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Blasphemous representations:

celebrities and the carnivalesque in South Park.

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witswatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.
February 2013

DECLARATION

I, Robyn van Jaarsveldt (student number: 0707250R), am a student registered for the degree of Master Dissertation in the academic year of 2013.

I hereby declare the following:

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ABSTRACT

‘Blasphemous Representations: Celebrities and the Carnivalesque in *South Park*’ is a Masters dissertation that examines the tripartite of *South Park,* celebrities, and the carnivalesque. This research argues that the animated television series *South Park* uses laughter and humour to unpack the absurdities of celebrities and public figures which operate within a liminal space of excess. The literature review refers to academic literature focusing on *South Park* and briefly discusses the series in relation to cultural studies, popular culture, and television and film theory. This discussion develops into a focus on literature on celebrity culture, the genre of satirical animation, and the relationship between laughter, humour and the comic devices of satire and parody. Key elements become evident and are theoretically adapted for the theoretical framework. The idea of the methodological pleasure of *South Park* is developed, suggesting that there is a sense of pleasure for the audience in decoding the intertextual references and allusions. The selection anthology of celebrities resulted from a process of elimination, ranging from popularity to the type of categorisation of fame of the celebrity or public figure. The analysis focuses on three thematic concerns: contextual identity and play, billingsgate language and ambiguity, and the grotesque and obscene body. In the end, however, the main argument is substantiated through an analysis of the ambiguous nature of carnivalesque laughter used in *South Park*. This suggests that the critical laughter directed at the ‘celebrities’ and public figures (represented in the series), is simultaneously directed at its audience.



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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TOWN AND CREATORS OF SOUTH PARK, AND TO 'BLASPHEMOUS REPRESENTATIONS: CELEBRITIES AND THE CARNIVALESQUE IN SOUTH PARK'.

South Park creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker take pride in the fact that the town and setting for their series, is "the most racist, insensitive, and bigoted place in this country!" (Sally Struthers)[1]. This study examines the televisual animation *South Park* as a cultural satire that attempts to interpret contemporary reality with specific focus on 'celebrity culture'. As a satirical animation with adult content, the series aims to ambiguously interrogate and critique certain experiences and occurrences within society while simultaneously entertaining its audiences. This thesis will examine a selection of *South Park* episodes in relation to the way they represent respective 'celebrities' and public figures in order to understand how laughter has been encouraged in the series. This will be achieved through assessing how the series critiques the liminal space of excess that surrounds each 'celebrity' and public figure in both their professional and personal lives.

Due to a series of factors, *South Park* is not only an animation for adult entertainment but is also incredibly controversial. The show is set in the small town of *South Park* situated in Colorado, the American state where Parker and Stone grew up. The primary focus of the series is on this small and somewhat quaint town and its inhabitants. However, when one refers to the song in the opening sequence of the series the lyrics suggest what type of town it really is, Stan Marsh sings "friendly faces everywhere, humble folks without temptation" and Eric Cartman sings "ample parking day or night, people shouting 'Howdy, neighbour'". These lyrics are not necessarily true to the inhabitants of *South Park* who are incompetent, racist, and sexist. They verbally and physically abuse themselves and the guests of their town, particularity famous guests. The town of *South Park* would appear to be a target for the bizarre, attracting monsters, demons, 'celebrities' and multiple types of religious icons. The series shows the experiences of *South Park* from the perspective of a group of four eight year old boys who, while dealing with issues of growing up, have to comprehend the odd and outrageous happenings in their hometown.

[1] '200' – Season fourteen, Episode five. For the duration of this dissertation this information will be formatted as follows: S14E5

The story behind the creation of *South Park* begins in 1992 when friends, Trey Parker and Matt Stone produced a short, 2D animation[2] for a university project called 'The Spirit of Christmas' which features Jesus fighting a snowman. Three years later Parker and Stone were commissioned by a Fox network executive to produce a short animation as a digital Christmas card to be sent to their friends and family. This animation features Jesus fighting Santa. The video was spread and became viral (Weinstock 2008a). *South Park*, however, was not contracted to become a series by Fox network due to its controversial content. It was Comedy Central who agreed to take on the show and the first episode titled 'Cartman Gets an Anal Probe'[3] was aired on August 13 in 1997 (Fallows, 2008). The four main characters of the series are Eric Cartman, Kyle Broflovski, Stan Marsh, and Kenny McCormick. The boys all attend '*South Park* Elementary School'.

Each of the characters have their own unique characteristics. Eric Cartman considers himself the leader of the friendship group when in reality he is the most hated. He is the series' lead antagonist. He is an overweight bully who is highly influenced by what he sees on television. For example in the episode 'Bebe's Boobs Destroy Society'[4] Cartman plays a game he calls 'Lambs' referencing the film *The Silence of the Lambs*[5]. In the game Cartman pretends to be Buffalo Bill[6] and his doll, who is his victim, is being held hostage in a deep hole. Winokur describes Cartman as "the lovable fascist, greedy, hypocritical, and homophobic anti-semite" (2006: 256) who revolts the people of *South Park* with his appearance and attitudes, while simultaneously drawing sympathy. Kyle Broflovski is Jewish and acts as the voice of reason throughout the series. His best friend Stan Marsh is an average 4th grader and the show's protagonist. Kyle and Stan are the animated vehicles for Stone and Parker to voice their personal opinions (Ressner and Collins,

[2] The debate about the difference between cartoons and animation is historically and socially dependent. This topic is discussed in the literature review.
[3] S1E1
[4] S6E10
[5] The film *The Silence of the Lambs* is an awarding winning thriller that was released in 1991. The film is based the 1988 novel by Thomas Harris by the same name, and the story revolves the characters Hannibal Lecter who is an incredibly intelligent psychotherapist and cannibalistic serial killer.
[6] 'Buffalo Bill' is a serial killer who skins his female victims' corpses.



1998). The friendship is also said to be a reflection of the friendship between Parker and Stone (Ressner and Collins, 1998). The fourth group member Kenny is the poorest of the boys and born to alcoholic, hillbilly parents. Kenny never seems to be able to survive an episode of *South Park* to the point where he is even written out of the sixth season in which he is cremated and accidentally eaten by Cartman. The phrase “Oh my God! They killed Kenny! ...You bastards!" has became a running gag[7] (Kaplan, 2002) due to its constant repetition by Kyle and Stan. While each boy sees the world from similar naïve perspectives, the idea that each of them – based on their individual unique perspectives – echoes different possible interpretations of the content of each episode, is briefly touched on in the analysis chapter.

The aim of this dissertation is to look at how celebrities and public figures are represented in the series in order to gain a greater understanding of how this particular programme engages with the excesses and absurdities that surround celebrities and public figures in their professional and personal lives.

The rationale for this dissertation will assess the need to study *South Park*, the reason *South Park* refers to the excesses of celebrities and public figures and addresses my contribution to literary gaps within the same field of study. Elizabeth EnglandKennedy (2008) believes that the hundred and thirty international award nominations and eighty wins that *The Simpsons* has accumulated over the years, justifies the reason as to why a popular cultural product and its effect on modern culture and society is important to study. If that is the case, then a show such as *South Park* most definitely deserves to be studied. Despite the debates around what texts and social research can be defined within the area of ‘television studies’ (Gray and Lotz, 2012), and while the case study for this analysis is a televisual text, this dissertation is more focused on contributing to the field of media studies[8].

[7] Don Kaplan (2002) discusses the popularity of the running gag saying that “each time he [Kenny] died, his friends would cry out the now familiar catch-phrase, "Oh my god, they killed Kenny!" The joke went on for so long it spurred T-shirts sales, Internet sites and even a Hip-Hop song called "Kenny's Dead" by rapper, Master P”.

[8] The discussion on television studies and its relation to media studies is elaborated in the literature review.

South Park, which caters for adults between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine[9] (Nielsen Media Report, 2003), premiered its fourteenth season in 2010 and was watched by almost four million viewers (PopCrunch 2010) in the United States of America alone[10]. In 2011, the show was nominated for ten Emmy awards and, throughout its run, has won three Emmy awards for outstanding animation programme. The series won the CableACE Award for Best Animated Series in 1997. In 1998 it was nominated for the Annie Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Animated Primetime or Late Night Television Program, and in 1999 the *South Park* film *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* was included in the 2001 edition of Guinness World Records for "Most Swearing in an Animated Film" (Singer, 2000). More recently, in 2011, *South Park* was voted number one in the '25 Greatest Animated TV Series' poll by *Entertainment Weekly*, beating other well-known adult animated series such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *Futurama* (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2011).

