

# ***SOUTH PARK'S* AMBIGUOUS SATIRIC EXPRESSION**

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*This Master Thesis is carried out as a part of the education at the University of Agder and is therefore approved as a part of this education. However, this does not imply that the University answers for the methods that are used or the conclusions that are drawn.*

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## Introduction and Background

During the red carpet event of the 72nd Academy Awards in 2000, the media, the people watching at home and the Hollywood establishment witnessed something that they had not seen before. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the creators of *South Park*, wore quite unusual attire. Parker and Stone had in fact decided to wear dresses for the occasion. The choice of the particular dresses was not random either; Parker and Stone were wearing dresses identical to those previously worn by Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lopez respectively. Gwyneth Paltrow had worn her dress to the Academy Awards the previous year, when she won the award for best actress. Jennifer Lopez wore hers at the Grammys. All those paying attention to the annual television spectacle were used to seeing some strange fashion choices every now and then, but this was quite unusual.

In the aftermath of the Academy Awards one question remained about this strange choice of attire, why did they do it? Was it to shock, to have fun or was it a form of protest? The answer is all of the above. On the Conan O'Brien show, Parker and Stone admitted to spending a lot of time thinking about it,<sup>1</sup> and they have on numerous occasions said that they are opposed to the Academy Awards. This may seem like a rather vague and undefined argument, but they do have their reasons. The reason for their dislike of the Academy Awards is intertwined with their distaste for celebrities and the media's coverage of them. Parker and Stone believe that during such events, it is the spectacle that gets the most amount of attention, while the making of good movies and those behind them, tend to take a back seat to the media circus surrounding the red carpet. It is worth noting that the reason for Parker and Stones' appearance at the Oscars was due to their nomination for best song, "Blame Canada".

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<sup>1</sup> Scriptorium.com *Conan O'Brien: Matt and Trey Interview*

They did however not expect to win, and said they would be content as long as they did not lose to Phil Collins<sup>2</sup> (which they did).

This negative view of the Academy Awards and the celebrity-obsessed media coverage surrounding it is what fueled their plan and created a legendary red carpet event, which landed them on the Top 10 worst red carpet dresses of all time.<sup>3</sup> During their planning stage they considered a chicken suit or dressing as pirates, but since they felt there was such an emphasis on what the “stars” were wearing on the red carpet, they chose to wear dresses. Though they claimed to be heavily intoxicated on alcohol during, they have later admitted to taking LSD prior to the event.<sup>4</sup>

This spirit of protest and iconoclasm is a large part of Parker and Stone’s successful Comedy Central animated series *South Park*. Ever since the first episode, the creators have been on a crusade to tear down the established dogmas of society. Nothing is holy and beyond ridicule and scrutiny, whether it is anti-smoking campaigns, child abuse, or especially celebrities. By wearing dresses on the red carpet they showed how society focuses on events that should be considered banal yet are estimated to be of great importance. “It feels like a costume ball you know, cause it makes- So much stuff about like, who's wearing what?”<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is a large amount of emphasis on celebrities and their lives, as people are fascinated by them and seem to lose focus on more important matters. By proudly parading around in dresses during the entirety of the show, Parker and Stone created a self-contained, miniature parody of the event. What they did was very much what satire strives to do, to encourage a squint-eyed look at the world in order to exaggerate the truth.<sup>6</sup> Parker and Stone made people look and react, and whether they knew it or not, the audience was shown the follies of the event. This view can be summed up by a quote from the *South Park* episode

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<sup>2</sup> Scriptorium.com *Conan O'Brien: Matt and Trey interview*

<sup>3</sup> Red-carpet-dress.com *The 10 Most Shocking Red Carpet Dresses*

<sup>4</sup> Defgamer.gawker.com *Matt Stone and Trey Parker's Magic Red Carpet Ride*

<sup>5</sup> Scriptorium.com *Conan O'Brien: Matt and Trey Interview*

<sup>6</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.69

*Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants*. In this episode, which will be discussed in greater detail later, there is an argument between the *South Park* children protagonists and some children from Afghanistan about the cultural values of their respective countries.

**Kyle:** You really think your civilization is better than ours? You people play games by killing animals and oppress women!

**Afghan Kyle:** It's better than a civilization that spends its time watching millionaire's walk down the red carpet at Amy's!

**Stan:** He's got us there dude!<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to show that *South Park*, despite its shady reputation as a show with lowbrow humor and gratuitous language and violence, is a highly topical and satirical show. I will show how *South Park* works as a modern satire which adopts a minimalistic animation esthetic to portray carnivalesque imagery. This contributes significantly to *South Park's* estranged microcosm of the United States. It should also become evident that the satire and irony of *South Park* is highly ambiguous. By presenting how this pertains to *South Park*, I will argue that there is a lot more going on under the surface than certain critics will admit.<sup>8</sup> This will be demonstrated through a discussion of some of the elements that make up the series as a whole, as well as in-depth analyses of a few selected episodes. These episodes have been chosen because they are what can be called "big-ticket" episodes, dealing directly with important events in American history taking place concurrently with the airing of the respective episodes.

*South Park* is an animated show that deals with the unusual lives of four boys named Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick and Eric Cartman, in the fictional town of South Park, Colorado. *South Park* is much like Springfield in *The Simpsons*; it is an

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<sup>7</sup> Season 5 Episode 9

<sup>8</sup> Cbc.ca/arts *Catholic Group Rails Against New South Park*. Many interest groups have protested the content of *South Park*, such as The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights

everyplace and yet, it is no place. Confusing as this might sound, it means that it has the appearance of being a real place due to its hybrid mixture of small town life, but it is not a real place. South Park is a microcosm of the United States.

Even though the first *South Park* short was created in 1992, it is the short from 1995 that is credited for putting *South Park* on the map. The short was originally made to show a television executive what the show was like; he however, decided to send it to his friends. This short spread on the Internet like a virus and became one of the first viral videos of the Internet.<sup>9</sup> The short had crude animation and even cruder language and would later serve as a pilot episode for *South Park*. As a result, it was picked up by the cable network Comedy Central.

Toni Woods states in her book *Blame Canada*, that *South Park* was the Internet's first love child,<sup>10</sup> and there is no denying that there is a certain amount of truth to this. The Internet was still in its relatively early stages in 1995, when it was becoming common for people to have Internet connections in their homes. During this time, *South Park* emerged and became extremely popular, as there were hundreds of fan sites up and running within months of the first episodes airing. In a way, *South Park* was born via the Internet, and as a result, the show has kept a lot of its Internet sensibilities. However, even though *South Park* originally circulated on the Internet, it had a rebellious nature to it.

The animation style of *South Park* also lends itself to the Internet particularly well. The show looks much like unrefined flash animations, which were and are commonplace on the web. Since the animation is unpolished the show can be appreciated despite low quality resolution. Anyone with an Internet connection in 1995 can remember how slow the download rate was, compared to today's standard. This minimalistic aesthetic animation lent itself well to the Internet. The Internet also allowed Comedy Central to enlist the existing fans

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<sup>9</sup> Ressler, J. *Gross and Grosser* <http://www.time.com>

<sup>10</sup> Johnson-Woods, T. *Blame Canada* p.37



of *South Park*, as it had a colossal cult following even before the first episode aired. Creating a show with a preexisting fan base was a huge advantage, and made the initial transition from the Internet to television much easier.

At the time of writing this thesis, *South Park* is in its 14<sup>th</sup> season. Apart from a larger budget and staff, not much has changed. The show still looks unpolished and the jokes are still dirty and, for the most part, come at the expense of others. Like all other cultural phenomena, *South Park* has spawned all forms of paraphernalia, from T-shirts to video games. There is no denying that *South Park* is a well-established cultural phenomenon, and although it might have lost some of its initial punch, the show is still going strong.

## Chapter 1: The Inner Workings of *South Park*

In order to fully grasp the complexities of *South Park*, one must first understand its basic nature. In the following sections I will discuss how the show mediates its message. *South Park* is not the first show to do what it does as far as social satire and commentary is concerned. It is not even necessarily the most shocking show to do so. *Drawn Together*, an animated show with a three-season run on Comedy Central, used a far more stylized animation bordering on Disney aesthetics and depicted scenes that would make even the most hardcore *South Park* fan blush. However, in spite of *South Park's* topicality it has a timeless and universal quality, due to a blend of several contributing factors that will now be discussed in greater detail.

### The Animation

When watching an episode of *South Park*, one cannot escape noticing the animation style of the show. When compared to other hit cartoon shows it looks cheap and simplistic, the truth is that advanced computer animation is used to create this effect. In the following sections, I will show that there is intent behind the minimalistic animation style of *South Park*. I will also discuss how this style of animation helps the show's satiric and humorous qualities.

The opening credits first create this image of subpar visual quality, and it appears to be done on purpose. *South Park* features a playful opening song introducing the major characters and establishes the show as a curious and carefree place. This could not be further from the truth. Throughout the entire sequence the low grade animation is quite apparent; the characters are stiff and constantly look toward the viewer, breaking the fourth wall, and reminding the viewer that this is not real. It is worth noting that the opening credits have undergone changes and have even been substituted entirely. The original introduction sequence was more in the way of a parody of children's shows in general.

