Burns. In this elderly dyad, Burns—as opposed to Abraham Simpson—is feared, respected and desired: his whims tend to be satisfied and his sometimes absurd perceptions of reality, similar to those of Abraham, are usually covered up. Neither Homer nor Bart dares laugh at the senile businessman in his face. Contrary to Abraham, Burns does not pontificate or rule, nor is he depicted as an ambassador of the past. On the contrary, his wealth and business position are enough to be obeyed. In essence, the two old men of the series represent parallel articulations of old age. Burns derives legitimacy from his socio-economic status, but he has no offspring to whom he can impart knowledge or values. In contrast, Abraham has children and grandchildren, but he does not have the means to legitimate himself. Neither of the men is ultimately capable of leaving a legacy, or of transmitting the traditions they take pride in. In what follows, I will further analyze Grampa's prefigurative position in three paradigmatic situations of the series: the good babysitter; helping the grandchildren and helping Grampa.[2]

The good babysitter

One of the roles attributed to Grampa is the care of the children when the parents go out or travel. This structure appears for the first time in the twentieth episode of the second season. There, Homer and Marge originally want to hire a babysitter, but the employee withdraws when she remembers the children's outrageous behavior. As a substitute, they call Grampa Abraham, which instigates a long process of denigration. The old man is required only as a last resource and it is assumed that he is always available. Once he is occupied with the chore of looking after the grandchildren, they never stop mocking Grampa, to the extent that in the middle of a wild party, Milhouse summarizes the situation as follows (S2E20): "There is party at the Simpson's house; the only adult is frail and old". When the party finishes, the house is in complete chaos and Grampa is crying on the sofa, saying: "I tried to be a good baby-sitter, but I failed. I'm a feeb, a useless, old, worn-out..." Lisa and Bart then feel touched and start cleaning the house, after which Grampa laughs out loud, trying to hide from his grandchildren that he faked crying. This leads to a moment of triumph when the parents return (S2E20):

> Marge: Oh, my, the house looks wonderful. Grampa, what's your secret?
> Grampa: Pretending to cry. [Chuckling] That's right. You heard me. Pretending to cry!
> Lisa: Way to go, Grampa.
> Bart: I'll never trust another old person.
> Grampa: I fooled you! So long, suckers! [Laughing]

It is noteworthy how Grampa and the grandchildren appear as equals tying to probe each other's limits. At no moment are feelings of care or protection expressed among them. In the end, the guilt that the grandchildren feel after Grampa's apocryphal cry and pretended complaint is immediately betrayed by the cynical retort of their elder, whose only possible resource when facing the challenge of the children is to feign pain.

Helping the grandchildren

Whereas the previous analysis lays bare the ageism related to old age in *The Simpsons*, the children are not immune to age-related prejudices either. In one episode (S4E19), Bart and Lisa present a script for an episode of *Itchy and Scratchy*, their favorite TV cartoon, but it is not accepted because they are not adults. Once again, Grampa's help is needed:

> Lisa: Maybe he just doesn't take us seriously 'cause we're kids. Let's put a grown-up's name on it.

Bart: How about Grampa? He's pretty out of it. He let those guys use his checkbook for a whole year.
[When they arrive at the Home, Grampa is writing a letter of complaint.]
Grampa: When I read your magazine I don't see one wrinkled face or single toothless grin. For shame! To the sickos at *Modern Bride Magazine*.
Bart: Hey, Grampa, we need to know your first name.
Grampa [gasps]: You're making my tombstone!
Lisa: No! We're just curious.
Grampa: All right, let's see. First name. Well, whenever I'm confused I just check my underwear. It holds the answer to all the important questions. Call me Abraham Simpson.

The joint experience of age-related prejudices does not produce any connection between the children and their grandfather. In fact, ageist assumptions motivate Bart and Lisa to seek Grampa's help, as they assume he will be easy to fool ("He's pretty out of it"). This scene not only ridicules the old, but also takes aim at political correctness. Grampa chooses an inappropriate target (*Modern Bride Magazine*) for his critique of the invisibility of the old in the media—a point of criticism that has been repeatedly raised in a more serious context (see, among others, Klein and Schiffman; McClintock Greenberg; ICAA). The scene reinforces the image of the elderly as being out of tune with reality. In order to become useful, Grampa needs to give up his identity—here symbolized by his name, which the children use as their alias. Throughout the episode, Grampa always gives his name unwillingly to his grandchildren and is critical of the cartoon's content. But his criticism goes completely unnoticed: complaints fall on deaf ears in a prefigurative context in which the figure of the old person is only necessary to sign a contract. To Bart and Lisa, none of his experience or opinions are worthy of consideration, neither are they incorporated in the task carried out by the children. It is the children who possess the monopoly of legitimate knowledge.

Helping Grampa

One of the most emblematic episodes regarding the relationship between Grampa and the grandchildren is entitled: *Raging Abe Simpson and His Grumbling Grandson in "The Curse of the Flying Hellfish"* (S7E22). The episode starts with showing Grandparents Day at Springfield Elementary School. All the children go with their grandparents.