South Park is a popular series and consumed globally with a large cultural resonance. Ott (2003) discusses the many online forums that have been created by fans to conduct discussions and spread news about the programme. These forums include social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as websites such as 'Cartmanland', '*South Park* Zone', and '*South Park* X'. While such forums offer a cultural platform for discussions about *South Park*, its online presence does not get to the root of understanding the true appeal of *South Park*'s popularity. Ott (2008) believes its success is due to the many pleasures found in watching *South Park*, particularly the superior pleasure of fandom and the ability to note the intertextual references between episodes. This pleasure fosters a "sense of in-group superiority" (Ott, 2008: 45) which is related to what Matt Groening,

[9] Results shown from the Nielsen Media Research found that *South Park* was voted the top programme for men aged between twelve to thirty- four. The series was also rated the third highest rated programme among adults aged between eighteen and forty -nine. This is a big age gap. One possible reason is that the series is rated for young adults above eighteen years of age.

[10] This number is not a too reflection for it excludes *South Park*'s international viewership and online viewers (who are encouraged by Stone and Parker to illegally download episodes). For more look at Ross, 1998; Buckingham, 2000 and Leonard 2006.

the creator of *The Simpsons*, believes is a way of rewarding constant viewers (2004: 81). Similarly, Halsall (2008) believes that it is the polysemic nature of the series that gives audiences a level of pleasurable power in deconstructing the different meanings. Through an amalgamation of these two approaches to pleasure, a third type will be discussed in this dissertation. This is the methodological pleasure of *South Park*. This is the process whereby the viewer experiences pleasure through the ability to decipher any kinds of intertextual references in the series and further apply the context from which that reference came from[11]. Finally Gournelos (2009) argues that another form of pleasure in *South Park* for the audience is from the controversial content that has developed a track record with censorship authorities. Groening (2004) has said that his goal with *The Simpson*s was to create an animated series that was similar to the life of the average American person, showing it as a humorous paradox that reflects its audiences' context. Essentially, *South Park* offers this as the most important pleasure, a platform where its audiences can laugh at society and themselves.

Satirical adult animations, such as *Beavis and Butthead*, *The Simpsons* and *South Park* use mediums of mass communication such as online media and television to critique social narratives such as politics, religion, gender, and race. Many key themes have developed through research and analysis of these texts such as the representation of 'celebrities' (Young III 2007) and the dismantling of their 'celebrity' status through the humorous techniques of parody and satire. 'Celebrity culture' is an industry based on the economics of fame. The definition of a 'celebrity' extends the privilege of fame to not only the skilled and talented but to individuals whose professional and personal lives are of public interest, with focus on the scandalous, the absurdities, and excess that come to define them.

Knox suggests that there is a lack of research into the area of celebrity culture in relation to *South Park* because it is difficult to categorise the two fields of study theoretically (2006: 78). The cause of this 'difficulty', is due to *South*

[11] The methodological pleasure of *South Park* will be further discussed in the literature review.

Park's ambiguous nature, it is both contributing to popular culture but also satirising popular culture. *South Park* satirically and paradoxically refers to 'celebrities' as a means of critiquing the excesses of the entertainment industry with a similar objective to other satirical programmes. The series and satirical programmes are mediums that highlight the importance of cultural products that provide alternative perspectives compared to those represented in mainstream programming (Knox, 2006). The series highlights that celebrity culture has become an industry focused on appearances, wealth, and success, all of which are represented in the context of excess[12]. The media attention in this context has opened a discursive space where the focus is on other excesses such as the 'celebrities' personal lives, their physical body, actions and decisions. Society consumes this excess on a mass scale, focusing on unnecessary factors. Thus, *South Park* creators Stone and Parker do not specifically aim to ridicule celebrities but, rather, the liminal space of excess that they live in, and encourage.

Likewise, the study of animated cultural products for adults and the relatively new genre of satirical animation needs to be further examined. While the gap in this literature is the result of the public mindset that animation is a genre specifically produced for children, many cultural products, such as *South Park*, are inverting such societal conventions. Furthermore, my research will contribute to past research in the genre of satirical animation with specific attention on the relationship between satirical animation and how it mocks the 'elite' and 'powerful'. This thesis will also focus on the ambiguity of this relationship by assessing the effect of satirical critique. Many authors who have investigated *South Park* observe the series' close relationship to characteristics of the carnivalesque. The amount of academic research (compared to other fields of study) investigating *South Park* and its approach to the carnivalesque and celebrity culture is relatively small. Through investigating the series and its representations of 'celebrities' and public

[12] Through the term 'excess' this study is referring to the discursive space associated with 'celebrities' and public figures, that is alludes to the absurd and unnecessarily extreme context that surrounds them. Specifically to *South Park*, the 'excessive' is a site of laughter, where a 'celebrity's' or public figures characteristics (mostly those considered absurd) are exaggerated, and stretched beyond the limit of believability.

figures, this dissertation will contribute to the conversation on the tripartite relationship between *South Park*, the carnivalesque, and celebrities.

Through my investigation of the liminal space of excess and its relationship with the tripartite of *South Park*, the carnivalesque and 'celebrity culture' certain research questions have surfaced. The 'tripartite' is unique to my research and brings to light my first research question: What are the reoccurring thematic contexts in which 'celebrities' and public figures are represented? Through investigating the thematic similarities in the tripartite, these patterns will better guide my research in understanding and answering my second research question: To what extent is laughter used as a form of critique in *South Park*? In an attempt to answer this question, this thesis will discuss the humourous techniques used to represent 'celebrities' and public figures in *South Park* and assess the degree to which the show is commenting on celebrity culture. The relationship between *South Park* and critique leads us to the third question: How is this critical laughter pleasurable? While the physical reaction of laughter to humourous texts is an undeniable pleasure, I hope to assess other possible pleasures, which contribute to the humour in *South Park*.

The hypothesis for this thesis is that *South Park* encourages many different forms of laughter for many purposes beyond the physical reaction; *South Park*, arguably, attempts to represent the flaws that surrounds 'celebrities' and public figures in the societal context. This research will further develop the academic discussion in relation to animation studies while highlighting the importance of alternative voices through cultural products that provide critical, humourous, and unconventional narratives. This dissertation will contribute to the debates around *South Park's* role in emphasising the necessity for alternative voices in society to avert cultural domination by 'celebrity culture'. Arguably, *South Park* uses laughter and humour to unpack the absurdities of 'celebrities' and public figures. These absurdities operate within the liminal space of excess. The expected outcome of my research is to prove that *South Park* highlights the flaws of 'celebrities' with the intention of providing a form of resistance to 'celebrity culture'.



Locating my work in the context of critique, this dissertation will argue that *South Park* inverts the conventional representations of 'celebrities' and public figures through the vehicle of humour and, thus, laughter. Arguably, the liminal space of excess is presented through exaggerated representations of the 'celebrity's' or public figure's personal and professional absurdities. This liminal space occurs in the name of critical laughter. The series relies on representing 'celebrities' and public figures in a critical context and this investigation will argue that *South Park* uses humour to unpack the absurdities and excesses that surround individual 'celebrities' and celebrity culture. In order to substantiate this argument, the work of Bakhtin (1968) and Mbembe (1992) in relation to the carnivalesque will be referred to. The expected outcome is that the following analysis and overall research will acknowledge the social rankings of the programmes audience, and 'celebrities' and public figures, bringing to light the necessity to lampoon their power to challenge hegemonic practices.

The following chapters will explore literature on cultural studies, popular culture and television, and television studies to explore how these concepts can aid my reading of *South Park*. The literature review will then assess the relationship between *South Park* and key concepts to substantiate my argument, including 'celebrity culture', the genre of satirical animation, and laughter, humour, satire, and parody. Ultimately, an analysis of a selection of 'celebrities' - from a selection of episodes – that have featured in *South Park* will either support or discount my argument and hypothesis.



REVIEWING LITERATURE ON CELEBRITY CULTURE, SATIRICAL ANIMATION AND LAUGHTER, AS WELL AS ASSESSING THE METHODOLOGICAL PLEASURES OF SOUTH PARK.

Cultural studies "centres on the study of the form and practices of culture, their relationships to social groups and the power relations between those groups as they are constructed and mediated by forms of culture" (Lister and Well 2006: 61). *South Park* acts as one of these "cultural forms" that contributes to the construction of such cultural practices. For this reason, cultural studies will be used to frame this dissertation. The following chapter will discuss the academic debates around; cultural studies, popular culture, television studies, celebrity culture, satirical animation, and humour and laughter. Each section will also be discussed in relation to cultural studies and *South Park*.