In later seasons, the creators decided to animate the opening segment in such a way that it puts emphasis on just how bad the animation used to be. The audience is shown fast-forwarded clips of hands putting together the characters, and is shown how they were originally animated. If the original opening was a parody of children's shows, the new opening is a parody of itself. The lyrics of the theme are the same, but the music is changed into a heavy metal track, giving the opening credits a more aggressive and darker feel. There are explosions in the background and there are texts proclaiming that the show is new and improved due to high tech computer animation. However, all these elements indicate that the show parodies itself, as the image of a brand new look is a contradiction. The show basically looks the same, with the exception of some new shading effects and 3D sequences to create dramatic effect. This opening is supposed to be a ruse, as it clearly invites the viewer to believe that the aesthetic has changed, when the truth is, that the creators are merely playing on TV shows that also change their opening sequence in order to appear fresh.

The persistent and deliberate use of low-level animation works to the show's benefit. Put in simple terms, one might say that *South Park* works with the idea that less is more. Even shows like *The Simpsons* have stylized animation closer to realism than *South Park*, in spite of yellow skin and four fingers on each hand. *South Park's* is a minimalistic animation style which, according to Toni Johnson-Woods, "rejects the hyperrealism of Disney". In doing so, *South Park* "eschews the institutionalization and conservatism [sic] of the cartoon industry".<sup>11</sup> Albeit she does note that Parker and Stone are not the first to do so. Minimal animation has a history almost as long as animation itself. However, these forms of animation were mostly due to budget restrictions, something that is not relevant for *South Park*; with the exception of the short Internet pilot episode, which was made of construction paper cutouts.

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<sup>11</sup>Johnson-Woods, T. *Blame Canada* p.78

Despite a certain amount of attention being forced at the animation, the animation does not require all of your attention. Low-level animation makes sure that the focus is not entirely on the aesthetic value of the animation, but rather on the main protagonists and the action taking place. The animation works on several levels. By utilizing crude animation in conjunction with satire, the satiric effect is amplified. The minimalistic animation emphasizes that what you are watching is not real, which in turn allows for unbelievable actions to take place. Indecent depictions enhance the comedic effect, as opposed to a realistic approach. Realism would not only limit the satiric possibility, but also would not allow for such actions to be done without impunity. One could argue that this lack of realism is present in all forms of animation. Even in Disney productions, which *South Park* rejects, there is a lack of realism present in anthropomorphic characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. On the other hand, if one looks at cinematic releases such as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Snow White* (1937) the human characters (not counting the dwarves) resemble real people to a higher extent than anything *South Park* has to offer. In Disney animated features, main human characters are made to look real, while comic relief characters and sidekicks are either anthropomorphized or exaggerated. Though, to be fair to the Disney animators, these unrealistic-looking characters have been painstakingly detailed.

While *South Park* might appear mundane when compared to advanced Disney animation, it does not make it any less valuable. The animation of Disney is created to capture the attention of the audience and entertain them with its high production value. The target audience of Disney is after all, for the most part, children. As such, advanced animation sequences are required. *South Park*, on the other hand, is definitely not intended for children; therefore advanced animation is mostly used to depict violence.

The exact origin for *South Park*'s minimalistic animation style is in part due to the creators' inability to draw properly, but there is also intent behind it. "Parker and Stone

originally attempted to make their show look as primitive as possible, thereby enhancing the possibility for satirical manipulation.”<sup>12</sup> This point is undoubtedly the most significant with regards to the animation. As Scott McCloud argues in *Understanding Comics*, “cartooning (...) simplifies the image, which in turn amplifies the meaning”<sup>13</sup> The characters of the show are quite often simplified stereotypes or token characters. This is the case with the only black child in *South Park*, whose name is actually Token. By simplifying the characters, their traits become clearer. Stan is the dreamer, Kyle is the philosopher and Cartman is the obese, grotesque, self-centered and power-hungry oppressor. While many would classify Kenny as simply the poor boy (which is true), he is also the sexual deviant. All of these types create a clear picture of the conflicts that take place in *South Park*. By having such clear divisions, it is easy to separate the sides and in turn interpret meaning, as one always knows what the character in question stands for. This visual stereotyping also allows for the introduction of characters to go smoothly without lengthy introduction. If a character looks like a redneck, then he embodies all the qualities associated with rednecks.

Due to the style of the show, it is also possible to mix animation styles and cross genres, and in some cases media. This playful stylistic crossover is used quite often. In the episode *Good Times with Weapons*,<sup>14</sup> a large part of the episode changes its style to look like Japanese anime while still being *South Park*. A fitting example of how simplistic animation makes gross and impossible actions believable, as well the possibility to cross over into other styles is found in the episode *Red Hot Catholic Love*.<sup>15</sup> In this episode, the characters discover that it is possible to insert food into the rectum and defecate through the mouth. This premise spawned a shocking scene where Martha Stuart is shown “eating” a whole turkey. More

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<sup>12</sup> Weinstock, A. *Taking South Park Seriously* p.27

<sup>13</sup> Weinstock, A. *Taking South Park Seriously* p.27

<sup>14</sup> Season 8 Episode 1

<sup>15</sup> Season 6 Episode 8

importantly, the idea of defecating through the mouth is a literal representation as explained by Father Maxi:

**Father Maxi:** ...they've lost touch with any idea of any kind of religion and when they have no mythology to try and live their life by they just start spewing a bunch of crap out their mouths.

During this episode the citizens of South Park have become disillusioned with the Catholic Church due to priests molesting children. As a result, they all decide to become atheists and brush aside all forms of mythology. In this instance, Father Maxi represents the opinions of Parker and Stone, who have both discussed their irritation with the socially atheistic and religious.

In the same episode there is a good example of stylistic crossover as well. Father Maxi is charged with retrieving the “Holy Document of Vatican Law”. Instead of showing this in a normal fashion, the sequence is animated exactly like the computer game *Pitfall* (1982). By having a scene from a computer game being played out instead of the normal animation, the story is still told, but with the absolute minimum of pixels. This scene works as a parody of itself, as this retrieval quest was supposed to be very dangerous, but instead looks just ridiculous.



Fig 1: Father Maxi retrieving the Holy Document of Vatican Law/*Pitfall*

Oddly enough, this episode defends religion by using the gross depiction of atheists defecating through the mouth, which literally means “talking shit”. This would not hold the same effect if the animation style was close to realism. In that case, it would lose much of its intended meaning and simply be seen as disgusting imagery. It still is rather disgusting for most people, but there is no denying the intent behind it.

It should by now be obvious that the minimalistic animation style of *South Park* is deliberate and effective. The reduction of characters to paper cutouts minimizes their aesthetic value to that of stereotypes, giving the audience visual cues of what to expect. Perhaps most importantly, the audience is infrequently drawn into a suspension of disbelief, as one is constantly reminded that what one is watching is not real. This allows for unbelievable and unrealistic actions to take place with a high degree of satiric intent. In addition to this, the animation and the format of the show allow for the blending of styles and the transition between them is eased allowing for satiric play and parody.

### Satire and the Carnavalesque Nature of *South Park*

It is apparent that no discussion can be done on *South Park* without discussing the aspects of satire, and that of the carnivalesque. There is an ever-present element of satire in each *South Park* episode, combined with carnivalesque behavior that makes us laugh. The following discussion will uncover what these satiric elements are and how they work on the viewer. However, before such a discussion can take place, it necessary to raise a point about the creators of *South Park*. In an interview, they divulged that they had no prior notion of what satire was “The first time I think I ever heard the word satire was somebody saying, 'Oh, you guys do satire' and I was like, 'what's that?' Since, we've discovered what it is.”<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that the show is not satirical. But it does mean that much like the creators

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<sup>16</sup> Treyparker.info Interview with Trey parker and Matt Stone

themselves, their satire does not play by “the rules”. This point returns later in my discussion, as it will become apparent that a critical analysis of the show as strict satire, such as would be made by Dustin Griffin or even Mikhail Bakhtin, does not always fit with the premise of the show. However, this is not entirely the fault of the creators and their lack of knowledge of satiric conventions. It is apparent that theorists have a hard time coming to a consensus of what satire constitutes. This is not necessarily a flaw, but rather a nod in the direction of a broader notion of satire.

Much of what has been called satire has been believed to be a highly moral and rhetorical art. By employing wit and ridicule, satire attempts to uncover the faults of people and society in general. It uses real world targets and utilizes a clear reference of moral standards or purposes.<sup>17</sup> This consensus is however considered outdated and inadequate as the complexity and ambiguity of satire has been pointed out.<sup>18</sup> Satire does not stick to one form; it is not a genre but rather a mode. By means of parody, satire can take on any literary form at any time, subverting it to fit its needs.<sup>19</sup> This is especially true for *South Park*, which constantly switches between genres and styles. One scene can be a *Phantom of the Opera*-like scene with Mr. Hanky, and the next is him in a *Fantasia*-inspired destruction sequence playing the role of Mickey Mouse.<sup>20</sup>

Dustin Griffin advocates the view that satire does not allow itself to be pinned down by one simple definition. He refers to theories from the 1960’s that stated that the satirist “sees the world as a battlefield between a definite, clearly understood good, which he represents, and an equally clear cut evil. No ambiguities, no doubts about himself, no sense of mystery troubles him”<sup>21</sup> According to Griffin, it is this black and white view of satire that is the problem. If the moral standards and principles of the world are so easy and clear-cut, why

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<sup>17</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.2

