

“At any given Before moment”: Memory, Trauma, and Pop Culture in Washburn’s *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play*

On October 7th, 1993, during the fifth season of FOX’s *The Simpsons*, the episode “Cape Feare” first aired.<sup>1</sup> This episode directly parodied Martin Scorsese’s psychological thriller *Cape Fear* from 1991, which was a remake of the 1962 film of the same name. Within this *Simpsons* episode, the character Sideshow Bob has been released from prison and begins terrorizing Bart Simpson by threatening to kill him. The episode borrows scenes from *Cape Fear* and other film thrillers such as *Friday the 13th*. The “Cape Feare” episode has, as many episodes of *The Simpsons* have, remained salient in the American psyche. So much so that the theme song from the *Cape Fear* films, originally written by Bernard Herrmann for the 1962 film, is now most notably remembered for its connection to *The Simpsons* as opposed to the original film.

In browsing the comment section of the YouTube video “Bernard Herrmann - Cape Fear (theme),” the memory of this piece is blatantly connected to *The Simpsons*. Though posted in 2009, comments on the video (as recent as “6 months ago” and as distant as “7 years ago” as of May 1st, 2018) are littered with references to the *Simpsons* episode. Some quotes from the full *Simpsons* episode such as “DIE BART, DIE” and “No-one who speaks german can be an evil man” demonstrate the immediate power of recall that *The Simpsons* audience base has with this particular episode.<sup>2</sup> Three years ago, YouTube user Machinedead also commented, “the Simpsons episode is supposed to remind us of the movie, not the way around xD probably one of the most epic Simpsons episodes ever because of the whole Cape Fear parody [sic].”<sup>3</sup> Whether

<sup>1</sup> “The Simpsons’ Cape Feare (TV Episode 1993).” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0701080/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0701080/).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, comments posted by users “Ignacio” and “Hans Gruber.”

<sup>3</sup> “Bernard Herrmann - Cape Fear (theme),” Youtube video, 5:43, posted by “deviantrake,” May 6, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QH3RhbVP7cA>.

intentional or not, this Youtuber is striking the chord between history and collective memory. In short, yes, Machinedead, you are correct. Some have associated the cultural weight of this song with the *The Simpsons* instead of the original film score. This misremembering demonstrates the enduring connection with “meaningless” entertainment, that is popular, and often cathartic, entertainment; it illustrates the permeation of pop culture, such as something as timeless as *The Simpsons*, into the American psyche.

This paper relates Anne Washburn’s *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* to both social and theatrical performativity in order to highlight the ways cultural memory is rewritten to negotiate, or deflect from, collective trauma. Though critics have noted the looming nostalgia present in futuristic, technological narratives like *Mr. Burns*, no one has yet to fully investigate, what I consider, the necessary presence of popular culture in transforming nostalgic memory into a new narrative within this text.<sup>4</sup> Through popular culture, we are able to negotiate collective trauma.

Washburn’s *Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play* relies on this exact permeation of *The Simpsons* in the American psyche. The play follows the lives of a handful of characters as they navigate the uneasy reality of a world without electricity. Threatened by the loss of transportation, refrigeration, communication, and entertainment, the characters are thrust from a known world of comfort into a space of subsequent anxiety. Thus, the characters begin to comfort themselves by remembering episodes of *The Simpsons*. With the interpolation of “Cape Feare,” American products like Diet Coke, and contemporary American pop music, Washburn creates a space that makes its audience hyper aware of its own social performativity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Bay-Cheng. "Virtual Realisms: Dramatic Forays into the Future." *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 4 (2015): 687-698. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed November 17, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Bay-Cheng. "Virtual Realisms: Dramatic Forays into the Future." *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 4 (2015): 687-698. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed April 25, 2018).