While cultural studies focuses on the many "practises of culture" (Lister and Well, 2006: 61), one of these 'practises' is the economic advantages of cultural products, leading to the development of the 'cultural industry'. Macdonald (1962) believes that the industrial success of a cultural product is not based on the quality of the product but on its popularity. If this is this the case then *South Park* is an economic entity, with almost four million viewers[13] watching the 2010 premiere of season fourteen (PopCrunch 2010). *South Park*, as a product of popular culture, based on its financial success and popularity in mainstream social circles, is arguably a prime example of what Boyd-Barret (2002) describes as the industrialisation and commercialisation of culture[14].

Boyd-Barret (2002) and Williams (2003) both discuss the social role of the media in cultural studies, with Boyd-Barret (2002) suggesting that mass entertainment was developed as a means of distracting the masses from "political action, to provide a surrogate sense of community, and to manipulate mass consciousness in the interest of the ruling classes" (Boyd-Barret, 2002: 30). The global impact that constructed ideologies have is described by Hall (1997) as a discourse that influences the means by which audiences consume many aspects of life, affecting their actions, beliefs and ideologies.

[13] This number of viewers in the United States of America alone. This was also the televised premier.
[14] This is discussed further in Strinati (1995), and Adorno and Horkheimer (1997).



This discourse is reflected in *South Park*, where these beliefs, actions, and ideologies are represented in the series in order for the audience to relate to the content.

Most importantly, *South Park* and other cultural products of a similar kind demonstrate that popular culture is reflective of "influencing the culture of and playing a huge part in narrating the changing nature of social and cultural experience across the globe" (Webb, 2007: 1). This reflection is evident in the content of *South Park* which is produced by referring to narratives of popular culture and social and cultural experiences. Bennett explains this as a process whereby cultural producers such as Stone and Parker and the series' audience "take the cultural resources provided by the popular culture industries and use the prescribed meanings attached to such resources as templates around which to construct their own forms of meaning and authenticity" (2000: 27).

On the one hand, Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) view this from the Marxist position, suggesting that this is an "exploitation" of societal discourse where consumption supports the capital focused 'cultural industry' (Hall 1980). However, on the other hand, *South Park* both uses and exposes these ideological constructs to aid audiences in appreciating the extent of satire, parody and social critique within the series. As a result, ideological discourse is not only produced and spread from cultural products, but also challenged[15], due to the popularity of intertextual references. Hall (1978) suggests that ideology can also be used to illustrate the means by which cultural texts and practices portray distorted images of reality (Storey, 1997) or perspectives of the world. This ideological form is characteristic of *South Park* as a series disrupts global ideologies on many levels, represented through distorted images, to expose fragmented cultural practices.

[15] Ideological representations are supported in some cultural texts, while in others (such as *South Park*) they are not. Hall (1997) argues for the agency of the audience suggesting that, despite the context in which the ideological construct is represented, people are not merely passive consumers. Due to the polysemic nature of *South Park* these active audiences have the ability to construct their interpretation of the content.



In order to access *South Park* therefore, this study uses a post-Marxist perspective of cultural studies which demonstrates and celebrates the diverse ways in which media technologies are used within different family, social and cultural contexts (Kellner, 1995). As well as the variety of interpreted meanings that individuals can draw from the media that surrounds them (Kellner, 1995). *South Park* encourages a range of interpretations, allowing for multiple meanings and diverse possibilities for its intended audience to consume it in varying ways. By using the idea of laughter as a way of unpacking the excesses of celebrity culture, this research will argue that *South Park* provides multiple platforms for interpreting it as a cultural text. Within the frame of cultural studies, intertextual references of ideological perspectives are promoted and spread through cultural texts. However Inglis (1990) turns to the unpredictable nature of the 'cultural industry', believing that in some cases, the "ideology and the accumulation of profit do not always coincide" (Inglis, 1990: 121). This is because, while the 'cultural industry' attempts to produce cultural products that will be popular for both capital and ideological gain (Kellner, 1995), some products, such as *South Park*, do not necessarily contribute subside to these desires of the 'cultural industry'. Culler (1998) believes that cultural products are successful when they offer alternative views to the mainstream while building from the foundations of ideological intertextual references, and that a text "must say something which one has not already explicitly thought or read but must be related in some positive way to what one has in the past thought or read. Within the context of what is known, it must propose modifications or elaborations" (Culler, 1998: 20). Linda Hutcheon (1989) reminds us that what is cultural is not given to us but made by us. The capital, social, ideological, and unpredictable characteristics of cultural studies will help me unpack and understand how *South Park* ambiguously contributes to cultural production only to simultaneously critique it.

Popular culture, under the theoretical umbrella of cultural studies, and its meaning is historically and academically complex, initiating many debates. Bennett (2000) believes that there is no single or correct way to define what popular culture is or resolve the often contrasting problems that surround it,



but rather, it is a series of different solutions which have different implications and effects. This is because popular culture is understood as a collective dream world where the culture produced by the people is culture for the people (Storey, 1997). Arguably *South Park* refers to the culture of "the people" as a means of creating cultural entertainment for "the people". This perspective will be used throughout this dissertation to better understand the popularity of *South Park*. While the Frankfurt School of Thought emphasises the importance of the context of the text in terms of ideological effects (Williams, 2003), British cultural studies examines the political alliance between texts and cultural studies. However most significant is that both the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies dismiss popular culture products as worthy of study because of mass production and ideological power (Williams, 2003)[16]. It is important to acknowledge, that *South Park*, like all other animated series, is classified as a product of popular culture that is ranked lower on the spectrum of importance when compared to other popular culture products (Pilling 1997). This is due to the historical development of animation from an elite art to common through its commodification (Storey, 1997).

While Inglis (1990) suggests that the unpredictable nature of cultural studies is a weakness of popular culture, believing that cultural studies "cannot look for a neat, peaceful fit between the need for revenue and the uses of culture" (1990: 121). Others may not see this unpredictable characteristic as a weakness for this nature can be used to theoretically understand the unpredictable and unconventional content of and representations in *South Park.* Popular culture will be used to read not only the content of *South Park* but its cultural contextualisation. This is because within popular culture:

> Cartoons often deploy laughter to comment on various issues of social and political concern. Yet this laughter should not be confused for a collusive, resigned laughter or mere escapism. This is a complex

[16] I must note that while the high-brow and low-brow debate within popular culture is a topic on its own and will not be debated in this thesis. However it is relevant because *South Park* is categorised as a product of popular culture and aids to better understand the context in which the series is produced as well and its content.



> process that, unfortunately, is often dismissed due to superficial notions of popular culture as a heap of escapist pulp and other such elitist attitudes. Yet, on the contrary, beyond the entertainment value, popular culture products often address matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them (Musila, 2004)[17].

Similarly to the contrasting perspectives of the power of popular culture, Weinstock (2008a) sees *South Park* as rejecting the notions of popular culture through subverting the value of the textual allusion and exposing the problematic and complex privileging of the popular culture debate of low-brow and high-brow forms of pleasure experienced through culture.

Samuels (2008), in his assessment of the relationship between popular culture and *South Park,* points out the rhetoric nature of the universe that emphasises the inequalities of contemporary society and those represented in *South Park*. Samuels (2008) turns to Freud's (1960) theory of jokes which states that the "main function of jokes is to present serious issues in a manner that shields them from any type of criticism and analysis" (Samuels, 2008: 105). *South Park* highlights serious topics such as the inequalities of society in a joking manner. However Stone[18] is ambiguous about the critical intentions of the jokes presented in *South Park*, saying that people like to laugh at the stereotypical representations in the series, but limits any critical reading by saying that such representations are purely entertainment-based with no meaning (Samuels, 2008). This rhetorical denial is complex and contradictory, resembling the nature of postmodern popular culture and cultural studies. Strinati (1995) suggests that cultural studies should assess the role popular culture plays in the indoctrination of people to get them to accept certain values and ideals.

[17] Theorists of popular culture in Africa have investigated its value and relationship within lived reality further. See for instance, Stephanie Newell (2000)
[18] Matt Stone, co-founder of *South Park* with Trey Parker.

To read *South Park* as a popular cultural product, this study locates it within its genre of production and reads it as a televisual product. As such, the study refers to scholarship that has theorised the significance of television products as significant in understanding their larger roles in the social and cultural contexts of production. Television and film are considered socio-cultural communication mediums and are amongst the most popular and accessible means of communication (Casey, et al, 2008). The development of theoretical frameworks for television programming became necessary because, as suggested by EnglandKennedy (2008), television is a powerful social tool. Nelson (1994) supports this notion suggesting that television, as a mass means of communication, can change the social perception, attitude, and actions as a powerful instructor of socio-cultural values and attitudes. 'Television studies' is a complex term, referred to as 'an area' rather than discipline of study (Allen and Hill, 2004) However, what is important to note is that 'television studies' provides an area to better understand the economic and cultural impacts of television. As Allen suggests, how television is used and functions in a person life "is a topic worth thinking about and studying because television enters into the everyday lives of so many different people in so many different places in so many different ways" (1992: 1).