<sup>18</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.3

<sup>19</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.3

<sup>20</sup> *Chef’s Chocolate Salty Balls* Season 2 Episode 9

<sup>21</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.35 Reference to *Cankered Muse* pp. 21-22



should one bother with satire? There is no point in reading satire only to learn something you already know. The reasons why people watch or read satire are far more complex than moral guidance. The world is not black and white. With satire, there always seems to exist a certain level of ambiguity and space for interpretation. In other words, there is a lot going on under the surface, and that is what draws the reader or viewer to partake in it. Griffin proposes that the rhetoric of satire can be seen in a new light. He treats satire as containing a rhetoric of inquiry, a rhetoric of provocation, a rhetoric of display and a rhetoric of play.<sup>22</sup>

The rhetoric of inquiry deals with how the satirist writes in order to explore and clarify a topic through satiric discourse. This discourse lends itself particularly well to open-ended inquiry, as opposed to a steady progress towards conclusion.<sup>23</sup>

Opposite to inquiry is provocation. While inquiry attempts to arrive at one precise truth by means of exploration, satiric provocation takes a more negative approach; in this case, the satirist critiques false understanding. Provocation and inquiry both raise questions, but expect different outcomes. The goal of provocation is to expose or demolish a foolish certainty.<sup>24</sup> Inquiry and provocation border on philosophical and ethical writing by exploring moral problems, however, satire also works as a form of rhetorical performance or contest in the form of display and play.<sup>25</sup>

The rhetoric of display is much like a public performance. Much of the intention behind it is to gain the interest and admiration of the audience by employing wit.<sup>26</sup> If one first garners the attention of someone on such basis, it is easier to convince them that your opinions are the right ones. Rhetoric of play is also part of this performance; it deals with how

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<sup>22</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.39

<sup>23</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.41

<sup>24</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.52

<sup>25</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.71

<sup>26</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.71

the satirist is able to play on other genres and texts by various means, such as alluding to text outside itself, and other intruding genres and voices.<sup>27</sup>

So far, *South Park* has no difficulties fitting into the molds of satiric rhetoric. Not only does the show dig into topical subjects in order to find something with validity to it, it also provokes the audience by lashing out at what the creators feel to be unjust. The show also employs play by using inter/extratextuality, allusions and mixing of different genre styles in accordance with jokes in order to get the audience on their side.

In keeping with the true nature of satire, ambiguity is also present, as well as some form of irony. However, according to Griffin, there is an inherent danger in the use of too much irony. If the irony is unstable and has a “free for all” mentality, the satirist falls into a mindless cynicism where everything is subject to satire, “the satire that attacks everybody touches nobody”.<sup>28</sup>

The problem with this in relation to *South Park* is that it does attack everybody. If one looks at every episode as a unified whole, one sees that nothing is beyond ridicule as there is no subject that Trey Parker and Matt Stone are not willing to touch. Though each individual episode tends to touch upon only a few topics, in total nothing is beyond ridicule. If this is the case, does that mean that *South Park* is worthless satire? On the contrary, this is where the spirit of the carnivalesque, as explained by Mikhail Bakhtin, comes into the picture.

As with satire, the creators of *South Park* did and most likely do not have any notion of the carnivalesque as put forth by Bakhtin. However, this does not negate the fact that there are large amounts of carnivalesque elements present in *South Park*, though not all of them are as easy to transfer to a visual medium. *South Park* is a self-contained carnival. Just like the carnivals of the Middle Ages were restricted to small islands of time during the year, *South Park* is restricted to a small island of time during Comedy Central’s broadcast week. Of

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<sup>27</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p. 84

<sup>28</sup> Griffin, D. *Satire: A Critical reintroduction* p.70

course, one can always buy the DVD and relive it. As I have mentioned before, the town of *South Park* is depicted as a place where absolutely anything can and will happen. There are no restrictions on the depiction of violence and excessive behavior, to watch *South Park* is to watch a carnival unravel before your eyes as there is what approaches a complete freedom from restraint.

However, there is far more to *South Park* than the mere festive and out of control behavior. An important element of the carnivalesque is the reversal of hierarchical levels,<sup>29</sup> which is especially important for *South Park*. One does not have to watch many episodes before it becomes obvious that whoever is in an authority position, he or she is most likely a bumbling idiot. The adults are unable to handle any situation rationally, and therefore it befalls to the children to act the part as responsible members of society. The only adult character whom the children turn to in need, and who knows what to do, is Chef. Unfortunately, he is a victim to his overactive libido.

In line with the reversal of hierarchical roles, the lower and upper body strata also tend to change places. In colloquial terms this is referred to as potty humor or fart jokes. Carnival laughter has a much broader appeal than that of its higher counterpart: the cool and collected mind. The upper stratum of man is above such base delights like “fart jokes”. It is the intelligent and the reasonable and stands as the antithesis of the lower body. In *South Park* almost no episodes are done without some form of scatological reference. In the episode *How to Eat With Your Butt*,<sup>30</sup> this reversal is made literal as Kenny has his class picture taken while upside down in his parka, having his rear end appear where his face should be.

This is where most of the satire and humor in *South Park* sneaks in. By putting the children in an elevated position looking down on society, they are able to see the faults of said society. The children assume a commanding position, preaching to the masses about what

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<sup>29</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World* p.81

<sup>30</sup> *South Park* season 5 episode 10

they have discovered and proposing solutions on how people can better themselves. What this means is that the show almost always has a normative ethos. There will always be some character who advocates common sense and understanding. If this is the case however, then my previous statement about *South Park* attacking every subject is inaccurate since their elevated position would put themselves above criticism. I will show in the upcoming discussion that this is not the case; it should become apparent that *South Park* sometimes circumvents this problem.

I stated earlier that *South Park's* persistent iconoclasm is part of the carnivalesque, or as stated by Bakhtin:

“For the medieval parodist everything without exception was comic. Laughter was as universal as seriousness; it was directed at the whole world, at history, at all society, at ideology. It was the world’s second truth extended to everything and from which nothing was taken away. It was, as it were, the festive aspect of the world in all its elements, the second revelation of the world in play and laughter”<sup>31</sup>

There is however, as with satiric theory, a crux in the argument about *South Park's* carnivalesque behavior. While satire avoids attacking everyone, the carnivalesque all inclusive laughter, is not to be considered purely satirical. *South Park* is indeed meant to be taken as satire. Still, Bakhtin states that the carnivalesque does not laugh at, but with the target. The carnivalesque regenerates and celebrates itself, it is not purely negative: <sup>32</sup>

“Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people... it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnivals participants (...) this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives”<sup>33</sup>

Bakhtin does not regard the carnivalesque as pure satire but rather upholds its ambivalent nature. In his view, the character of Cartman can be considered a positive character. His excessive girth is one of his most distinguishable features. He puts a large emphasis on food

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<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and his world* p.84

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World* pp 21, 62, 306-307

<sup>33</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World* pp 11-12

and the evacuation of it. He is constantly eating, putting his own pleasure before others' (with very few exceptions). Cartman is not intended to be a celebration of human nature; on the contrary, he represents the ugly side of man, willing to do anything in order to further his own gain. Cartman is a satirical character, however, in keeping with the ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque, fans find themselves cheering him on, as he is in fact one of the most popular characters despite his cruel and egotistical nature.<sup>34</sup> Still, he is not a positive manifestation, and we are also encouraged to laugh at him.

Despite *South Park's* depiction of grotesque realism as something negative, it does sometimes include itself in the laughter. In such cases, the normative ethos is discarded and one is left dumbstruck as the assertions built up during the episode are shown to be faulty, and no proper moral guidance is presented at the end.

On certain occasions, the creators use highly ambivalent depictions making it clear that they are part of the problem they criticize. One example is the episode *All About the Mormons?*,<sup>35</sup> where the entire episode is used to ridicule the Mormon faith, only to have the Mormons retaliate in the last 30 seconds. Making the ones who laughed seems like the ones who are wrong, by having their ignorance and bigotry condemned.

**Gary the Mormon speaking to Stan:** "All I ever did was try to be your friend, Stan, but you're so high and mighty you couldn't look past my religion and just be my friend back. You've got a lot of growing up to do buddy. Suck my balls!"

In this case, laughter is ambivalent and all-inclusive. The intended target of ridicule emerges victorious as society, represented by Stan, is shown to be at fault. However, clear-cut instances such as this are rare. When *South Park* points its finger and laughs, it usually does not include itself. Although one might argue that Gary represents the voice of reason, the

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<sup>34</sup> Bored-bored.com *Top 10 South Park characters*

The-top.tens.com *Best South Park characters*

<sup>35</sup> Season 7 Episode 12

ending is still confusing because the representation of the Mormon faith as far-fetched is never resolved. Instead, Gary admits to it being a ridiculous faith with a positive lifestyle.

In the episode *Cartman Joins NAMBLA*,<sup>36</sup> the town is visited by The North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) who advocates for the legalization of sexual relations between adolescent boys and grown men.<sup>37</sup> As usual, the episode ends with a speech about the lessons made during the episode; however, this speech is given to the president of NAMBLA so that he might plead his case.

**NAMBLA President:** Our forefathers came to this country because they believed in an idea, an idea called freedom. They wanted to live in a place where a group couldn't be prosecuted for their beliefs where a person can live the way he chooses to live. You see us as perverted because we are different than you, people are afraid of us because they don't understand. And sometimes it's easier to persecute than to understand.

**Kyle:** Dude! You have sex with children.

**NAMBLA President:** We are human, most of us didn't even choose to be attracted to young boys, we were born this way. We can't help the way we are and if you all can't understand that, well, then I guess you just have to put us away.