*Mr. Burns* navigates a space in postmodern/postdramatic theater that explores collective memory. Postdramatic theater centers on an understanding of theater that “often focuses on exploring the usually unacknowledged anxieties, pressures, pleasures, paradoxes, perversities that surround the performance situation.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the focus has shifted— gone are the escapist days. *Mr. Burns* is also in conversation with postmodern theater where, as Jeanette Malkin notes in her work *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama*, “shock is neither intended nor relevant.”<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the loss of the electric grid in Washburn’s future world is not the central climax of the play. Instead, the play focuses on the trauma that stems from this dystopian future, and the collective memory that culminates from a combination of this trauma and previous notions of social performativity. Through her use of the theater as a site, Washburn invites the audience to participate in the rewriting of memory as the characters, and the audience, attempt to escape their present reality.

The displaced characters in *Mr. Burns* who attempt to quell anxieties and reaffirm their identity through the recalling of the “Cape Feare” episode of *The Simpsons* walk the line between social performance and the classic performativity of television and theater. Social and staged performance blur as Washburn demonstrates how performance influences how a group reacts to trauma and establishes a collective identity. My reading helps scholars see performance differently as it highlights identity. This hyper-fixation is then used as a lens to negotiate collective trauma and rewrite America’s understanding of its national, and even sexual, identity.

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<sup>6</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann. “Introduction,” *Postdramatic theatre*. Routledge, 2006. Pg. 4.

For more on this genre holistically, see the entirety of Lehmann’s book, Bernd Stegemann’s “After Postdramatic Theater,” and David Barnett’s “When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts.”

<sup>7</sup> Jeanette R. Malkin. 1999. *Memory-theater and postmodern drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Pg. 18.

## The Spotlight of Performance

Scholarly emphasis has shifted to analyze how “social actors perform race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, profession, religion, and nationality” and how the physical bodies of these “social actors” accrue social identities.<sup>8</sup> Through the “repetition of acts”<sup>9</sup> that come to dictate everyday life and set norms, entertainment becomes performative for an entire culture. With this understanding, the lines between traditional performance, such as a theater and dance, are expanded to encompass with the possibility of an everyday performance. This is to say, every action can be read as a performance of a social caliber. Traditional performances operate on a known stage—the physical platform of a theater—whereas social performances that come to denote various aspects of life and culture operate on a social stage such as in a classroom or a shopping mall.

The plot of *Mr. Burns* is an investigation of this nuanced definition of performance, both social and theatrical. As the play opens with the characters seated casually on the stage, discussing a topic as mundane as a television show, the audience’s perception of performance is immediately shaken. Audiences, as spectators, openly carry predispositions, memories, and associations into a theater.<sup>10</sup> One might enter the theater expecting an extravagant setting. There is, however, a casual air in the opening of *Mr. Burns* that differs from the expected distance

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Manning. “Performance” in *Keywords for American cultural studies*. Edited by Burgett, Bruce, and Glenn Hendler. 2007. New York: New York University Press. Pg. 191

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce McConachie. *Engaging audiences: A cognitive approach to spectating in the theatre*. Springer, 2008. Pg. 133. This book is useful for a more in depth, scientifically based, reading on how spectatorship is understood and experienced by a theatre audience.

between actor and audience of “highbrow” art.<sup>11</sup> The staged performance, as it centers on the conversational remembering of a *Simpsons* episode, and mirrors the opening of *The Simpsons* with community around a couch, demonstrates how people interact, or perform, in everyday life. Since the audience is watching a relocated social performance, they are invited to engage with the definition of performance from the onset.

In addition, the audience is vaguely removed from the actors on stage as they negotiate their memory of *The Simpsons*. Through this positioning the audience is granted the permission to judge and analyze the social performance in front of them where they might not in “real life.” The theater acts as a space for understanding as it invites audience members to reflect on their own social performances with the comfortable distance of the stage. The audience is forced to “actively *coproduce* the spectacle being seen, and, perhaps, ‘work through’ a collective historical wound” of the characters.<sup>12</sup> By positioning the audience as active collaborators alongside the cast of *Mr. Burns*, Washburn creates a collective experience of remembering the very memory of American culture itself, the “cultural wound” of which is palpable. This cultural wound, the collective wound felt by characters who have lost several cornerstones of their identity as twenty-first century Americans, creates a space to investigate the importance of cultural identity.