South Park is both a product of the televisual culture as well as the online generation of communication. While many viewers watch *South Park* via 'Comedy Central' channels on television, Stone and Parker encourage individuals to watch newly premiered episodes for free on the official *South Park* website[19] (Gournelos, 2009). This raises questions as to where one can academically categorise *South Park* as a product of television or online entertainment and whether television studies is most appropriate in understanding such a complex series. In their book *Television Studies*, Gray and Lotz best answer this predicament suggesting that "someone can study television and not be doing 'television studies,' while someone else can also be studying something other than television (like YouTube) and be doing television studies" (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 3). Gray and Lotz, in their discussion

[19] www.southparkstudios.com

of ‘television studies’, believe that outside of the United States of America, the terms ‘media studies’ and ‘television studies’ are used interchangeably to discuss scholarly research in film and television, internet, and radio studies (2012: 4).

To better understand what ‘television studies’ is, I turn to Robert Allen who assesses some of the many ways in which ‘television studies’ can be defined and studied (Allen and Hill. 2004). These three ‘definitions’ are also historically and geographically based. The first way of seeing ‘television studies’ is from the technological perspective where television is seen as a “changing set of technologies for electronically capturing images and sounds” (Allen and Hill, 2004: 1). The second way is seeing television as “a set of formal, narrative, and representational structures and capacities” which is shared with other media types. And finally the third way (which is most useful to this dissertation) is perceiving television as “the social experience associated with producing, viewing, listening, talking about, reading about, being captured by, appearing on, and being influenced and affected by television” (Allen and Hill, 2004: 1). Ultimately the debate on ‘television studies’ and its academic position is graphically specific and departmental dependent. As Lynn Spigel describes it, after thirty years of literary growth, ‘television studies’ now recognises “itself as a (loosely) organized protocol for understanding television as a cultural, social, political, aesthetic and industrial form” (Spigel, 2000: 407). Gray and Lotz define ‘television studies’ as “a set of methods and theories” assessing the three key seeds “from which ‘television studies’ grew” (2012: 14). These seeds are the ‘social science approach’, the ‘humanities approach’, and the cultural studies approach’.

The social science approach is audience-based, researching the effects the programs have socially on the masses. This area of research is commonly associated with psychology, sociology, and communication based disciplines (Gray and Lots, 2012). The humanities approach attempts to examine ‘television studies’ from the humanities tradition which arguably emerges from two threads, literary studies and film studies. Katz (1977) describes the movement towards the humanitarian approach during the 1960s and 1970s



as the result of research in the area of popular culture from linguistic, anthology, and literary critics in relation to semiology.

In Kindem's (1980)[20] dissertation on film, he suggests that television and film studies have been academically neglected, and this is particularly true for television. However, to better understand film and television, Kindem (1980) discusses the application of semiotics, which has aided this research through the application of semiotic analysis to the televisual text of *South Park*. In film theory the relation of film and semiotics has a well developed academic history; as a means of better understanding of semiotics and film theory I turn to the forerunners in the discussion around the value of the filmic cultural text, Wollen (1972) and Metz (1974).

Wollen (1972) turns to linguistic semiologist Peirce's theory of signs to justify his argument that when examining a film, the emphasis should be on the signs within the film and what these signs signify. Through assessing the indexical[21] and iconic[22] importance in codes and signs one can decipher such signs in order to see what the implications of the signs are. This highlights the importance, not only of the polysemic symbolic meanings of signs, but the rich connotations in the signs of language. Billingsgate language is a key characteristic in *South Park* and is often directed to indexical and iconic codes and signs associated with 'celebrities' and public figures.

In his application of semiotics to filmic subject matter, Metz (1974) expresses the belief that one should study the denotation of a film before the connoted messages because one must have a basic understanding of the plot and its aspects before delving into a deeper symbolic and philosophical analysis. This aspect of Metz's (1974) work has been highly influential in this research

[20] A growing body of work in the fields of film and television shows that there is now more interest in the field. Even then, initial conversations on the same are extremely useful in mapping where the debates began.
[21] Wollen (1972) uses Peirce's theory of signs with three aspects of a sign, the indexical aspect is dependant on the connection between the picture and object in the image.
[22] Along the same lines Peirce's theory of signs defines the iconic aspect of a sign as the resemblance between the image and the subject. For more information look at Braudy and Cohen, 2009.



in that assessing the symbolic references in *South Park* is a prime objective. Because it is a motion picture televisual product the plot and episodic denotations are relevant in contextualising specific episodes. Once this process has been achieved Metz (1974) then suggests examining the connotations within the text, highlighting the importance of the narrative of genre. This is also particularly important to this research as *South Park* is a rich contributor to the development of the fairly new genre of satirical adult animation.

Wollen (1972), Metz (1974) and Harman (1975) all agree that studying semiotics in film results in the theory of film-as-a-system-of-signs. In more recent academic research in television theory Nikos (1998) investigates the relationship between television and film studies through a semiotic analysis and problematises the theoretical and analytical application of semiotics to televised subject matter. Nikos (1998) believes that the weakness of semiotics is its focus on a collection of signs in one isolated image and that semiotics does not accommodate the complex combinations of multiple signs and multiple sounds that are in constant motion.

The humanities approach opens up new ways of studying and understanding media texts in order to better understand the messages of gender relations, psychoanalysis, and symbolism (seeing a televised program as a televisual text)[23]. "Television studies' interest in understanding how programs work, how they create meaning, and in developing a series of tools for analyzing everything from a programme's words to its images, and from its more explicit meanings to its suggested and implied meanings. This all stemmed directly from the humanistic tradition" (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 13).

The third approach is the cultural studies approach. This approach argues against the separation of cultural texts, fighting the stance of elite versus popular culture, and the belief that elite cultural texts are the only significant

[23] The humanistic approach and the cultural significance of television is further debated in a number of key works: John Fiske (*Reading Television*, 1978), Horace Newcomb (*TV: The Most Popular Art*, 1974) and Raymond Williams (*Reading Television and Cultural Form*, 2003, originally published 1974)

texts worth examining. The cultural studies approach rejects surveys and number based research, and its focus is to explore "media's relation to nation, class, gender, youth and race… Cultural studies work thus came to represent a way to talk about makers of identity, power, and the media" (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 15). While considering the relationship of 'television studies' and cultural studies, both Fiske (1992) and Hay (1992) bring to light the need for 'television studies' to be more than the application of the textual analytical methods borrowed from film and literature theories to a televised text, but for 'television studies' to also recognise industrial, contextual, and audience responses.

It is central to cultural studies to assess the connection of "industrial conditions with the production of cultural forms" (Gray and Lotz, 2004: 98). The industrial or institutional nature of television is a significant site for examination. There is a dual economy of television. On the one hand there is the political economy of television which demonstrates the commercial desire to entertain with financial benefits. It is focused on financial success with content that is directly and indirectly affected by commercial sponsors and advertisers (Casey et al, 2008). Within 'television studies' there are key areas of study. Within commercial television these include institutions and audiences, the study of institutions includes examining the "they"[24] who create and cancel programs (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 89), assessing the systems of production and understanding the dominant structures and people supporting them. This debate is very relevant to *South Park*. Due to the controversial content of the series, there have been times when Comedy Central have altered the content in an episode[25]. This relationship is an example of the political economy of the television industry. While the aim in *South Park* is to create controversial content, one can not ignore that Comedy

[24] Gray and Lotz suggest that when assessing who "they" are as in the important players in the institutional side of television we should ask questions such as; "how does a program come to be created? What factors determine its time-slot, success, or demise? Who creates television? How is the industry arranged? What motivates television production? How has the industry changed over time? How do programs' politics and narratives stem from the dominant structures supporting them?" (2012:89)

[25] This debate is examined in an in-depth discussion in chapter five.



Central do have the power to censor the programme, or even not feature the show on its channels.

With a focus on institutions, ‘television studies’ highlights the power of commercial television in spreading ideological content, assuming that audiences are passive in their consumption (Hall, 1991). Gray and Lotz suggest that the “business of television is less about the creation and selling of programs but more so the creating and selling of audiences” (2012: 57). Within the industrial side of ‘television studies’ audiences are conceived in “straightforward numerical terms” such as ratings and shares (Casey et al, 2008). However, Lewis (1991) suggests that, within ‘television studies’, there has been a movement away from the idea that television is embedding opinions onto audiences, but rather towards “a conception of television as an information source, which provides some of the building blocks for audiences to make sense of the world” (Casey et al, 2008).