**Kyle:** Dude! You have sex with children!

**Stan:** Yeah, you know we believe in equality for everybody and tolerance and all that gay stuff. But dude, fuck you!

Throughout the speech, music and visual cues are utilized so that one could actually feel sympathy for the NAMBLA point of view. The argument is put forth in the traditional *South Park* manner, making it sound and look legitimate. However, Kyle and Stan's comments

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<sup>36</sup>*South Park* Season 4 Episode 6

<sup>37</sup> [Nambla.org](http://Nambla.org) *Who Are We*

clarify that even the most ethically convincing arguments do not need to be palatable. By doing so, the children leave themselves open for attack, even their own viewpoints need not be the correct ones as they are not free from scrutiny.

In conclusion, it is obvious that *South Park* is a highly satirical show. It uses satiric techniques, such as satiric play and especially the carnivalesque, to create a tilted microcosm of the United States in order to show not only the fallibility of social constructs, but also the opinions and people who surround it. By inquiring into social norms and creating provocative images from these norms, the show manages to make the audience laugh a cathartic laughter at the behalf of the satiric target as well as themselves. Though *South Park* appears to attack everyone, each episode primarily focuses on one target at a time. We are shown that as members of society we are all part of the problem, but we can laugh at it and overcome it. If we manage to laugh at our faults it is easier to fix them since we do not see them as threatening obstacles. In the world of *South Park* the lower body rules and serves as a cathartic release as the citizens of South Park do and say what we are afraid to.

## Chapter 2: What's So Funny?

**Cartman:** Stan, don't you know the first law of physics? Anything that's fun costs at least eight dollars.<sup>38</sup>

What is it about *South Park* that has such a broad appeal? Some would say that the show has long overstayed its welcome, and even the creators are overjoyed that they have lasted as long as they have, a fact they celebrated in the 100<sup>th</sup> episode *I'm a Little Bit Country*<sup>39</sup> when they break the fourth wall in a song about the Iraq war by proclaiming they don't care about it because they made it to 100 episodes. Pinpointing exactly why *South Park* has such a great appeal is a difficult task, because there are almost as many reasons as people who watch it. All of the elements discussed up until this point, come into play; such as the show's timeless visual aesthetic, the humor is universally filthy (though not everyone will feel that way), there is a lot of satire, and it is almost always topical. In some cases only a few hours may pass between something happening in real life, and it being depicted in *South Park*, as is the case with the episode *About Last Night...*, that deals with the election of Barack Obama as president. The episode was completed on the morning of its broadcast day.

However, there is still more to explain the appeal. The community of *South Park* is, as already mentioned, without a doubt a microcosm of American society. Much like Springfield in *The Simpsons*, the community of *South Park* is a representation of a town which could be anywhere, yet it is nowhere. This allows all the satiric events to take place in small mountain community. It is perfectly plausible that Al Gore should choose this particular town to speak at the local elementary school,<sup>40</sup> or that what happens in South Park should be the most important story on the national evening news. The events of the entire country, and sometimes the world, are seen through a small community, allowing the social satire to surface in an

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<sup>38</sup> *Trapped In the closet* Season 9 episode 12

<sup>39</sup> Season 7 Episode 4

<sup>40</sup> *ManBearPig* Season 10 Episode 6



obvious way. By having such a mundane town, reality is tilted into the abnormal by the visit of famous people and aliens. Through defamiliarization the perception of the familiar is enhanced and satire is established. My argument is however that since *South Park* is a microcosm; all manners of attitudes and opinions can be expressed and discussed. Thus, the town of South Park is not a small American town which is defamiliarized by the visit of celebrities, but rather a representation of the United States as a whole. This is why when the inhabitants of South Park or the unlucky visitors are ridiculed; the ridicule becomes in fact a comment on society as a whole. The community of South Park does not lack characters and the roster is still growing. Hence, more stereotypes can be played upon and broader topics are open for discussion.

### *South Park in Action*

*Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Play Set*<sup>41</sup> shows how the various elements of satire, carnivalesque and inter/extratextuality come into play. Its premise is a perfect example of how *South Park* works as a focal point for societal critique. In this episode, the famous heiress Paris Hilton comes to the town in order to open a local store in her chain of clothing stores named “Stupid Spoiled Whore”. Despite South Park’s small size, the town is surprisingly international and all manner of stores are represented there. South Park as a microcosm allows for Paris Hilton’s presence to be believable and makes it easier to mock her in the context of the show.

Anyone familiar with Paris Hilton’s celebrity status might view her appearance in the show as a random act of celebrity bashing. Her appearance is however, quite deliberate as Paris had slowly begun to gain fame outside of New York before the airing of this episode,

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<sup>41</sup> Season 8 Episode 12

mostly due to her role in the reality show *The Simple Life*, and a leaked sex tape made by her boyfriend.

This episode, like many others, deals with society's fascination with celebrities, which Trey Parker and Matt Stone have admitted to dislike highly (which is ironic since they are celebrities themselves). Not only are people like Paris Hilton being attacked in this episode, but also the people who follow her. When the character Wendy Testaburger asks who Paris Hilton is and what she does, she gets the answer that Paris is rich and spoiled. Which begs the question why she is admired? Paris rose to celebrity status due to her constant appearance in the spot light and on the cover of tabloids. To put it bluntly she had done absolutely nothing worthwhile. Paris is of course depicted as less than flattering in the episode. She is rude and crude, constantly drunk and often coughs up what appears to be semen. Her sexuality is in focus, depicted as disgusting and gross, and Paris is trying to market it to young impressionable girls, misguiding them into thinking that her behavior is a desirable norm.

In line with the carnivalesque, all inhibitions are abandoned and the world is put upside down. It is the girls who are in control of their sexuality. All the mothers of the girls say that the girls are taking control and merely being themselves. The image of a whore is put up as the highest ideal. The girls chase the boys and are depicted as almost raping the boys at a party (a boy spends time in a closet with a girl and comes out rubbing his buttocks crying "it hurts"). The party represents a modern carnival where all inhibitions are abandoned. Female sexuality and genitals are in focus, as the lower body becomes dominant. Personal gratification takes precedence over established social norms when the boys are subjugated and treated as mere objects. This is a fitting example of societal role reversal and its implications as opposed to the traditional where men are the dominant ones.

In between the critique of celebrity worship, *South Park* also employs a great deal of intertextuality by means of popular culture references and sight gags. Since animation is a

visual medium, *South Park* can work on several levels with its references, one can say that most of these require knowledge about what is being referred to, but this is not always true. At one point a picture is shown of one of Paris's dogs that by committing seppuku. Even if one does not recognize this when one sees the picture of a dog thrusting a sword into its own belly, it can still be considered funny at a carnivalesque level.

Another popular culture reference takes place during a segment constructed as a toy commercial for the Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Play Set. This fictional toy allows the owner to create a fake home sex video similar to that which Paris Hilton is famous for. On the box there is a small image of what appears to be Bratz ® dolls (a series of dolls for girls). This suggests that the real life dolls are marketed in a similar fashion to the fake product of the show. However, if one is not familiar with this reference, it has little significance in the episode.

*Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Play Set* critiques how celebrities are disconnected from real people, a topic touched upon in several episodes. The general consensus of *South Park* is that Hollywood celebrities in particular are disconnected from the mainstream population. However, celebrities feel that they are able to critique society because they are in an elevated and highly visible position. It is their role to talk down to people and tell them what to do. Therefore it comes as no surprise when Paris wishes to buy one of the boys and dress him like a pet. She is so disconnected from real life that she believes she can buy everything she wants.

The conclusion of the episode is shocking, provoking and slightly ambiguous. Wendy finds herself disillusioned with the exploitation of young girls' sexuality, or she is unable to act like a whore. Wendy becomes an outcast because she gets good grades and dresses like what she is, a little girl. In the end, she turns to Mr. Slave, her teacher Mr. Garrison's assistant and boyfriend. Mr. Slave is one of the many stereotypes of homosexuals represented in media. More specifically, Mr. Slave is a reversal of the manly biker character. He wears leather attire

and looks like one, but he speaks with a lisp typically associated with homosexuals in comedy. He is a self-proclaimed whore, and therefore he challenges Paris Hilton to a “whore-off”. The competition ends with him inserting Paris Hilton completely into his rectum, trapping her inside.

The result of Mr. Slave’s actions causes the crowd watching to applaud and cheer him on, making him the new whore to admire. This brings the episode to its typical cliché conclusion where someone, usually the boys, stands in front of everyone telling the crowd what they have learned. Here, Mr. Slave tells them to stop cheering, because his actions are not praiseworthy. He is “a whore” and does not deserve their praise, and neither does Paris Hilton. She is not a healthy role model for their children, and they should all find other people who their children can look up to.

This scene is somewhat ambiguous. One must bear in mind that Mr. Slave is an unconventional character; he does not hide the fact that he should not be looked up to or be taken seriously. When some viewers recognizes this, Mr. Slave’s advice becomes nullified, despite the fact that his advice is correct. Mr. Slave is not in a position to give advice in these matters, especially when he has just proclaimed that he is no role model. By conventional standards, Mr. Slave is a sexually immoral person telling people not to be the same, despite how much he enjoys it.

However, this is after all satire and therefore it is quite fitting for this conclusion to be ambiguous. Mr. Slave has firsthand knowledge of what he is referring to and he is able to see the faults of society which he is part of. He is not ashamed of his actions, but unlike the rest of society, he recognizes that they are disgusting actions. He is in fact the perfect person to tell society the correct moral lesson.