### **Fetishization of *The Simpsons* as Cultural Collective**

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that theater has always reaffirmed distance between actors and their audience. In fact, the rise of a distinction of highbrow and lowbrow art is reflective of Civil War era concepts of respectability and phrenology. Until that moment, theaters were more interactive. However, now the contemporary understandings of theater emphasizes a fourth wall between the stage and audience so, this casual presentation may be jarring.

Susan Manning. “Performance” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. Edited by Burgett, Bruce, and Glenn Hendler. 2007. New York: New York University Press. Pg. 191.

<sup>12</sup> Malkin., Pg. 31.

The significance of *The Simpsons* is that the show is, itself, a culturally readable time capsule of American culture. A parody of the American political/social/and economic climate is created within each episode. *The Simpsons* works to fetishize the American landscape with these parodies as it offers a space for viewers to entertain, without addressing, the important changes in America. Uncomfortable subjects that Americans cannot look directly at— such as elections, the economic crash, and threats of war— are addressed under the guise of what Quincy calls “Meaningless Entertainment” in Act 2 of *Mr. Burns*.<sup>13</sup> Within the play’s future, that is seven years after we are introduced to a post-electric America, Quincy argues that things “aren’t funny when they are true,” clearly denoting the characters’ understanding of their present need for a dramatized version of reality, something cathartic that *The Simpsons* previously offered.

The characters are willing their memory of *The Simpsons* to the foreground to create something to look at indirectly to process the trauma of a post-electric society. However, since “trauma does not remember its original source,” this leads the characters to fetishize *The Simpsons*.<sup>14</sup> They obsessively recall *The Simpsons* but not correctly. The show acts as a nostalgic cornerstone of an American normalcy, the basis of the time prior to the current trauma. (It is important to note here that the past for the characters, aligns it with present-day for the audience. So, as the characters are negotiating their trauma, the contemporary audience is directly reminded of theirs.) This is not to say that the characters in *Mr. Burns* could ever forget about the power outage and resulting nuclear threat by distracting themselves with *The Simpsons*. Rather, the trauma these characters experience replays in disconnected fragments, much like *Simpsons* episodes themselves, separated by commercial breaks. This form of coping—fetishizing or

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<sup>13</sup> Washburn, Anne. *Mr. Burns and Other Plays*. Theatre Communications Group, 2017. Pg. 189.

<sup>14</sup> Malkin., Pg. 29.

fixating on the “Before moment”<sup>15</sup> as Gibson later calls what they are trying to recreate—is the basis for the entire establishment of acting troupes in Act II and III of *Mr. Burns*. Quincy’s goal of establishing “Status again” draws a concrete connection to the desire to create a “welcoming” space to discuss trauma.<sup>16</sup>

The challenge of parody is properly utilizing the culturally legible aspects of a given time. The characters, in attempting to remember a recent and popular past, must exploit the collective experiences they share with the present audience. In short, the jokes and commentary cannot succeed, that is, cannot elicit a laugh, without the audiences’ collective memory. Within the “Cape Feare” episode of *The Simpsons*, for example, as emphasized by the YouTube video of the theme song, some of the younger demographic does not know the Herrmann piece as a part of a score because the films are outside the collective memory of that audience. Yet the use of the theme song still resonates as entertaining when isolated through the “Cape Feare” episode of *The Simpsons*, a sort of misassociation of humor. The song is not funny because of its attachment to the film but becomes comical in its association with *The Simpsons* episode. Thus, it is still earning a laugh but not the same laugh from all audiences. Whether through product placement or lyrics, Washburn’s play needs the cartographic memory of its American audience; it is drawing on our reading of an American identity.<sup>17</sup> This cartographic memory works to anchor a national memory within the group consciousness. So while we read certain moments, ideas, or items that are popular, these same moments, ideas, or items become anchors for our memory and

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<sup>15</sup> Washburn., Pg. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., Pg. 171.

<sup>17</sup> Jeanette R. Malkin. 1999. *Memory-theater and postmodern drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Pg. 23. The idea of a cartographic system for studying history was proposed by Pierre Nora. This method asserted that the objects, place, and ideas contain a collective identity. Here cartographic is referring to the ability to map a national memory across objects, such as pop lyrics and Diet Coke which will be discussed later.

understanding. *The Simpsons* anchors the memory of the audience and actors together, acting as a cartographic memory. Trauma can act as a cartographic moment in a collective cultural memory — take for example the shift in American culture after September 11th, 2001. In *Mr. Burns*, the characters work within a similar trauma, even in the misremembered.