On the other hand, there is the cultural economy of television which explores “how people make moments of television meaningful and pleasurable” (Allen, 1992: 25). Casey (et al, 2008), discusses ‘pleasure’ in ‘television studies’ to encompass a more social interpretation when deciphering televisual texts, saying that “pleasure in television can be many-faceted, even contradictory, with some texts offering comforting pleasure that could be seen as ideologically reactionary, and others allowing space for more challenging and oppositional positions. But It is also clear that viewers occupy variable positions in relation to television texts” (Casey et al, 2008). Fiske (1987) describes these different positions as ‘modes of address’ where viewers can accept, negotiate, or reject the messages in the text based on their understanding of it and, more notably, the pleasure they experienced in engaging with it. What is most relevant to ‘television studies’ is understanding how the many different types of audiences matter and behave (Gray and Lotz, 2012). This brings to light the text-audience relationship. Allen (1992) suggests that semiotics has much to offer when examining this relationship, particularly when assessing texts that expect the viewer to ‘read between the lines’.



While textual analyses is by no means a new research methodology within the humanities (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 30), the techniques of analysis, from which 'television studies' has emerged, have contributed to the four approaches defining the textual analysis of programs. These four approaches are art and literature studies, rhetorical analysis, film and screen theory, and semiotic analysis (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 40). In the case of applying semiology to television programs[26], Seiter (1992) suggests that while semiology restricts itself to the text and can thus not explain television economics, production, history, or audiences, it raises important questions about televisual texts along the lines of gender, race, and class.

In this dissertation semiotics will be used to decipher the intertextual references in *South Park*. Characteristically self-reflectivity (White, 1992) and polysemy (Casey at al, 2008) are key in understanding the dynamics of postmodern television, specifically in the case of *South Park*. Collins believes that intertextual referencing has become a marker of "quality television" (1992: 334). If this is the case, *South Park* is of the highest quality. However, the "problem for television studies, as it tries to come to terms with postmodernism, is how to reconcile the semiotic and economic dimensions of television. Stressing the semiotic to the exclusion of the economic produces only a formalist game of 'let's count the intertexts', but privileging the economic to the point that semiotic complexity is reduced to a limited set of moves allowed by the master system is just as simplistic" (Collins,1992: 339). Gray and Lotz (2010) believe that a true 'television studies' approach to this dilemma is to be mindful of all aspects of 'television studies' such as the economic and cultural, seeing each intricately interwoven within the other. Newcomb and Hirsh stress the need to acknowledge that television is a "cultural forum" and "central to the process of public thinking" (Newcomb and Hirsh, 1994: 505). Thus, it is important to understand ideological import from the many approaches of television.

[26] The word 'programme' is interchangeable with 'show' and 'text'.



Gray and Lotz (2010) believe that while studying the institutions, audiences, and programmes are key aspects of 'television studies', one must also include the less tangible but equally important context of television. This is because while these key aspects are situated historically and spatially, and in relation to one another, "a proper study of television programmes, audiences, and industries requires that we inquire into the many contexts that surround these other agents, that give them meaning, and that play a key role in creating and nurturing them" (Gray and Lotz, 2012: 114). Contextual programme analysis is thus a useful method in understanding the context of the program by referring to key elements such as genre and intertextuality. A consideration of genre and intertextuality is useful to this thesis in that it assists in interpreting the complexity of the intertextual references to 'celebrities' in *South Park*.

'Celebrities' are the most commonly critiqued topic in *South Park*. Even when the critique is not directed personally at the topical 'celebrity', their identity is still being portrayed within a critiquing context. 'Celebrity' has become a highly influential culture in the postmodern epoch. Sturm (2008) suggests that the cult of stardom and 'celebrity' can be described in four ways; 'celebrity' as a social function, as a sign or text, as a commodified product with economic prowess, and as containing cultural power. Developing an understanding of the term 'celebrity' is important to unpacking the excesses of celebrity culture. This is a central concern in this dissertation. It is also important to familiarise ourselves with the types of power that 'celebrities' possess in relation to society. This is because, while Marshall (1997) suggests that 'celebrity' is a commodified product of capitalism, this commodity also has a larger cultural impact. It is because of these economic and cultural powers that it is important to understand and ultimately evaluate the role of 'celebrities' and celebrity culture in society. This discussion will ultimately focus on the relationship between celebrity culture and *South Park*.

'Celebrity' historians including the likes of Boorstin (1961) and Walker (1970) contextualise modern 'celebrity culture' by discussing the old Hollywood term of the 'Star'. A 'Star' was and still is an individual who is famous for their talents. However, while this term is still used specifically in relation to film



studies, the broadening of the media world demands a more inclusive term.[27] This is because the term 'celebrity' includes a larger range of 'Stars' that could be included in the greater category of celebrity culture. This then includes sport 'stars', musicians, politicians, and even socialites. Holmes and Redmon (2010), while attempting to investigate why and how this concept of 'the celebrity' is key to the way the social world organises and commodifies its representations, discourses and ideologies which tend to lean towards a cynical perspective. They believe that the "study of celebrity gives legitimacy to a 'faux', low-brow area of derisible scholarship, tak[ing] students away from the more 'serious' or 'worthy' academic disciplines" (2010: 2).

Rowlands (2008) embraces this pessimistic view, arguing that the academic and cultural obsession with 'celebrities' and celebrity culture is like a virus or "mental illness" that has blurred the class boundaries of high and low-brow 'celebrities'. Hall (1980) agrees with Rowlands (2008) and attempts to implicate a discriminatory process that separates high and low-brow 'celebrities' within popular culture. This integrates with the arguments of Boorstin (1961) and Gitlin (1998) who describe the celebration of a 'Star' and the framework of stardom as something that was once sacred but with the development of the 'celebrity' is no longer.

However, we must question who it is that will decide which cultural products and 'celebrities' belong in which category, high or low. For this reason, the historical development and this current debate will be used to read the representations of different 'celebrities' in *South Park*. The series does not discriminate as to which 'celebrities' are represented but rather re-presents to its audience individuals who signify "a name which, once made by the news, now makes news by itself" (Kolter, Rein, and Stroller, 1997:14). Not only does a 'celebrity', particularly those represented in *South Park*, make the news that we consume but Geraghty (2000) argues that the construction of a 'celebrity' and success has blurred the line between private and public. As a result, the focus of this study will be on these kinds of individuals that are re-represented

[27] Such as media studies where Dyer (1986) has suggested the term 'celebrity' is more appropriate.

within the satirical contexts of *South Park* which focuses on their personal lives and flaws (Turner, 2004).

Within *South Park*, in terms of intertextuality, each 'celebrity' referenced becomes a sign carrying with them connotations of their social contexts and excesses. However the success of the reference is based on the audiences' ability to interpret the persona of the 'celebrity' with the constructed representation (Evan and Hesmondhalgh, 2005). Henderson (1992) suggests that the celebrity-based culture in the contemporary postmodern epoch is a result of the changeover in the public's role from producer to consumer. As a consumer one must decode the message portrayed through the 'celebrity'. One of the key features of celebrity culture that will be used to better understand the representations of 'celebrities' in *South Park* is its ambiguous relationship with society where we get pleasure in both worshipping 'celebrities' and hoping for them to fail. This liminal space that demonstrates the perplexed relationship between idealisation and envy from society is evident in many tabloids such as *Heat Magazine* and many television shows such as *Saturday Night Live*. Moreover, within this liminal space, the 'celebrity' is a sign that demonstrates the tension between authentic and false culture (Alberoni, 1972).

The ambiguous relationship of ascent and descent between society and 'celebrities' illustrates the 'celebrities' social status and its association to consumer culture (Marshall, 1997); Casey (et al, 2008) points out that the 'celebrity' phenomenon is at an all time high, noting that even while an individual is famous or has gained public attention for reasons that are unrelated to their career, they will, at some stage, feature on television. In her analysis of 'Stardom', Geraghty contrasts the historical 'Star' to the 'celebrity', "the term 'celebrity' indicates someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their works and who is famous for having a lifestyle. The 'celebrity' is thus constructed through gossip, press and television reports, magazines articles and public relations" (2007: 99). It is through these public representations that 'celebrities' become topics for satirical critique. Dyer's (1987) notion of "the structured polysemy" of the



image of ‘celebrity’ suggests that the ‘celebrity’ be approached as a text that has multiple meanings within different contexts[28].

Italian sociologist Alberoni (1972) is considered one of the first theorists to interpret the ‘celebrity’ and public figure in terms of power. Despite some of his work contradicting the history of stardom (Alberoni, 1972: 73), his discussion around the ‘star system’ and its power brings a new and interesting dynamic to any such discussion. Alberoni (1972) argues that ‘stars’ and ‘celebrities’ do not occupy any institutional power because the business of entertainment is a different sphere from that of kings, prophets and politicians. This notion goes against what Dryer (1979) refers to as the “superficially exceptional qualities” that the public believe ‘celebrities’ have while excluding politicians from the notion of celebrity culture. In the end ‘celebrities’ are icons of what Alberoni (1972) refers to as the ‘powerless elite’.