Paris Hilton is allegedly said to have reacted positively to this episode. She said that despite not seeing the episode she felt that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Parker and

Stone's reaction to this was: "That shows just how fucked up she is. That's terrible that she's flattered by it."<sup>42</sup>

It should by now be clear that *South Park* is more than a simple cartoon. It is a diverse and complex show which deals with a variety of topics in an unconventional, satirical and funny manner. The following segments are dedicated to more in-depth analysis of a select few of *South Park* episodes. Unlike *Stupid Spoiled Whore*, they deal directly with relevant historical events as opposed to cultural phenomena. As such they require relatively more historization in order to put things into perspective.

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<sup>42</sup> Otto, J. *Interview Trey parker and Matt Stone* <http://movies.ign.com>

## Chapter 3: *South Park* and the War on Terror

*Osama Bin Laden has Farty Pants*<sup>43</sup> was the first *South Park* episode to air after the September 11 attacks, airing on November the 7<sup>th</sup> 2001, and deals directly with the state of affairs in the US following the 9/11 attacks. It does not deal with the attacks themselves, though this topic is brought up in a later season.<sup>44</sup>

The period of time which pertains to this episode was a trying period for a lot of people in the US and around the world. Not only had the 9/11 attacks shocked the nation, but many people also lived in fear of anthrax, as well as other terrorist attacks. In addition to this, the US had engaged in a global war on terrorism and was actively searching for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. Though the US had gained massive support from other countries after 9/11, it began to dwindle after the invasion of Afghanistan. The White House's hardball line of "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"<sup>45</sup> was not received well by the world community. Also, the war that was supposed to capture Osama Bin Laden turned into a long termed occupation with heavy civilian casualties.

The repercussions of the 9/11 attacks were widespread as a lot of people across the country lived in fear. All across the US and England frightened people bought gas masks to protect themselves.<sup>46</sup> People all over the US feared a second terrorist attack, fearing that one could occur anywhere at any time. Studies have shown that there was a significant amount of anxiety among the populace, and many people had difficulties sleeping.<sup>47</sup>

There are several prominent topics which are presented in satirical form in this episode, all of them deriving from this period. But more importantly, this episode is a hybrid combination of both satirical elements and popular propaganda. The episode plays out for the

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<sup>43</sup> Season 5 Episode 9

<sup>44</sup> *Mystery of the urinal deuce* season 10 episode 9

<sup>45</sup> Bush, G. *Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People* <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov>

<sup>46</sup> Sample, I. *Gas Mask Buying is an "Over-reaction"* <http://www.newscientist.com>

<sup>47</sup> Schmidt, B. *Anxiety After 9/11* <http://www.psychologytoday.com>

most part like any other *South Park* episode, however, due to the show's innate nature, a thematic shift is made possible. A change such as this has been done in other episodes such as *Good Times with Weapons* and *Make Love not Warcraft*,<sup>48</sup> though in these instances the stylistic shift served more as comic relief and a diversion than a social comment, as will be discussed later.

In retrospect, it might be considered obvious that many of people overreacted to the immediate danger of a terrorist attack. But the anthrax attacks which occurred after 9/11 kept the fear of a terrorist attack alive. At that time it was still not clear who was behind anthrax filled envelopes, but it was assumed that terrorists were responsible. Several news outlets reported on this, as well as the possibility that Iraq was behind it.<sup>49</sup> It was even said on *The Late Show* by John McCain that Iraq might be responsible.<sup>50</sup> In 2008 the FBI declared Bruce Edward Ivins the culprit, although some sources still disagree.<sup>51</sup> This is one of backdrops which *South Park* uses in order to create a satirical representation of a nation in fear.

The opening shot of the episode serves as a perfect example of how the show comments on current affairs. The scene is a reference to other episodes where the main characters stand at the bus stop waiting for the school bus. However, the scene is defamiliarized by having the children wear gas masks. In this way, an everyday and mundane activity is turned into social critique. It strikes the viewer as strange and unsettling that a group of children wear gas masks while waiting for the bus. Furthermore, one is left to wonder why they are wearing them. It is true that *South Park* attracts a lot of different people --such as celebrities-- but why do they fear terrorists when they live in such a remote location? Most likely, the fears of the adults have been passed on to the children, who like the adults do not understand the situation. They are merely reacting, letting fear get the better of

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<sup>48</sup> Season 8 Episode 1 and Season 10 Episode 8 respectively

<sup>49</sup> Rose, D. *Iraq "Behind US Anthrax outbreaks"* <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>50</sup> Thinkprogress.org *One Month after 9/11, McCain Said Anthrax "May Have Come From Iraq"...*

<sup>51</sup> Isikoff, M. *The Case Still Isn't Closed* <http://www.newsweek.com>

them. This is made quite clear in the opening conversation when Butters comes to the bus stop:

**Butters:** Hey, how's it going fellows?

**Stan:** Butters, what the hell are you doing?

**Butters:** Well I'm just standing around being a kid, why? How come you are wearing those ugly spaceman masks?

**Kyle:** These are gas masks, Butters.

**Stan:** Yeah, if you don't have a gas mask you are going to get smallpox or anthrax.

Even the sharpening of airport security affects the children. Before the children can go on the school bus, their backpacks are inspected for dangerous items. Cartman is denied taking a round-tipped paper scissor with him, since it is considered a dangerous item. This ridiculous scenario is so close to the truth that the humor in it is almost not funny.

**Barbrady:** Aha, what the hell are you doing with this?

**Cartman:** Those are my Hooty Owl round-tipped scissors.

**Barbrady:** These are a weapon!

**Cartman:** Ah, common. How am I going to kill people with those?

**Barbrady:** I'll think of a way, now move along.

There have been countless cases of people who have had to throw away items such as nail clippers and nail files, which at the time of the episodes airing were illegal to carry on planes.<sup>52</sup> This everyday situation is presented as ordinary in the lives of children, by showing this happening to children in this way, one is supposed to see the futility in its existence.

When depicting the children in school, we are served examples of how the visual medium of satire as represented in *South Park* allows for messages to come across almost

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<sup>52</sup> Tsa.gov *Lighters, Nail Clippers and Lithium Batteries*



subliminally. It is normal for episodes to have people, things or actions going in the background. It is quite normal not to notice these events as they serve no purpose for the story. In this case, what one might notice is that the coat pegs all have gas masks hanging from them. This is pointed out by Tweek, who hangs his up. Above these racks is a colorful sign which says “Gas masks”. Again, something mundane and ordinary is defamiliarized; however, as a result it is made familiar and normal. One gets the impression that this is how things work now, and living like this is part of the daily life in South Park.

Up until the airing of this episode the news and TV in general were dominated by stories and images pertaining to either 9/11 or the war on terror. This persistent and monotonous saturation of negative images fueled the fear a lot of people were feeling. The news broadcast changed dramatically following the 9/11 attacks. No longer were domestic issues such as crime and drug stories dominant, foreign policy and terrorism dominated the news stories as each topic had a huge increase in coverage.<sup>53</sup> Stories about the war and the threat of terrorism were understandably the most dominant feature of the prime time news. People both wanted and needed to know what was going on. However, at a certain point the saturation got out of hand as all other topics did not seem to matter. In retrospect, it is clear that the threat of new terrorist attacks were overblown. Certain studies have shown that the exaggerated broadcasting of the September 11 attacks have led to a high number of post-traumatic stress as a result of excessive television exposure.<sup>54</sup>

The episode comments upon these circumstances by having Stan’s mother, Sherrill, lie in a near catatonic state from too much TV exposure. She has spent the last 8 weeks watching the news telling her that “bad things are likely to happen”. She becomes totally incapable of anything but watching the news.

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<sup>53</sup> Journalism.org *How 9-11 Changed the Evening News*

<sup>54</sup> Vasterman, P. *The Role of the Media and Media Hypes in the Aftermath of Disaster*  
<http://www.epirev.oxfordjournals.org>

The war in Afghanistan began exactly one month before the airing of this episode. Initially, the military operation consisted of Special Operation Forces engaging Al-Qaida. Bombing runs and missile attacks had been part of the military operation since day one. On the day of the invasion the bombing of Kabul was shown exclusively on CNN.<sup>55</sup> However, the use of such weapons (laser designated bombs, guided surface/air to surface strikes) quickly became one of the dominant features of the war. The excessive bombing was also the root of massive protests from the world community. Between October 7, 2001 and January 1, 2002, 1000-1300 civilians were directly killed by US led bombing runs.<sup>56</sup> In addition to increasing number of civilian casualties, Osama Bin Laden had not yet been captured or killed. Though Osama Bin Laden was not the main goal of the war on terror, he was undoubtedly a high priority target.<sup>57</sup> Osama Bin Laden was still at large, presumably somewhere in Afghanistan when *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* aired.

The Afghanistan represented in *South Park* is quite peculiar. The Afghan town depicted in the episode is unspecified. Much like the town of South Park, it appears to be a small mountain town; in fact, it is a distorted mirror image of South Park. The main characters from Afghanistan are four children who look and act like Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman.



Image 2: The Afghani children on the left and the South Park children right.