In order to access the collective memory of the audience, Washburn's characters must master the full presentation of identity—that is social performance and reactions to trauma—and authentically place it on the stage. All of these aspects of a collective memory lie in the margins, or in instances that become naturalized and unchallenged. Social performance houses both memory and trauma within. Without collective memory there is nothing for the audience to read in the presentation. The collective memory of *The Simpsons*, which is inherently rooted in pop culture, necessarily includes the social performances and traumas within our time and space.

### **Pop Lyrics: Looking Indirectly at Trauma**

In the “Cape Feare” episode of *The Simpsons*, Sideshow Bob is bested in his nautical kidnapping scheme by Bart when he is asked to perform the entirety of *H.M.S Pinafore*. Unaware of their growing proximity to the town Springfield, Sideshow Bob buys into Bart's challenge with full theatricality, that is costuming and choreography, for just long enough that he and the Simpson family sail downstream into city limits, thereby returning the Simpson family to safety. Sideshow Bob, through his connection to the classic opera, is read as a character that is grotesquely, and humorously, high-brow. The opera by Gilbert and Sullivan is out of place in *The Simpsons*, as the show works within a comedic vein more likened to slapstick and situational comedy. Sideshow Bob's performance of this work, then, makes him an outsider; he becomes a

spectacle, a performance to be observed. Perhaps because the scene in the television show is so comedic due to its grandiose theatricality, the *H.M.S Pinafore* is referenced at the end of Act 1 of *Mr. Burns*, but it is dropped from the remainder of the play. This classic piece, marginally recognized by the contemporary audience of the episode, is too distant for the characters of *Mr. Burns* to read ten or seventy-five years later.

What does continue in the cultural memory of the acting troupe as they grasp for the “Before moment” is the idea of meaningless entertainment, including the necessary use of “meaningless” music. The audience understands what Quincy calls “Meaningless Entertainment” as common entertainment, the less elevated entertainment. Though believed to be meaningless, the characters’ preoccupation with this form of popular culture denotes how necessary this entertainment is. As such, the acting troupe in *Mr. Burns* looks to recreate contemporary, pop music videos in the “Chart Hits” scene, allowing them to draw upon the missed memory of meaningless entertainment, such as MTV. The pop song lyrics serve as a site for a collective memory but do so without distancing the audience from characters, as references from *H.M.S Pinafore* would. The songs utilized in the “Chart Hits” scene are ones that would be aurally, visually, and culturally recognizable. These song lyrics are presumed to be known by the (American) audience and the characters, and therefore behave as collective comfort by redirecting attention. Interspersed into Act III acts are quotes from “Livin La Vida Loca,” “Toxic,” and a bastardization of lyrics from Eminem's “Lose Yourself,” which recall the audience’s contemporary, and the characters’ past, American identity. These designated songs, in addition to the ones chosen by the cast of each specific production, are culturally readable for twenty-first century America.

These songs work because they occupy a space of fetishization for the characters. They allow the characters to investigate the threats around them without directly addressing them. As Colleen, the director, mentions after the troupe's run of "Chart Hits" in Act II, she was watching the performance but she "wasn't looking" specifically at one point.<sup>18</sup> This play on words reiterates the purpose of these lyrics: to see without being forced to look. She then promises that she will watch for a specific aspect of the performance next time. (Let the record show that there is no "next time").<sup>19</sup> By singing "Toxic," the characters and the future audience are not force fed any production number that is inauthentically optimistic. An unrealistically chipper performance would likely upset the audience of the post electric world as they would recognize the, to borrow a phrase from Holden Caulfield, "phony"-ness. Instead, the troupe works to negotiate their audience's trauma with songs that are ironic. The use of "Toxic" and "Livin La Vida Loca" reflect the uncertainty of the American landscape after the loss of the electrical grid and the very real threat of nuclear radiation within the play. These songs then call on the anxieties of the audience within the play and they are able to nod toward their actual trauma without having to look directly at it; they can sing along without uttering the words in real conversation. In the same way that contemporary American audiences can look at problematic aspects of America through *The Simpsons*, so are the characters within *Mr. Burns* able to comfortably recognize the pop lyrics and ignore the reality of their crazy, possibly toxic, lives.