When looking at politicians such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama, as well as the public attention to their personal lives, one can see that “official politics has been catching up, blurring the boundaries and levelling the hierarchy between ‘high’ political representation and ‘low’ popular entertainment” (Corner and Pels, 2003). When consuming media coverage of the late 2012 presidential campaign between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney it is evident that political marketing runs parallel to the culture of ‘celebrity’[29] and consumerism demonstrating where politics and the media begin to focus on how politicians are represented (Corner and Pels 2003), rather than their institutional power. This debate is relevant to ‘celebrity’ studies, but more importantly it justifies the inclusion of politicians in this dissertation’s analysis of ‘celebrities’ that are represented in *South Park*.

This study will also assess the symbolic meaning of stardom and ‘celebrities’ because of their social and cultural impact. Paris Hilton, for example, caused

[28] Boorstin (1961) and Alberoni (1972) both argue that although the sign of stardom and celebrity are texts that are rich in meaning, this meaning is also meaningless.
[29] For example, an article featured on the UK *Daily Mail* website was titled ‘TMI! Michelle Obama reveals MORE toe-curling details of first kiss with Barak… but is it just a cheap bid to win over voters?’ (Gye, 2012).

a social movement (as exhibited in *South Park*[30]), which encouraged young girls and women to be more sexually provocative (Egan and Hawkes, 2008). Where most academics such as Evans (2005) and Marshall (1997) agree is that the 'celebrity' contributes to the capitalist and cultural nature of the cultural industry and has thus become an icon where the public will try model a social identity to be like that celebrated individual (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). Sturm discusses some key factors when analysing the "cult of the celebrity" (2008: 210). Similarly to television studies, the two main factors in better examining 'celebrity' includes the cultural and economic power that 'celebrities' have. The economic power of 'celebrities' is due to publicity and the entertainment industry, that as the "public [we] are presented with the image of the person who has most chance of attracting attention and sympathy of exciting human warmth or curiosity" (Alberoni, 1972). Rojek phrases the economic power of the 'celebrity' best saying that "celebrities are commodities in the sense that consumers desire to posses them" (2001: 13). As discussed earlier the 'celebrity' is a text consumed by society. However on a greater scale the commodified 'celebrities' impact is not only economic but cultural as well.

Evans and Hesmondhalgh (2005) and Evans and Wilson (1999) mutually agree that the social values (particularly those promoted by a 'celebrity') that are portrayed in the mass media are used by society to interpret the world that surrounds them. 'Celebrities' possess this power because of their "ubiquitous" presence in our lives (Evan and Hesmondhalgh, 2005) and the 'you're a god' type of admiration (Weber, 1968) from society. However, other theorists including Alberoni (1972), Marshall (1997), and Rojek (2001) all believe the social role of a 'celebrity' is due to their "charisma". It is this "charisma" that attracts audiences to praise but also deconstruct the 'celebrity'. In his discussion of the relationship between audience and "charisma", Dyer (1972) suggests that "as an audience, we are drawn to deconstruct the star, and in that process of reading the elaborate text that goes beyond the screen image,

[30] 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset' - S8E12.

we are compelled to debate the nature of the star's public and private lives" (cited in Rojek, 2001: 17).

The 'celebrity' within the cultural and entertainment industry is a commodified object that has a social function to fulfil. Gowans (1981) suggests that such objects perform, not only the social function of reflecting the spirit of a time frame, but also the ideological foundations of society. Wolf (1999) describes social power as an aspect of all relations among people which takes many possible forms, such as ideology. Foucault (1983) also suggests that different modes of culture transform people into subjects. This is due to the nature of power for it only exists when it is put into action and then, subsequently, modifies others. As seen in *South Park*, this power possessed by 'celebrities' exposes them to satirical productions and transforms them into critiqued texts. It is also due to this social power that "we are fascinated by them [celebrities] and idealise them…[but] at the same time we also envy them, even gaining a certain pleasure from wishing them to fail" (Evan and Hesmondhalgh, 2005: 1). This ambiguous relationship between 'celebrities' and the public has resulted in a liminal space which Alberoni (1972) believes focuses less on the 'celebrities' talents and more on "their eccentricities" (1972: 73). Consequentially, satirical products such as *South Park* have been developed to present audiences with the pleasure of watching 'celebrities' fail. *South Park* does this by placing 'celebrity guests' in contexts that emphasise and critique their failures. In *"Omigod, It's Russel Crowe!" South Park's Assault on Celebrity*, Sturm suggests that the series, like most in the satirical genre, exposes "the manufacturing of celebrities, distorts 'celebrity' representations and public images, and undermines the authority or merit conventionally invested in most celebrities" (2008: 209).

Besides challenging social narratives of power and society, *South Park* also contributes to the study of the animation genre with its hybrid development of satirical adult animation. While there are other series within the genre of satirical animation such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy, South Park* differs from these series because its animated representations "highlight the inanity of the candy-coated endings of the family-oriented sitcoms on American



Television" (Halsall, 2008: 32). While gaining a greater understanding of this genre, the following discussion will briefly examine the history and development of animation. As well as investigate its development as a genre and explore its identity within the mode of satire.

Animation is one of the easiest genres to identify but the hardest to define. As the earliest form of big screen entertainment, the genre soon developed into primetime television and then into children's entertainment (Ohmer, 1993). The evolution of the animation genre from entertainment for all members of society, no matter their age, to the modern perception that animated products are only for children is of particular interest to this research because *South Park* inverts these perceptions. Mitchell (1995) discusses how animation developed into television cartoons[31] and, in the process, lost its cross-generation appeal, simply becoming "kids stuff". Pilling believes that this is due to animation being a "highly self-conscious art form predicted on a very naïve value system" (1997: 170). Cartoons have "grown-up" in terms of their content and the audience they attract (Casey, 2008: 21). However, in more recent developments, satirical and other forms of adult humour have been interspersed into television animations. Mitchell (1995) suggests this was due to the increased popularity and thus economic benefits of adult animated films. The success of the genre of adult animated films resulted in the development of adult content television animation such as *The Simpsons*. The genre is now a common feature of contemporary life and, thus, a contributing factor to postmodern society.

In his research on genre in literary studies, Hepburn (1983) talks about genre conventions, suggesting that they are necessary to aid the audience in constructing their attitudes and expectations when consuming cultural products. Fowler (1982) agrees with such a value for genre and contributes to the discussion by assessing genre as a positive support that is not

[31] It is important to note the difference between 'animation' and 'cartoon'. Theorists such as Wells (1998) and Pilling (1997) note that animation is the art of hand-drawn images that create life, whereas cartoons are the more modern, mass produced (Bianculli, 1992) imagery for children. The difference is also important for many people do not believe that cartoons deserve academic research (McLuhan, 1962) whereas animation does.

classificatory but rather clarificatory because of its interpretational use by writers, readers and critics. The definition of genre within 'television studies' is complex and far-reaching from Hepburn's (1983) and Fowler's (1982) somewhat simplistic descriptions. Casey explains that the "genre approach within television studies is a way of theorising how television programmes are classified and organised. It includes a consideration of the codes and conventions within and between television programmes" (et al, 2008: 135). Fowler (1982) also emphasises the free spiritedness of genre that challenges and transcends social conventions. Todorov (1976) describes this as genre challenging conventions through some cultural products that "disobey" their genres. He states that "a new genre is always the transformation of one or several old genres; by inversion, by displacement, by combination" (Todorov, 1976: 162). While television cartoons developed into an art form focused on adult content, the genre of animation was evolving and, in the process, adopted elements from other genres. This is evident in series such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad!* and *South Park* which fall into the genre of adult satirical animation, a genre that (within the rhetorical sense) shows a global shift towards breaking the boundaries and inverting the conventional understandings of genre and adult entertainment (Raffaelli in Pilling 1997: 31) while critiquing contemporary society. *South Park*, and this specific genre, is unique because it is involved in the production of the very culture that it is satirising (Henry 1994).

South Park is considered an animation that uses satire. In its true sense satire is concerned with criticising and modifying cultural texts with the objective of moving toward moral resolutions to make true social critiques (deForest Lord 1977). Satire encourages the audience and public consumer to assess the broader questions of rhetoric by examining the description of style and the author's intentions (Jensen and Zirker, 1972). Zirker states that "to write so about satire is not to ignore the art that, in this fallen world, can produce so mysterious a result; it is to acknowledge the human and humane conditions out of which the art of satire is fashioned" (cited in Jensen and Zirker 1972). While the content of *South Park* is a reflection on American society (Weinstock, 2008), the satirical context in which these reflections and



‘celebrities’ are represented is a social critique concealed by humour. Altman (1987) suggests that entertainment has, for centuries, considered the devil’s handmaiden. In *South Park*’s entertaining and satirical representations of society and ‘celebrities’, one can say that *South Park* is the devil’s handmaiden because of its use of blasphemous humour (Murtagh 2007).