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<sup>55</sup> McCaleb, I. *Defense Officials: Air Operations to Last "Several days"* <http://www.archives.cnn.com>

<sup>56</sup> Conetta, C. *Operation Enduring Freedom: Why a Higher Rate of Civilian Bombing Casualties* <http://www.comw.org>

<sup>57</sup> Bush, G. *President Bush Releases National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* <http://www.georgebush-whitehouse.archives.gov>

The bombing of Afghanistan is dominantly portrayed in this episode. The children find themselves unable to keep occupied, as both the basketball court and the movie theater is bombed right in front of them. Their reaction is however rather telling. None of the children reacts with anger or disgust; they are merely annoyed at what is taking place. To them, the constant bombing and devastation of their town has become mundane and an everyday occurrence, it is no more than an annoyance. They do not even react when one of their houses is destroyed, killing their family. This way of life is upset by the arrival of aid money from South Park, as each of the children receives one dollar from the children in South Park. This was part of former President Bush's request that each child contribute at least one dollar to aid the children of Afghanistan. By doing so, the goal was to "sow the seed for peace in our shared future"<sup>58</sup>

As the children hold their dollar, they look at the death and destruction around them. This image is tragic, horrifying and funny all at the same time. How can one dollar undo so much destruction? The bombing has become so normal that they don't react to them. They are too tough and resilient to break, so the viewer recognizes that the only purpose of the dollar is to make the sender feel better.

The Afghan children, like the children in South Park, play their part in accordance with carnivalesque role inversion; it is the children of South Park who are in charge. The adults of South Park and the rest of the US have no autonomy and simply react to everything with fear. Stan's mother, Sherrill, is only brought out of her comatose state when a brown package arrives from Afghanistan. This of course triggers even more panic as everything from the fire department to the FBI is brought on the scene. The package contains a goat from the boys in Afghanistan sent in gratitude for the money the boys from South Park sent. This leads to the boys traveling to Afghanistan and meeting their Afghan counterparts. It is somewhat

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<sup>58</sup> Awesomelibrary.org *President Bush Asks For Help From Children*

interesting to note that from the point of the goat's introduction, all actions central to the plot revolve around it. This is made possible since the US military stationed in Afghanistan believes that the goat is Stevie Nicks. The inclusion of this running joke in the episode is rather banal, as Matt Stone states that he did it simply because he hates Stevie Nicks.<sup>59</sup>

However, this is also part of the portrayal of the American army which the episode sets up. In the world of *South Park*, all US soldiers are willing to die in order to save one celebrity. As a part of an inside joke the leader of the troops is General Plymkin from *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*. For a *South Park* connoisseur, this indicates that the leadership present is the worst the Army has to offer. General Plymkin tells his men to “grab your guns and your Bibles” when they go after Bin Laden. This naturally invokes the image of a holy war, or a crusade. This is obviously an allusion to George Bush's statements before the war, where he referred to the war on terror as a crusade.<sup>60</sup>

While in Afghanistan, the boys are captured by Al Qaida and brought to Osama Bin Laden. It is at this point that the fore mentioned shift in style appears, and the show turns into a propaganda movie. As satire operates as a mode rather than a pure genre, it is possible for satiric rhetoric to take on any shape or form, and occur at any time. Obviously the satire can change its attack pattern as a result. Up until this point, the episode has displayed pure satiric tendencies. Practically every image has been a display of how the American people have reacted and over-reacted to the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror, the target of satire shifts now to Osama Bin Laden.

The picture drawn by the media and government of Osama Bin Laden has been that of a madman who was single-handedly responsible for the 9/11 attacks.<sup>61</sup> *South Park's* depiction is also that of a madman, but not the mad genius that he was put up to be. Instead, Bin Laden is portrayed as an eccentric, babbling incoherent parody of his media image.

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<sup>59</sup> DVD Commentary for the episode

<sup>60</sup> Bush, G. *Remarks by the President Upon Arrival* <http://www.georgebush-whitehouse.archives.gov>

<sup>61</sup> [Fbi.org](http://www.fbi.org) *Congressional Testimony of Dale L. Watson*

By relying on satiric play, *South Park* is allowed to take on the mode of a wartime propaganda movie, wherein Cartman plays the role of Bugs Bunny and Osama Bin Laden takes on the role of a Nazi (*Herr Meets Hare*). These movies in turn borrowed heavily from the traditional movies where Bugs Bunny would outsmart Elmer Fud. Anyone who has ever seen one of these will notice the striking similarities in everything from sound effects to gags. In a sense, by paying homage to the originals *Osama Bin Laden has Farty Pants* turns into a classical satiric propaganda movie. Instead of having Bin Laden as a person to be feared, he is a person to laugh at, and almost pity. Or as Cartman puts it: "He's not crazy, he's an idiot".

Trey Parker and Matt Stone show knowledge of old World War II cartoons in their portrayal of Bin Laden. During the Second World War, several cartoons released by both Disney and Warner Brothers depicted the Nazis and Hitler in particular, as a rambling madman, albeit in a humorous way. Today these cartoons are not shown on television, as the company who own the rights feel that they are offensive in their portrayal of both the Germans and Japanese. Nonetheless, *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* borrows heavily from Bugs Bunny episodes such as *Herr Meets Hare*, *Russian Rhapsody* and *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips*. Bin Laden's last line in the episode, "terrorists is the craziest peoplez" is a direct intertextual reference to Hitler in *Russian Rhapsody* where he says "Nazis is the craziest peoplez".

Unlike the rest of the episode, which is purely satirical, this segment is satirical propaganda. It does not attack the American value system or way of life in any way; instead it focuses entirely on Osama Bin Laden. The fact that it is Cartman that is able to defeat Bin Laden enhances this. Cartman is the embodiment of Western, and especially American society taken to the extreme. In other words, he represents everything that is wrong with our way of life. Still, he is the one to defeat Osama Bin Laden single-handedly. Cartman shows that Western society can overcome the threat of terrorism by employing wit and ridicule.

Despite the fact that these propaganda elements are inserted into the episode, it does not forgo its satiric intent entirely at this point. While Cartman is dealing with Osama Bin Laden, the South Park boys and the Afghan boys exchange opinions. As already mentioned, the Afghan boys are the mirror opposite to the South Park boys; as such, their views on both the war and the United States differ greatly from that of the American public, represented by the South Park boys. After both Kenny and Afghan Kenny are killed, Stan and Kyle are surprised that Americans are blamed and not held in such high regards:

**Afghan Stan:** You murdering American (shouts, and fires his rifle)

**Stan:** Hey, shut up kid! America didn't start this war.

**Afghan Stan:** America did start this war! They started this years ago, when they put military bases on Muslim holy lands.

**Kyle:** All right, I've had just about enough of this. They told us in school and on TV that most people in Afghanistan and America like America.

**Afghan Kyle:** And you believe it. It is just not the Taliban that hates America, over a third of the world hates America.

**Stan:** But why? Why does a third of the world hate us?

**Afghan Kyle:** Because you don't realize that a third of the world hates you.

As the representation of many Americans at that time, Stan and Kyle are oblivious to the notion that the war might be far more complex than what they were led to believe. The invasion of Afghanistan was an attempt to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden, destroy the terrorists training camps and usurp the Taliban regime. However, it was assumed that the removal of the Taliban regime would be a welcomed change, the fact that many in Afghanistan viewed the US as just another oppressive regime was unfathomable. The idea that the United States started the war is to Stan and Kyle preposterous. The truth however, is

that large groups of people in the Middle East disliked the US due to their interventionist policies in the Middle East.

In conclusion, *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* is an example of how contemporary satire works within the show. Though the episode is a clear attack on society and satiric elements are present, the satire and irony are highly unstable. One is constantly being bombarded with images which criticize both the war in Afghanistan and Americans. However, juxtaposed with these images, the episode becomes a somewhat apologetic propaganda film. It is obvious that although there is a heavy emphasis on satire, the episode also supports those that it mocks. This is stated by Stan at the end of the episode:

*Stan picks up a small American flag and plants it in the ground*

**Kyle:** Dude! I almost thought those Afghani kids talked you into not liking America.

**Stan:** No Dude. America may have some problems, but it's our home, our team. And if you don't root for your team then you should get the hell out of the stadium.

It seems that Trey Parker and Matt Stone are not entirely attacking American society. They realize that despite their country's engagement in a war they feel is unjust, cruel and with a lot of collateral damage, they still support the American way of life. However, it comes as no surprise that in true *South Park* fashion this message is distorted when they all salute the flag and say "Go Broncos", making America a literal team they support out of obligation and belonging, despite existing disagreements and resentments. This episode is a satiric representation of the American perception of the war on terror, and how an entire nation was crippled with fear. The American people are portrayed as scared and paranoid. Still this episode uses its platform to not only convey this representation; it is also a contemporary

propaganda film with references to WW2 propaganda. It serves as an outright defense of the American way of life, where Cartman, who embodies all the evils of Western society, is the one to defeat Osama Bin Laden.



## Chapter 4: Voting and the Rights of Cows

Like *Osama Bin Laden has Farty Pants, Douche and Turd*<sup>62</sup> utilized a current and topical event in American history to create a satiric statement. However, unlike *Osama Bin Laden has Farty Pants, Douche and Turd* is a statement of Parker and Stones' political affiliation. The episode deals mainly with the 2004 presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry. There is also some general critique of the animal rights organization People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) intertwined into the story in order to broaden the satirical aspects. The episode could stand on its own without the inclusion of PETA and there is no clear reason for their inclusion. However, Parker and Stone often include several topics into single episodes because they simply want to address them. This episode was released shortly before the presidential election, and comments on the democratic system in the United States. The creators of *South Park* portray the election as a false choice with no apparent suitable candidate for presidency. In *South Park* language, the choice is between a douche and a turd sandwich.