In contrast, the rest of the songs used in the music performance are not defined.

Washburn gives the director and company the power to decide which songs should be included in the "*medley of popular hits from the last ten years.*"<sup>20</sup> So, while Washburn notes that these

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<sup>18</sup>Washburn., pg.187.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pg. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Washburn., pg, 184.

songs need to be performed with crisp choreography and “*without irony*,” the openness of artistic expression guarantees that the company will choose songs to incorporate the culture of their audience. The songs are expected to be contemporary, regardless of the year of production.

While some pop songs reach national acclaim, some regions have stronger, albeit stereotypical, connections to different genres. Leaving the arrangement and choreography open therefore ensures that the company, for sake of a successful show, will call on the collective memory of the demographic in front of them. They will tap into the recent, collective memory. This ensures that the show will maintain its cultural relevance as it moves through the years, much like *The Simpsons* itself, by incorporating current events.

Ultimately, the memory of the lyrics’ performativity in the performance of the original artist allows for these pop songs to occupy a space of comfortability, that is comfort and familiarity. Both the audience in the future play and the physical audience remember the music video for “Toxic,” or at least the reputation of Britney Spears. The audience would know how to interact, how to ingest and read music videos. The shortness of the medium, considering most contemporary songs last between three and four minutes, forces the audience to remember American media consumption as we know it. The audience also understands the costuming, what Washburn describes as “*perhaps worrisomely sexy outfits*” for the characters to wear.<sup>21</sup> With this knowledge the future audience members, as they watch the characters recreate a composite music video in “Chart Hits,” are able to comfortably look at their trauma through a medium they are accustomed to. The lyrics act as a negotiation of the space between trauma and pop culture.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pg, 184.

### Commercials: Selling ‘Normalcy’

As the characters are attempting to establish and perform their “Before moment” by recreating *The Simpsons* episodes as their repertoire, they cling to other aspects of twenty-first century American normalcy — commercials. By Act II, these commercials are the competitive edge that the acting troupe can supply. The future American audience is looking to be completely immersed in an escape from their present reality. The audience wants to forget the threat of nuclear radiation, they want to return to nostalgic ease. With the recreation of commercials comes the reestablishment, and fetishization of, normalized products and, thus, product placement. One such product mentioned in the commercial reenactment is Diet Coke. Just as Duff Soda is regularly sprinkled through *The Simpsons* repertoire as an anchor for the cartographic memory of *The Simpsons* fanbase, so much so that the product was actually made and sold in global retailers, Diet Coke is sprinkled in the repertoire of the acting troupe. This single product becomes the symbol for normal, as it is something comfortable to look at. And, by focusing on the memory of Diet Coke, the characters can indirectly talk about their lack of Diet Coke.

The characters’ fetishization of Diet Coke serves as an example of a reification of an object in the collective memory. In Act II, as Washburn’s characters attempt to establish some modicum of normalcy, the acting troupe works on their commercial breaks. In the commercial, as a woman comes in to see her husband watching tv, she moves offstage to draw a bath. The audience of *Mr. Burns* will read this as a normal moment, one we can disregard, but will also recognize this as a nostalgic time that the characters within the play can only remember. As the actors recreating the commercial discuss their day and what they wish to drink — wine and soda

pop — the troupe sketches the previous economic status of a nation whose banking system no longer exists. These products are inherently linked to a performance of class, middle and upper. (The same class of people with comfortable jobs that would likely be provided the time to watch *The Simpsons* in the evening and catch the references). Here the emphasis is on the Before *economic* moment. As the troupe practices their commercials, Gibson recalls other popular products such as grape fanta.<sup>22</sup> And yet, though products are constantly mentioned, they have lost their status as a proper noun. One might argue that this lack of capitalization for a single product, such as Fanta or Diet Coke, is simply Washburn's attempt to avoid copyright infringement, similarly to how *The Simpsons* writers added an 'e' to *Cape Fear*. However, the consistent disregard for capitalization of products like Sharpies or Quarter Pounders<sup>23</sup> demonstrate a stronger point. In this post-apocalyptic society, these products cannot be remembered in the same way; it is too traumatizing to remember the entirety of what was. But the characters still fall back onto the familiarity of these products because of their cathartic, cartographic connection to the "Before moment."