Animated adult entertainment is a relatively young field of academic research. Casey (et al, 2008) suggests that it is because of the success of series such as *Beavis and Butthead*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*, due to their political incorrectness, and textual playfulness that academics have had to reassess the broader demographic that is watching animations. This is a result of the animated genre moving away from the stereotypical genre of entertainment for children (Bill cited in Maureen 2009) and into the domain of subject matter with cultural resonance (Irwin, Conrad and Skoble 2001). Mitchell suggests that the lack of academic texts on the cultural impact of animation is the consequence of “many people feel[ing] uneasy when serious attention is paid to objects and subjects that they are accustomed to classifying as trash” (Mitchell 1995: 6). Despite this pessimistic attitude, satirical animation for adults is still a relatively new genre within society. The series *The Simpsons* paved the way for satirical adult animation from the late 1980s and was ground breaking in its postmodern self-reflective, intertextual, and societal critiquing characteristics (Wallace 2001). Due to its global success, *The Simpsons* became a distinctive viewing experience, not only as a televisual commodity (Knox, 2006) but through its impact in cultural studies (Alberti, 2004) as well.

The Simpsons not only evolved the genres of satire and animation but was influential by changing social-cultural values and attitudes (Greenfield, 1984). Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*, has said that his goal was to create an animated series that reflected the life of the average American, using the series as a satirical paradox to reflect on the context of its audiences, namely this American person (Groening, 2004). This technique has become characteristic to the genre of satirical animation and has been

adopted by many series within the genre, such as *Family Guy*[32] and *American Dad!*. More recently, further academic research has been dedicated to the genre of satirical animation because of its use of intertextual references and self-reflection to the point where it is involved in the production of the very culture it satirises (Henry, 1994). Casey, in the context of 'television studies', suggests that "the prominence of intertextuality along with the use of irony, parody and pastiche, some theorists have cited animated sitcoms such as *The Simpsons* as exemplifying postmodernism in television programming" (2008: 21). This characteristic is common in all products of satirical animation. However Storey (1999) suggests that *The Simpsons* demands its own form of critical analysis for the reason that the series, categorised within popular culture, represents a mixture of social forces from both elitist and popular culture. This has resulted in the series both incorporating functions of society while satirically resisting these social functions. *South Park* and other series within the genre (such as *Beavis and Butthead*) adopted and evolved these same techniques successfully, while others such as *American Dad!* and *Family Guy* have been criticised for their lack of originality (Knox, 2006).

South Park follows in the footsteps of *The Simpsons* where the sitcom forefather "playfully deconstructs itself in a knowing and highly self-referential manner as well as drawing on a wide range of popular cultural references as a source for its humour" (Casey, 2008: 21). The success of an evolved genre such as satirical animation is relatively delicate where the combining and rejecting of previous conventions need to be recognised by its audiences (Hepburn, 1983). Gournelos (2009) discusses the most flourishing technique of the small town setting which is used in all of the satirical animated series such as *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*. While the genre uses satire to reflect on societal culture, the series' use a context that is familiar to audiences. 'Springfield' and 'South Park' represent locations where, in parallel to the lived realities of the audience, "contemporary social, economic, cultural, and political issues are manifested" (Gournelos, 2009:61). Similarly, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Beavis and Butthead* all use children as the figures

[32] For further academic discussions on *Family Guy* refer to Booker 2006, Gray 2006, and Crawford 2009.



to voice their social critiques (Gardiner 2005). While this is not necessarily a new development within animation, Johnson-Woods (2007) and Gournelos (2009) both suggest that these animations are unique through the narrative by which they make these critiques.

Adrejevic (2004) sees popular media as an arena of conflict and change through which people construct alter ideologies through social critique, and this is evident through satirical animations. *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butthead*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad!* are all satirical series that contribute to the construction of new ideologies through social critiques (Crawford 2009). This essentially makes this a characteristic of the genre of satirical animation. In academic research, theorists have often compared the series to one another[33] for it has become characteristic within the genre for these series to reference each other, consciously or subconsciously. While *American Dad!* and *Family Guy* have been criticised for using the original *The Simpsons* formula too closely, *South Park* has avoided such criticism due to its elaborately unconventional representations. The repetition and comparison of such series is so prevalent in critical discussions of satirical animations that Parker and Stone rebutted it with an episode called 'Simpsons Already Did It'[34].

In the episode the character Butters (portraying his evil alter ego 'Professor Chaos') tries to wreak havoc on the town of *South Park*, only to be told that every evil plot he has designed has already been featured in *The Simpsons*. At one stage the episode even represents the *South Park* characters drawn as caricatures of the characters from *The Simpsons*[35]. Gardiner (2005) says that, despite the many similarities between all the series, the misbehaviour that is represented ultimately operates for the good of society.

[33] For further reading see Wallace 2001; Dodson 2003; Alberti 2004; Crawford, 2009
[34] S6E7 (refer to Weinstock, 2009b)
[35] When comparing the two series it is important to remember that *The Simpsons* is a satirical animated series that is family friendly (Commonsense Media, 2013) while *South Park* has an age restriction of fifteen years of age once it has been censored for television viewing (Commonsense Media, 2013).



Framing *South Park* in the genre of satire allows this research to assess the series within the discussion of Gray, Jones and Thompson (2009) who believe that satire on television is important in creating an oppositional public sphere. However, due to its animated nature, *South Park* is able to utilise satire in a broader spectrum when compared to live satirical shows such as *Saturday Night Live*, *The Colbert Report,* and *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart*. The representations in these series' are very different because the reality of the television programs restricts the level of controversy (Gournelos, 2009). However, *South Park* and other animated series demonstrate excessive representations in the process of what Knox (2006) refers to as the postmodern exploitation of animation.

Crawford (2009) examines the concept of magical realism in satirical animations. Magical realism is a technique of storytelling that exploits constructed reality through parallel representations between reality and fantasy to describe an event that is not understood by our logic, experiences and the laws of the universe (Faris 2004). Magical realism is a key aspect in understanding the fairly new genre of adult animation for it provides alternative means of approaching the concerns of a nation in an indirect way. S*outh Park* exhibits the use of magical realism by offering a platform to exhibit representations and actions that are against the norms of what society conventionally consumes, (for example, the adorable forest animals who spawn the child of Satan[36] who is in a homosexual relationship with Saddam Hussein[37]). Such fantastical unrealistic representations of iconic figures in different contexts to what consumers are conventionally used to is arguably a form of social critique.

DeRochi investigates satire in *Family Guy*, saying that "unlike *South Park*, *Family Guy* should never be mistaken for true satire" (2000: 376). This is because DeRochi (2000) believes that, within the postmodern epoch, satirical

[36] 'Woodland Critter Christmas' – S8E14.
[37] The relationship between Satan and Hussein is irregular due to Hussein's abuse nature. We are first introduced to the relationship in the film *Bigger, Louder & Uncut*. However their relationship is best exhibited in the continuous episodes 'Do the Handicapped Go to Hell' – S4E9 and 'Probably' – S4E10.



modes are negotiated for different requirements. One form of satire that *South Park* embraces is undercutting the audiences' expectations of representation by breaking social stereotypes and conventional representations of 'celebrities'. *South Park* uses the spectacle of mockery in its application to public figures, suggesting that although the series criticises existing norms in society it also maintains these constructs (Karimova, 2010). This is observed in the series through its references to racial and gender stereotypes, where, for example, Cartman continuously refers to racist and sexist serotypes to voice his bigoted opinions. Although the bigotry is presented in a context of satire, through alluding to the stereotypes it is relying on the audience member's to have an existing familiarity of the stereotypes. However, Karimova (2010) assesses the representation of 'celebrities' in the series suggesting that while the series and its authors, Parker and Stone, present 'celebrities' and public figures in contexts of satire, it is a contradiction of stardom for Parker and Stone are themselves 'celebrities' due to the success of the series. Fagin (2000) claims that "*South Park* is loaded with moral content, teaching *. . .* that it is good to mock celebrities, ridiculous beliefs, and hypocrisy," (cited in Gardiner, 2005:51) and Sturm (2008) agrees. In his analysis, Sturm (2008) discusses the success of 'celebrities' within popular culture due to exposure and circulation in the media, turning to Dyer (1979) in examining what is 'extraordinary' about 'celebrities' that ultimately ranks them as socially elite and thus famous. However, when discussing the relationship between 'celebrities' and *South Park* Sturm states that:

> In marked contrast to these processes of celebrification, the animated series *South Park* not only offers a challenge to this privileged reproduction of celebrity, but also dismantles the basis of their production, circulation, and consumption. Through elements of parody, irony, and satire, *South Park* provides both a comical and insightful critique of celebrity by mocking their manufacture and flattering representations (2008: 211).