Never before had the rest of the world paid such great attention to an election in the United States. Observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) were present for the first time, despite having been invited on previous occasions.<sup>63</sup> This is no doubt due to the controversies of the 2000 election. Though there were controversies in the 2004 election, they were minor in comparison, and, as this episode aired before the election it does not comment on the outcome. The focus of this episode is the process of casting a vote and the choices one has in general. Utilizing this specific and topical election allowed Parker and Stone to state their message of disregard for the American political system.

Although the election is the historical backdrop in the episode, it is never openly stated. Instead, an allegory is employed, though this allegory is not very subtle. Due to the

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<sup>62</sup> Season 8 Episode 8

<sup>63</sup> Wilkins, J. *The White House Interactive* <http://www.georgebush-whitehouse.archives.gov>

interference of PETA, a topic I will return to later, South Park elementary school is forced to change their school mascot (it was a cow). As a joke, Kyle and Cartman have all the children write up a giant douche and a turd sandwich as candidates, forcing there to be an election between the two. These two choices are *South Park's* versions of George W. Bush and John Kerry. Which one is which is entirely irrelevant, as they are both portrayed in a Bakhtinian lower body stratum manner. By presenting both candidates as personified scatological references, equal disgust and loathing is shown for both of them. As elaborated upon by Bakhtin, the lower body is the antithesis to the upper body. The upper body, inhabited by the mind, is calm, reasonable, and intelligent, while the lower body is rude and offensive. However, Bakhtin would view this portrayal as a disintegrated image. According to Bakhtin, “when the grotesque is used to illustrate an abstract idea, its image is inevitably distorted”<sup>64</sup>. Bakhtin views lower body references as celebratory, as he states that “the very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image bears a deeply positive character”<sup>65</sup>. As discussed in the first chapter, this is not always the case for *South Park*. This is one of many instances where the lower body stratum is negative and meant to be treated as satire.

In the eyes of the people behind *South Park*, the choice between the two political candidates is nonexistent. It is impossible to choose who to vote for, because they are both equally appalling candidates. This is the way Stan views it, as he is the only undecided voter in the town. This makes Stan important as he is the key to understanding the episode. As the episode for the most part follows Stan, we experience the election through his eyes. Stan does not see why he should bother with the election, not only he does not support either candidate, but he feels that his vote will not have any substantial impact. His status as undecided (or uninterested) makes him the target of both mascot camps, attempting everything from subtle to not-so-subtle persuasion and even bribery to gain his vote.

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<sup>64</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His World* p.62

<sup>65</sup> Bakhtin, M. *Rabelais and His world* p.62

The reason for this focus on Stan as the uninterested voter is that in the 2004 election almost 64% of eligible voters used their votes, making it the highest voting participation since 1992.<sup>66</sup> This meant that due to the high voter participation, the so-called fence sitters were important and could possibly tip the favor both ways. In *South Park*, Stan is viewed by many of the other characters as no more than an asset who can secure victory.

Stan's attitude of indifference towards the candidates is based on the experiences of real people during the election. Just because there is a major election does not mean that it garners the interest of everybody in the country. That being said, the election attracted a lot of attention from the international community which viewed the choice as a simple one; most Europeans supported John Kerry for president, based on his stance on Iraq<sup>67</sup>. However, for the actual voters this was not necessarily a simple choice, because like Stan, voters were unable to see any difference between the candidates, a fact even pointed out by the partisan Fox News network.<sup>68</sup>

The opinion that there exist only superficial differences between the Douche and the Turd sandwich is constantly brought up and seems to lie at the heart of the critique in this episode as the grown-ups take part in the debate discussing which candidate is better. There is even a debate (making the allegory even thinner) between the two candidates. This is an obvious parody of a televised political debate, where the two candidates avoid answering questions with simple answers and instead attack each other's character. The satirical approach adopted by *South Park* allows for this transition between the narrative story and the play of the debate. By breaking the mold and relying on an extratextual reference, the event gains emphasis, and the viewer knows that what follows bears importance on the topic of the episode. In this case, a debate is used to further perpetuate the stereotype of politicians during

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<sup>66</sup> Holder, K. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004* <http://www.census.gov>

<sup>67</sup>Bohlen, C. *Kerry Would Win Europe's Iraq Support, Officials, Scholars Say* <http://www.bloomberg.com>

<sup>68</sup> Balko, R. *Kerry, Bush Offer Voters Little Choice* <http://www.foxnews.com>

debates. A rather fitting example of the satire in this scene is when the turd sandwich is asked a somewhat complex question:

**Host:** How should South Park elementary enforce its laws of conduct for young athletes during sporting events?

**Turd Sandwich:** (long pause)... You know, my opponent wouldn't even know the answer to that question. If you ask him the same question he would not answer it. He would stand around and just babble on and on about nothing until finally he was saved by the buzzer.

(The buzzer goes off)

Despite the indifference among many people regarding the presidential election, it is remembered by many because of the involvement of the entertainment industry, musicians in particular. Eminem wrote songs in protest of the Bush administration<sup>69</sup>, in one specific song he openly criticizes the Bush administration and urges young voters to use their votes and make a difference. Most notorious is perhaps rapper P. Diddy, who in collaboration with Mary J. Blige, Mariah Carey and 50 Cent founded the political service group Citizen Change.<sup>70</sup> Their aim was to encourage young, and especially young black people to use their vote. Though this at first might sound like a reasonable and noble endeavor, their methods could not escape ridicule or scrutiny by shows like *The Daily Show*. Citizen Change garnered attention from the media with their slogan "Vote or Die" repeated vigorously and printed on everything from flyers to t-shirts. Not only is the slogan an obvious hyperbole, but it is also a fitting example of a false choice. The implication made by P. Diddy is that one does not have any choice when it comes to voting. Either one uses the right to vote and makes a difference, or you die. This obvious hyperbole is made literal in *South Park*. Since Stan has decided that he does not wish to cast a vote, P. Diddy chases him around town, while rapping, and

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<sup>69</sup> "Mosh" from the album *Encore*

<sup>70</sup>Friedman, R. *Is Diddy's "Vote or Die" Dead or Just Sleeping* <http://www.foxnews.com>

threatening to actually kill him if he does not vote, saying that who he votes for is irrelevant as long as he votes.

The treatment of P. Diddy as an irrational and condescending celebrity is a part of the traditional discontent *South Park* has for celebrities who intrude into the life of normal people. P. Diddy utilizes his celebrity status to preach to kids about how they should behave. This is not necessarily a bad thing as his intentions were somewhat noble. Attempting to make young people more interested in politics and actually taking a stand on political issues is important. However, in line with the critique in this episode, his method is flawed. P. Diddy's message is a false choice, a fitting example of black-and-white thinking.

As previously mentioned, this episode not only deals with the presidential election, but also with PETA and their methods. The combination of these two elements is bewildering, as they seem to have absolutely nothing in common. On closer inspection however, one can find similarities. PETA, like P. Diddy, attempt to impose their societal and ethical values on the rest of society. Both of them feel that they are in an elevated position giving them the right to tell people how to live their lives, and what choices to make. The presence of PETA and their actions also serve as instigators of actions. It is they who are responsible for the election of a new mascot, and it is eventually they who steer Stan in the right path.

The change between the two topics would under normal circumstances be hard, but the nature of *South Park* is what allows for the seamless transition between the two topics to blend together. By relying on the mixing of familiar settings with a minimalistic animation style, making the images on screen more credible. The transition is made by narrative shifts back and forth between the two topics of the episode. Since the animation is minimalistic and the characters are stereotypes this transition is not distracting. In addition to this is the take no prisoners attitude of *South Park*, one might ask why PETA is treated in this episode? A

tempting answer is: Why not? As I stated earlier, Parker and Stone often include subject matters into episodes for no other reason than that they feel it should be addressed.

PETA is an animal rights organization based in Norfolk Virginia that has received a lot of attention from the media. PETA has become notorious for throwing red paint on people wearing fur coats, as well as its commercial campaign where the treatment of animals bred as food is compared to that of the Jews in concentration camps.

However, despite the criticism aimed at PETA, the portrayal of PETA in this episode seems arbitrary when compared to the election. Despite being responsible for the mascot election, they have no further role to play in the episode, other than comic relief. They are not given a proper satiric treatment, and rather they are lampooned. As mentioned, PETA is known for throwing red paint at people wearing fur, and the opening of the episode is them throwing red paint at the school mascot (a man in a cow suit). PETA has also been linked to the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) which is considered a terrorist group<sup>71</sup>. Although no official support has been given to the ALF by PETA, there is evidence that they have financially supported certain members of the ALF.<sup>72</sup> Since the ALF is considered a terrorist organization by the FBI, and PETA has supported certain individuals of this organization, *South Park* deems it right to treat them as the same organization, referring to them as eco-terrorists:

**Stan:** But, Mr. Garrison, if we change our mascot, that means the eco-terrorists win.

**Mr. Garrison:** That's right Stanley, the eco-terrorists win.

Mr. Garrison's statement is a reference to the train of thought a lot of people had after 9/11. People felt that they should go on with their daily lives, so as to not give the terrorists the

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<sup>71</sup>Fbi.org *Congressional Testimony of James F. Jarboe*

<sup>72</sup>Doward, J. *Beauty and the Beast* <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

satisfaction of watching them have their lives disrupted. This line is a rhetorical trope used after 9/11, and although Mr. Garrison is saying it straight, it is meant as satire.