As Maria breaks the rehearsal of the commercial scene to inquire, "Where *are* the Diet Cokes Does anyone know?" the interaction is launched off of the theatrical stage and onto a social stage.<sup>24</sup> Immediately in response, Gibson reads Diet Coke as a gendered product. His response to Maria's questions center on the probability of finding a Diet Coke for women until Sam interjects that "Men are drinking them too though. Men like diet coke too." This comment contrasts with the social performance that Gibson read. This will be legible to the audience too as Diet Coke has been arbitrarily gendered feminine. Thus, men who like Diet Coke are performing

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<sup>22</sup> Washburn., pg. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pg. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pg. 172.

“feminine” actions that deviate from masculine performance. Jenny vocalizes the polarizing social performance of drinking Diet Coke when she notes that “gay men” are also drinking Diet Coke.<sup>25</sup> The Diet Cokes float in a between space of both social performance and theatrical performance, a space that the acting troupe is conscious of so as to recreate an authentic nostalgia on stage. Diet Coke is an anchor for social norms. Even in a dystopian space, or rather especially in a dystopian space, there is a desire to retain the previous standard performance, including the presentation of sexuality.

### **Pauses - The Negotiation Space**

Comfort can be found in pop lyrics and Diet Coke because their meaning as a cultural anchor has been bolstered to new heights on the stage. This movement from the performativity of social instances to the staging of a collective memory lies within the silences of the first and second acts. The stage directions call for long, awkward, and heavy silences. Theater often uses silence in the aspect of timing however, these silences in Act I and II are not comedic, they are traumatized and heavy. They flow naturally like conversation but do not serve to entertain the audience. The result is a more authentic negotiation of sound, something that feels more akin to the natural pause of tense conversation. The silences are abundant and descriptive. Yet, by Act III, silences do not appear in the script once.

These silences represent the spaces of negotiation in memory. This is the space where Diet Coke and song lyrics gain and leverage their cultural weight. As the characters attempt to cope with trauma and recreate their identity, their pauses become moments of reflection. They

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<sup>25</sup> Washburn., 173.

subsequently force the audience into a space of reflection. The silences in the earlier sections of the play emphasize the anxiety of the characters by creating anxiety in the audience. They create the space for both to recall nostalgia and avoid their present challenges. If the characters are looking to form a multi-faceted understanding of their place in a new American identity, like a quilt, then the pauses are the stitches. They are the vital, nuanced agents that bring together the collective whole. Yet where did these pauses disappear to in the progression of the play?

During rehearsal in Act II, there is a “*hushed almost-pause. And then Chart Hits continues, ending with: The Thomp-Sons!*”<sup>26</sup> This moment is referencing the context of *The Simpsons* episode, that is the fact that the Simpson family must enter Witness Protection. In the episode, the opening credit sequence is comically rewritten to mirror the family’s new life as the Thompsons. In the rehearsal in *Mr. Burns*, however, there is no indication or reference to the humor of the rewrite. The actors do still refer to the main characters as Sideshow Bob and Bart Simpson, proving that the memory of the actual plot has not dissipated. The pause before this moment, however, is the negotiation space. This almost-pause before the comforting song lyrics and the misnaming of the Simpson family is a hint toward the fallible ability of cultures to misremember, the ability and possibility of a culture to remember incorrectly. The characters have not forgotten yet but, if the audience is not effectively recalling the “Cape Feare” episode, then the narrative has already been rewritten for them. As if this performance on stage were a game of telephone, those audience members without a prolific memory of *The Simpsons* repertoire would take the name change at face-value. Once repeated, to following generations or those also unfamiliar with the original television show from the “Before,” this change could

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<sup>26</sup> Washburn., pg. 186.

warp the collective memory. This almost-pause, then, denotes the possibility of misremembering.