[Grampa Abraham Simpsons spits on the floor.]
Bart [ashamed]: Grampa! I don't mind when you spit at home, but I have to work with these people!
Grampa: Oh, jabber jacks! Schoolhouse don't put out spittoons, I ain't responsible.

> Teacher: All right, seniors we'd all love to share in your wisdom, experience. Let's start with Milhouse's grandfather.

Grampa then makes fun of those who are in the spotlight and Bart feels ashamed. When it is his turn to go to the front, Bart does not want him to go. Grampa claims to have invented the toilet and once again puts his grandson to shame. Back at home, Bart tells everyone at dinner about the embarrassment at school and wonders why Grampa is always making up crazy stories.

> Homer: Maybe it's time we put Grampa in a retirement home.
> Lisa: You already put him in a home.
> Bart: Maybe it's time we put him in one where he can't get out.
> Lisa: Nooo. Old people deserve our respect. They are not second-class citizens.

In this case, as well as in others, Lisa represents the voice of political correctness: her statements are void, with only symbolic value and without any practical consequences. The episode both addresses and confirms the ageist stereotype of the old as useless and embarrassing. Grampa, however, reasserts his claim to wisdom and authority. In a later scene of the same episode, he shares with Bart his experiences as a soldier during World War II. He was part of the same squadron as Mister Burns: once again, we see the two elderly men appearing in a dyad. The squadron discovers a valuable treasure of artworks and hides it with the agreement that the last member of the group (called Hellfish) would take possession of the fortune. Bart dismisses Grampa's story as fiction:

> Bart: Great story, Grampa. Could've used a vampire though.
> Grampa [sobs]: My own grandson thinks I'm a liar.

At that moment, Burns himself appears on the scene to force Abraham to confess where the treasure is hidden. Bart gradually realizes that Grampa's story is true and thinks he can keep the treasure himself. Finally, it is Burns who manages to achieve his goal. Bart gets trapped at the bottom of the sea and Abraham submerges himself in the water to save him. The episode closes as follows:

> Grampa: Well, at least I got to show you I wasn't always a pathetic old kook.
> Bart: You never were, Grampa.
> Grampa: Oh, I'd hug ya, but I know you'd just get embarrassed.
> Bart: I won't get embarrassed. I don't care who knows I love my Grandpa.

This is the only registered situation where Grampa and his grandson enter into an emotional relation of mutual understanding, protection and care. However, to reach that attachment, Grampa had to show that he was a hero, could have been rich and able to save his grandson from death.

In contrast, in various episodes, the grandchildren are presented as helping Grampa resolve problems which require a youthful perspective, while remaining disdainful of the older person's experience. This prefigurative structure of the intergenerational link can be observed, for example, in an episode from the eleventh season, when Lisa gets the old people at Grampa's retirement home a Wii, a video game device (S21E11, *Homer the Whopper*). After the elderly initially complain that it is not a television, they start having fun playing tennis, which encourages them to be very active; the nurses, however, break the Wii on purpose because, in their opinion, it stimulates the elderly too much. Once again, the old people are then placed in front of a television which only emits static images. The nurses claim that looking after old people is the worst job in the world, with a low salary and the constant presence of death. Lisa retorts that they should allow the senior citizens to have fun; the nurses sharply state that they should have had their share of fun before entering the retirement home.

The old people in the retirement home are portrayed as disempowered and infantilized by the middle generation whom they are at the mercy of. Unlike the middle-aged, the young imagine new and unknown possibilities for the old, but they lack the power to change something for the better. Lisa, for example, may desire to break down institutional barriers, but she is as limited by her non-adult status as the elderly are by their old age. When the young and old connect in a way that empowers both, as in this episode, that bond is soon shattered by the middle generation, which appears only to care about its own needs. In spite of the humorous tone of the series, its criticism of institutionalized care for the elderly should not be dismissed as unserious. As Jennifer Hockey and Allison James would argue, "age impacts very powerfully on the way we see ourselves—and are seen by others" ("*Social Identities*" 3) and paradoxically, there is a growing tendency to attribute childlike characteristics to the elderly (*Growing Up* 10).

Beyond parody

According to Albert Taylor (1998), grandparents may be the key agents in restoring a sense of continuity in their grandchildren's lives. In a traditional and postfigurative culture, as Mead confirms, grandparents are representations of continuity in that they have lived through and adjusted to more change than any generation in history. As "living repositories of change" Mead argues in "Grandparents as Educators" (1974), grandparents are best able to help adolescents and young adults know who they are. They do so by providing the young with direct connections to the past, a sense of

continuity overtime, and a sense of confidence for facing the future. Evidently this is not the case in the relationships between Abraham and his grandchildren. The figure of Grampa may indeed represent a tenuous line of continuity to the past, but this link is completely delegitimized. As stated before, mockery and scorning of the old is customary, especially from Homer and Bart, a practice which tends to be highlighted through contrast with Lisa's politically correct language. Grampa no longer appears as a treasurer of experience that ensures the continuity with the past, but rather as a witness of times that are best forgotten, a connoisseur of obsolete certainties, a protagonist of phrases and attitudes that ought to be cruelly rejected, and the carrier of a worn-out, tired body which reminds the young of death. Ultimately, respect for the old person (Grampa Abraham or Burns) is portrayed solely as a byproduct of material interests; it is feigned only so long as the older person can be used to advantage; and it is not undergirded by genuine feelings of care, admiration or emotional reciprocity.