As the events unfold throughout the episode, Stan is exiled from the town due to his refusal to vote. He is tied backwards on horse with a bucket over his head and chased out of town. Apparently in South Park, not voting is one of the gravest crimes one can commit. It is at this point that the episode switches focus to PETA. Stan is “rescued” by PETA, but he is chastised for sitting on the horse. Nevertheless he decides to join the PETA camp. Here, PETA is portrayed as militaristic fanatics who practice bestiality and follow the commands of a goat. The use of a goat as the leader of PETA might be a reference to Satan, though there is nothing diabolical about it. As an extratextual reference, the goat from *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* can be seen in the camp.

While with PETA, Stan learns the “message” of the episode. It is quite common for the least moral person in a satire to speak the most amount of truth at the end. In *Stupid Spoiled Whore* it is Mr. Slave who teaches the people of South Park proper moral values. In this case, it is the target of ridicule that possesses the necessary knowledge to resolve the situation:

**PETA Member:** You don't belong here, Stan. You should return home.

**Stan:** I can't. I was banished for not voting.

**PETA Member:** But why on earth wouldn't you want to vote?

**Stan:** I think voting is great, I just did not care this time because it was between a giant douche and a turd sandwich.

**PETA Member:** But Stan. Don't you know? It's always between a giant douche and a turd sandwich. Nearly every election since the beginning of time has been between some douche and some turd. They are the only people who suck up enough to make it that far in politics.

This statement is typical for *South Park*. It is either a statement of pure genius or a gross oversimplification and utter nonsense. Nonetheless, it is a very funny piece of knowledge that probably went over well with *South Park* fans. Though one could claim that this is not meant to be taken at face value, it is an accurate description of the creators' political values. Both Matt Stone and Trey Parker claim they have never voted.<sup>73</sup> They see no difference between the candidates up for election, as they are themselves considered Libertarians, although only Trey Parker is registered as one.<sup>74</sup> They find themselves in the center of the political scale, a fact pointed out by Stone when he said "I hate conservatives, but I really fucking hate liberals."<sup>75</sup> As it stands, this statement serves more as a funny statement than a societal critique.

After this revealing truth about the political system, our hero Stan realizes that he has to return and cast a vote. After a musical montage, used quite often in *South Park*, Stan finally casts his vote only to have the mascot he voted for loose with 36 votes against 1410, which makes Stan question the value of one vote. As a consolation, he is told that the merits of voting cannot be based on whether your candidate wins or not. However, since P. Diddy killed all the PETA members South Park is able to go back to their old mascot and Stan is told that now his vote did not matter.

One is left with two unanswered questions after this: How important was Stan's vote when one considers the outcome? And how important is a vote when the only viable options are equally appalling? Throughout the episode these questions have been raised. It is not just Stan who views mascots/politicians with contempt. Though a democratic country is built around the process of voting, does that mean one has to utilize it? Obviously, *South Park* attempts to say that one does not have to use your vote. In a democratic election such as the American presidential election there are in reality only two candidates. Any third party

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<sup>73</sup> Davis, J. *Small Town Heroes* <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

<sup>74</sup> Winter, B. *Trey Parker – Libertarian* <http://www.theadvocates.org>

<sup>75</sup> Anderson, B. *We're Not Losing the Culture Wars Anymore* <http://www.city-journal.org>



candidate does not stand a chance of winning since he will never be able to get enough votes to pose any threat. In such an election it is easy to see that there is no need to bother voting when you do not believe in either candidate, or your favorite stands no chance of winning.

**Stan:** I learned that I better get used to pick between a douche and a turd sandwich, because it's usually the choice I'd have.

*Douche and Turd* is another example of *South Park*'s topicality. However, like most episodes and unlike *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants*, this episode also includes a different topic which is not related to the main topic. The inclusion of PETA seems random and it just might be. Its inclusion is mostly likely due to either Stone or Parker's, or both, dissatisfaction with them. *South Park* is used as the platform of their special brand of social critique and as such they are able to use it to express their dissatisfaction with the political system.

## Summing Up: *South Park*'s Ambiguous Satire

At the time of writing, *South Park* has entered its 14<sup>th</sup> season and has aired 200 episodes since 1997 and due to contractual obligation the show will continue airing into at least 2013. The show has had a huge impact on popular cultures as many of its first memes are still alive and thriving.<sup>76</sup> In this time, *South Park* has continuously and ferociously torn down established dogmas of society in its iconoclastic crusade. It seems that no target is taboo for Matt Stone and Trey Parker. They use *South Park* as their personal platform to express any and all grievances they have with society, whether it is politics or celebrities.

As discussed in this thesis, there are several reasons for the show's success. By relying on their tried and true techniques, *South Park* has managed to create a satiric representation of the United States in the form of a microcosm. To achieve their goals they utilize the special properties of their show to the fullest. Due to the fact that the show is produced in a very short time it is constantly open for changes. If an interesting news article or topic is brought to light, it can be integrated into the show as it is constantly evolves before airing. This topicality allows the creators to do such things as air an episode of Obama's presidential election victory on the same day.

This up-to-date microcosm is rendered in a peculiar way when compared to its contemporaries. True to its roots, the cardboard cutouts originally used are preserved through computer animation, giving the show the special properties of an intentionally minimalistic animation aesthetic. This way, outlandish scenarios and grotesque actions can be performed without the impunity that real actors or a realistic representation would have. The animation serves as a reminder that what the viewer is watching is not real, making the transition between mundane and extreme scenarios more believable in the world of the show. Most importantly, it enhances the show's satirical intention.

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<sup>76</sup> "Gingers have no souls" from *Ginger Kids* Season 9 Episode 11 can still be heard.

Satire is woven into the animation in order to mediate its message. Because the images are so simplistic, the satire is enhanced giving the images more direct and sometimes literal meaning, such as the example cited earlier about the ingestion of food through the anus and the evacuation of waste through the mouth. By relying on minimalistic animation, characters and places are also divided into easily recognizable stereotypes making meaning and intention clearer.

In line with the satirical approach, the show also emphasizes the carnivalesque by having freedom from restraint. This freedom allows the show to tackle any and all situations in a highly ambiguous manner through the celebration of the grotesque. The carnivalesque element is also important in the representation of the microcosm that *South Park* represents.

In this society, the children are at the top despite the fact that they are at the bottom. Such an obvious contradiction seems bewildering, but it is quite ingenious. The children of the show explore the world with a childlike demeanor lacking in the rest of society; they see all situations through new eyes without preconceived opinions. As they explore, they find that the grownups do things in ways which appear appalling to the children. However, due to their manner of exploring subjects and the fact that they are intellectually superior to the adults, they are looking down at society declaring what is wrong with it. Because it is quite obvious that almost all of the adults are inadequate in almost every capacity, despite the fact that they are the ones with the power to rule.

In one episode entitled *The Wacky Molestation Adventure* the children find a way to rid themselves of the parents by accusing all of them of sexual molestation. A power vacuum develops and anarchy rules, turning the town into a dystrophic society inspired by movies like *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985) and the novel *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954). The lesson they learn from this is simply that they need their parents to provide for them. This moral lesson aimed at children seems odd when considering that they

are not the intended audience of the show, although it is not strange when one considers the history of the show.

Since Trey Parker and Matt Stone have no formal education on the inner workings of satire, they have adopted a contemporary approach to it. They do not play by the rules because they have no knowledge of what those rules are. As such, their satire is unstable and ambiguous. As I have shown, the endings of the shows are not always straightforward, breaking down the normative ethos into what the creators want it to be. This is not always the case, as they will mostly present socially constructive alternatives to difficult dilemmas based on compassion, reasoning and their special brand of political thought.

In line with the contradicting and ambiguous statements of *South Park*, an episode was released which might contradict the entire premise of the show. Episode 2 of season 14 entitled *The Tale of Scrotie McBoogerballs* might contradict everything being said about *South Park*. The premise of the episode is that the children of South Park elementary are told to read *Catcher in the Rye*, a novel recently removed from the banned books list. All of the children are excited to read a book that contains such grotesque acts and language that the book was banned. They are however disappointed by it, as it does not live up to their expectations. In order to remedy their thirst for grotesque depictions, they set out to write their own book. This book is subsequently published and becomes renowned for being so disgusting that it is impossible to read more than a few lines without throwing up. The book becomes a huge success and considered a literary masterpiece. Everyone who reads the book creates an analysis and conclusions based on their belief or political affiliation. The children protest this, as their authorial intent was to write as disgustingly as possible and not convey any meaning.

The criticism raised by this episode is that literary critics find all forms of meaning in literature and popular culture, even when no meaning was intended. This is not especially

provocative, however, some have pointed out that this might be directed at *South Park* itself. It is possible that this episode is aimed at *South Park* and those that analyze it. In other words, the creators are saying that there is no deeper meaning to *South Park*. However, if this is the case and only some believe so, that would mean that the episode itself does not have any significant meaning, and as such one cannot draw the analysis of *South Park*'s lack of intent. This episode is not only ambiguous, it is a paradox.

In the end, *South Park* stands as an example of how an animated show can turn out when its creators are not bound by restrictions on how a narrative should be presented or what topics are taboo. They continually point out flaws in society, whether it is the obsession with celebrities and celebrities' comments on society, or political movements trying to outlaw homosexual marriage. As long as the show airs, it will find a way to scrutinize and ridicule all aspects of society.

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