Colleen's character is the manifestation of the pause, where the performance of the character and the power of silence follow the same course. In Act I, Colleen sits silently at the edge of the conversation, obviously traumatized from her experience. She effectively haunts the stage; the other characters attempt to not acknowledge her but, for some reason, cannot seem to disregard her completely. At the end of Act I, as Gibson is performing his rendition of *H.M.S Pinafore*, she has "*crept back, and watches from the margins of the woods.*"<sup>27</sup> The performance of the piece has brought her back to the present, where she engages with the world around her. By the opening of Act II, she has taken a more active role in the theater troupe. She is now the director calling the shots, the agent of memory. Where the silences, and Colleen, used to weigh heavily on the group, now they are principal characters in the changing of the narrative.

The last marked silence in the script, the last known pause before the chaos of gunfire, is at the end of Act II. In this moment, a threat has entered the theater where the troupe is rehearsing. The threat is understood to be other survivors attempting to steal lines or material, which is effectively stealing the characters' livelihood in this new economy based on the exchange of "Meaningless Entertainment." It is not inconsequential that this threat is also staged in the audience. The living audience, the empty theater for the characters, is highly aware of their participation in this performance as Colleen turns to address the intruders. The actors break the comfortability of the fourth wall by looking into the audience. The result is that in these quiet moments where the actors are surveying the house of the theater looking for the threat, the

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<sup>27</sup> Washburn., pg. 157.

audience becomes conscious of their bodies and performances. The danger of the situation freezes all characters in place as they negotiate their next move. The audience is involved in this tension, since the characters are still looking at or past them at the threat. This is just one small, though emotionally and dramatically heightened, moment where the audience is able to see the purpose of these silences. These silences act as a space for the negotiation of the next move, of the new decision.

At the end of the second act, Colleen is shot by the intruders. The character who functions as the gatekeeper of memory, the one who represents the formative power of silence, dies. Here, silence is also dying. The death of this silence, of the space of negotiation and remembering, solidifies the misremembering of trauma. The pauses, the places for negotiation, are no longer needed. Within a decade in the script, the dominant collective memory has been established and lifted to the honored space of the theatrical stage to be consumed. The most notable adaptation, with the loss of the gatekeeper, or the loss of the last people with living memory of *The Simpsons*, is the introduction of the character Mr. Burns.

### **The Man, the Myth, the Villain: Mr. Burns**

The habit of a traumatic event to replay itself in these disconnected fragments presents itself most notably in the appearance of Mr. Burns.<sup>28</sup> In the original *Simpsons* episode the villain was Sideshow Bob. However, Mr. Burns' character recalls the character of a nuclear power-plant owner in *The Simpsons* to stand in as a symbol of the trauma of nuclear meltdown fears. Mr. Burns denotes a simultaneous need for avoidance of stimulation that may trigger trauma and the

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<sup>28</sup> Malkin., pg 29. Mr. Burns' installation as the cause of the dystopian society trauma aligns with studies of PTSD of war-shocked soldiers. Mainly in reference to the audience's avoidance of their past.

uncanny presence of such stimulation. His character functions as the scapegoat for the trauma of the surviving characters of the play. He, then, occupies a space of fetishization, where the audience within the play would be able to look at him and address their fears of nuclear meltdown indirectly. Both elements of fetishization utilized in the recreation of the “Before,” that is pop music lyrics and Diet Coke, are misremembered onto Mr. Burns. Mr. Burns becomes a combination of all fetishized aspects of the “Before”: a singer of song lyrics, drinker of Diet Coke, and overtly theatrical.