What is the logic or ideology that underlies these intergenerational interactions between the old man and the children who are tied by blood? What meanings can we attribute to the mockery, disdain and cruelty that the old are subjected to in *The Simpsons*? It is clear that *The Simpsons* constitutes a television satire in which it is possible to corroborate the changes in contemporary ("global") societies: through a structure of reiteration it depicts societies and its tendencies ironically. The parodic tone is sometimes quite evident; other times it is less overt, and often quite contradictory, argues Chantal Herskovic (2011). The deliberately grotesque representation of the grandfather can be interpreted as an exaggeration of qualities of the physical weaknesses and cultural obsolescence of the elderly, as well as the rejection of affection in American society's discourse on old age. *The Simpsons* parodies not only the typical American family but also, and especially, its televisual representations. As Jonathan Gray (2006) points out, "the force of its depiction of suburbia comes from its negation of depictions offered by countless other traditional family sitcoms. The family sitcom, suburban paradise, in good cliché style, like ball-games and hot dogs" (137).

The exact meaning of this parody has led to divergent views among scholars. On the one hand, Daniel Blakeborough (2008) supposes that while on the surface the show appears to mock older people, it criticizes in fact society's disrespectful view of the elderly, calling instead for a reevaluation. According to Jason Gillespie (2012), *The Simpsons* is unique in calling for a critique of established ageist stereotypes and opens the door for their possible subversion:

> While these familiar stereotypes exist within the larger social structure and are repeated ad nauseam in our cultural texts, there exists a means by which such representations can be historicized, contextualized, probed, questioned,

> undermined, and subverted: With the opening of a critical discourse through the satiric and ironic parodizations of such representations on *The Simpsons*, we can look into the ideology that drives these portrayals in the mass media and our culture ("”16)

Then again, some other studies show that in the American cartoon tradition, the bonds between old and young people are far removed from the way they are represented in *The Simpsons*. For example, Hugh Klein and Kenneth S. Schiffman (2009), analyzing TV cartoons in the twentieth century, found almost exclusively positive portrayals of elderly. Their study yielded that older people were usually portrayed as "good guys," had above-average intelligence, and did not differ from their younger counterparts in their level of physical attractiveness or pro-social and anti-social acts. As Gillespie (17) shows, television portrayals of older people in both primetime television and television programming intended for children follow a trend of under-representation, but differ in their overall positive depiction of older people.
Taking these trends and interpretations into account, it is possible to infer that *The Simpsons* in fact parodies old series and sitcoms of American television in which old people had a central, harmonious, and balanced role within the expected limits of a postfigurative culture which admired and respected the elderly. This hyperbole, which magnifies the decline of the grandparents' authority in *The Simpsons*, suggests that the rise of prefigurative culture can explain contemporary society's incapacity to facilitate meaningful intergenerational links. Indeed, the connection with past traditions that the elderly might represent is buried under the cynicism and cruelty of the younger characters. More than a denunciation of stereotypes, *The Simpsons* is an ironic and disconsolate expression of the end of a culture in which grandparents guided their grandchildren in their growth. In line with Pierre Schoentjes's conception of irony in *Poétique de l´Ironie*, we argue that it is a brutal closure of the old postfigurative lineage, which is replaced with a prefigurative model in which cultural legitimacy is only held by the new generations.[3] This can be observed in particular in the aforementioned *Raging Abe Simpson* (S7E22), where Grampa is depicted as being embarrassing to his grandchildren and also in *Homer the Whopper* (S21E1) which shows institutionalized and infantilized old people playing with the Wii and at the mercy of young and middle-aged adults.

According to Naomi Bell Cornman O´Neil (2007), when grandchildren do not have a relationship with their grandparents, the younger generation lacks a cultural and historical sense of self. When young adults, with strong intergenerational ties, experience life events, O'Neil argues, they may recall how their own grandparents acted in similar situations or what their grandparents said to them. However, when the transmission of historical and cultural knowledge loses value, when intergenerational references are relegated to confined institutions, when the mere

idea of sharing everyday life with an old person provokes resistance, this lack is no longer perceived as a weakness but rather as strength. Any attempt to reconstruct it only seems to provoke a brutal and ironic backlash which suppresses memory of an era already surpassed.

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Endnotes

[1] All these character profiles are available at *The Simpsons' Wikiaweb* page: http://simpsons.wikia.com.

[2] We have checked all episodes from all seasons and there is no record of any change in the bonds between grandparents and grandchildren throughout time. The paragraphs taken as examples are representative of similar scenes in the cartoon.

[3] The narrative force of this displacement is so strong that it produces a feeling of nostalgia for the old forms of infancy and old age.