By Act III, the high-brow performativity of Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera has combined with the familiarity of “Toxic” to make an enemy of Mr. Burns who performs the number. And yet, in this moment, “Toxic” retains its sexual connotation from our contemporary perception; the memory of Britney Spears as a sex symbol remains, but her sexual promiscuity is incorrectly attributed to Mr. Burns’ character. In the final act, while Mr. Burns has bound and gagged the Simpson family, he directly addresses Lisa Simpson, the eight-year-old daughter, informing her that he “bring[s] her love, love triumphant, love captivating love, intoxicating, delectable, love just so gosh-darn yummy, here, have a taste.”<sup>29</sup> Here he is about to slip his finger into Lisa’s mouth, under her gag. While this movement is stopped by Bart Simpson, this performance is likely to make the audience uncomfortable as they recall that Lisa is a child. As the scene continues, Mr. Burns begins singing Spears’ “Toxic” as he kills Homer and Marge Simpson. After both parents are dead, that is both forms of protection are gone, Mr. Burns then “*slowly slips his thumb into Lisa’s mouth*” to the tune of “Toxic.”<sup>30</sup> Mr. Burns has been transformed into a pedophile throughout time, he has been effectively misremembered. The cultural, sexual

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<sup>29</sup> Washburn., pg. 213.

<sup>30</sup> Washburn., 214.

weight of Britney Spears' song is placed on his character as the enemy and manifests in the physical; he becomes a conglomeration of evils.

This works because Mr. Burns is overtly theatrical in the last act. He sings his murder plan. He has just been painted as a pedophilic murderer who is attacking the (now) heroic Simpson family and he pauses to “*refresh himself with a swig of diet coke...*”<sup>31</sup> Not only is Mr. Burns performing theatrically as the villain, he is also, in this moment that he drinks Diet Coke, being read as sexually deviant through this drink. Thus, Mr. Burns is demonized for both his theatrical, physical attack on the Simpsons and his dramatic attack on the social stage.

More than the ridiculousness of drinking a Diet Coke in the midst of a murder, the performance has become a mimicry of a high Greek tragedy. Bart is transformed into a hero aiming to save his family. A chorus sings of woes. In the Auburn University production in the spring of 2018, the masks utilized by the chorus were ghostly, rough recreations of *The Simpsons* characters including Edna Krabappel and, perhaps most hauntingly, Krusty the Clown.<sup>32</sup> The masked chorus staring into the audience effectively passed judgement on the contemporary audience as they watch this recreated performance. Bart's transformation into a heroic figure parallels the transformation of Mr. Burns into the villain. Bart is no longer the pesky kid who skateboards down the sidewalk and wreaks havoc, he is now the epic hero without parents, attempting to save a damsel in distress. Bart's role of outsmarting Sideshow Bob in the original “Cape Feare” episode of the television show has been magnified to the scale of Odysseus fooling Polyphemus by pauses in time. *The Simpsons*, like Homer's work for his contemporaries, has been grotesquely elevated to “high art.”

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>32</sup> *Mr. Burns, a post-electric play*, script by Anne Washburn, score by Michael Friedman, lyrics by Anne Washburn. Directed by Chase Bringardner, Telfair Peet Theatre, April 17, 2018.

Because of their necessity to cope, the characters within Washburn's play have rewritten their narrative. A nearly century-long game of pop culture telephone has played itself out in the search for comfort. The pauses of trauma in the first two acts of *Mr. Burns* has solidified a Mandela effect, that is the collective misremembering of an event by a group of people, for the remaining members of America.<sup>33</sup> This collective rewriting of history is bizarre and comical for the contemporary audience as the cultural anchors of *The Simpsons*, Diet Coke, and Britney Spears have become fetishized. This misremembering is a negotiation of cultural trauma that has changed the image of an American identity. The pauses utilized by Washburn, and the popular culture interjected into them for comfort, are necessary for the characters' understandings of their world. They create a narrative of America for both the surviving characters and the audience. The pauses build a distance by which the contemporary audience can criticize what we hold important, what future generations will misread in an attempt to understand us. What is important now is what is important to the futuristic characters of *Mr. Burns*: Meaningless Entertainment. The historical facts are not what is important. What is comfortable is what matters, what deflects trauma keeps us sane, what fits our memory and understanding of our world emerges triumphant. And thus, we remain trapped within incomplete histories that we aim to (half)confront and falsely narrate in our popular culture.

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<sup>33</sup> J. P. Moss. *The Mandela Effect*. Lulu.com, 2018.