While presenting 'celebrities' and public figures in a satirical context provides humorous pleasure in abjection, *South Park*'s attack on the unglamorous

personal quirks of ‘celebrities’, within the liminal space of ‘celebrity’ and public figure excesses, is a founding root to the satirical humour in the series (Becker, 2008). Becker (2008) also suggests that ‘celebrities’, such as Mel Gibson and Rob Reiner, who through their fame and power, preach their personal socio-political perspectives, simply become bigger targets for *South Park*.

South Park, while profane and crude, does not discriminate against which ‘celebrities’ and public figures are featured in the series. Politicians are satirised in the series, as discussed by Thompsons (2009), whose analysis assesses the range of political arguments represented in *South Park* within a satirical context. Ultimately, Thompsons (2009) suggests that in placing politicians within the genre of satirical animation the series is creating an oppositional public sphere. Such oppositional representations are not specific to *South Park*, but the genre of satirical animation as a whole. However, *South Park* is unique from the other series in the genre because of its billingsgate approach[38]. In analysing the stereotypical representations of mothers in *South Park*, Nagy (2010) discusses the contrasting stereotypes between the stereotypical ‘mother’ represented in animations created for children, compared to their representation in adult animations:

> The stereotypical mother is a model of women’s roles within the nuclear family propagated in America beginning in the 1950s. In cartoons aimed at adults there is no space for the myth of the perfect mother or wife and it is here that cartoons can parody the myths that are there in society (Nagy 2010: 1).

South Park relies on stereotypes and social conventions as subjects of satire and, as Nagy (2010) states, the series ambiguously embraces stereotypes, while also questioning the stereotypes social relevance. Gardiner’s (2005) arguments, however, defend *South Park* by suggesting that the series’ use of

[38] This “billingsgate approach” is referring to the linguistic vulgarity of *South Park*.



stereotypes through avenues of satire defends liberal beliefs of free speech and sexual freedom.

Racism is the most popular prejudice referred to in *South Park*. Significant examples of this are evident in Kyle's mother's heavy nasal accent, as well as the depiction of Token, the only black boy at the school. Semmerling (2006) investigates the representations of "evil Arabs" in *South Park* with specific reference to Saddam Hussein. Societal culture, as suggested by Semmerling, becomes content in *South Park* when topics of mass popularity reach levels of absurdity and "deserve a reality check" (2006: 248). Semmerling (2006) refers to the relationship between Hussein and Satan where stereotypically Satan symbolises the ultimate evil. However he is bullied by his homosexual lover (Hussein), suggesting that Hussein is more evil than Satan. The conclusion is that the stereotypical racist representations in the series have blurred the binaries between good and evil (Semmerling, 2006). *South Park* is "one of the most religion-fixated shows on the small screen" (Pinksy, 2006)[39].

Winokur (2006) supports such statements in his examination of *South Park* and religion with specific reference to Mel Gibson's film 'The Passion of the Christ'. Winokur (2006) illustrates a technique of displacement as satire within the culture of commodity where, for example, Cartman worships Mel Gibson, a 'celebrity' above religious icons[40]. The satirical displacement of a 'celebrity' with religion commodifies religious figures (Winokur, 2006). However, despite the religious doubt that has been implanted in Kyle, in the end of the episode he regains faith in his Jewish beliefs. This ambiguous approach is characteristic of the series as supported by DeLashmutt and Hancock who state that "*South Park*'s creators embody a *via media*, situating themselves as though suspended between poles – neither left nor right, conservative nor liberal, zealously religious nor cynical atheistic" (2008:176). Yet, such representations as God as a mutant creature and Jesus, who lives in *South Park*, and hosts his own television programme, do not seem unbiased. Yet

[39] cited in DeLashmutt and Hancock (2008: 176)
[40] S8E3 'Passion of the Jew'

again the humourous representations in *South Park* are blasphemous (Murtagh 2007).

All of the interpretations of such vital social topics such as politics, race and religion are all carefully satirised in *South Park* within the genre of adult animation. However, S*outh Park* is unique to the genre because of the series' absurd and excessive representations. Hutcheon (1985) suggests that the genre of adult animation is a postmodern product because of the intense intertextual references as well as the self-consciousness contradictory and undermining statements made within each episode. In terms of 'television studies' Stabile and Harris (2003) suggest the term 'bimodal address' to account for the way "in which some animated sitcoms display an ironic, self-conscious awareness through intertextual references to popular culture as well as offering a metacommentary on the sitcom genre through satire, irony and parody" (Casey et al, 2008: 22). As is evident, *South Park* is a postmodern cultural product that - while embracing the genre of satirical animation - still breaks those conventions. Satire as a genre offers many pleasures, not only to the authors but also to its audiences. While many have researched the many means of abjection within the series, it is also important to understand the pleasure of laughter that is encouraged in *South Park* through its representations. However, it is important to note that while pleasure is key in the consumption of satirical cultural products, in 'television studies' the "use of the term 'pleasure'… is far from unproblematic" (Casey et al, 2008: 194). This is because there is a general assumption that viewers watch television out of choice and that it is consumed purely for entertainment (Casey et al, 2008: 194). Ultimately the pleasure experience via television is an individualistic pleasure particular to each audience member.

Satirical cultural texts use mockery and ridicule as a means of exposing the flaws of the powerful (Mbembe, 1992). While satire is in itself a genre of cultural texts, its intended outcome is to promote laughter as a critique. However laughter and humour fall within the genre of comedy. Casey describes the relationship between television and comedy as interesting because as a genre "it is so clearly meant to provide 'escapist'



entertainment… Because of its escapist function the popularity of comedy, evidenced by its ubiquitous presence in television schedules, remains formidable" (et al, 2008: 40). The characteristics of comedy are obvious and upfront with the objective to evoke humour and laughter. Humorous discourse and its relationship to laughter is complex, especially in the investigation of postmodern comedic products such as *South Park*.

Bennett (2008) says that comedy is the genre of laughter. For many of us, comedy, humour and laughter appear in many forms through satire, prejudice, irony, parody, subversion, inversion of authority and power or social contexts. Similarly the prejudices in *South Park* and other cultural texts, as suggested by Zinn (2003), allow laughter to emerge as the result of the authors' critical account of human relations, power, and gender roles. Simon (1985) refers to difficulties of analysing humour as being in the vein of attempting to solve "a labyrinth of contradictory explanation and a morass of terminology from which there is no escape" (1985: 239). As with the humour and content of *South Park*, humour in general is essentially subjective and the consumption and effect of humour will be dependent on factors such as an individual's socio-political and cultural state of mind (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). Keith-Spiegel has developed the subjective theme within the theory of humour, suggesting that "at any rate, defining the essence of laughter is not nearly so simple as describing its behavioural components or linking it indiscriminately with humor" (1972: 17). In this sense, Lewis (1989) and Freeman (1997) both believe that theorising comical texts, such as *South Park*, is meaningless because of the multitude of subjective interpretations of the humour in the text.

In the same way that the above explanation is counter-productive to the pleasurable objective of a joke (Erichsen, 2005), Jerome Miller (1995) suggests that an explanation of humour is just as futile. In his analysis of laughter and its relation to the absurd, Miller (1995) examines the 'philosophy of comedy', considering comedy as a topic of serious analysis because it "holds a monopoly on ultimate questions so that its sovereignty over ultimacy seems to be beyond question" (Miller 1995). Miller (1995) also believes that



philosophising a theory of humour that is indeconstructable will only cause the humour rug to be pulled from underneath the theory. This is because if society takes comedy too seriously is that not misreading the meanings and defeating the objective of comedy (Miller, 1995)? Reichl and Stein (2005) disagree arguing that "laughter has to be taken seriously" (2005:2) because of the age-old conjunction between laughter and humour and their serious societal role. Ironically, however, for the purpose of this research we need a greater understanding of the use of humour and laughter in *South Park*, the relationship between humour and laughter as well as their greater societal role. In an attempt to solve this dilemma, I turn to Bergson's outlook that "we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit" (1991:2) but rather use this knowledge to assess the liminal space where humour and laughter occur in *South Park*.

Critical literature conceptualises humour and laughter as both mutli-dimensional notions that are polysemic in their social role and meanings. *South Park* utilises this polysemic nature to create multiple interpreted meanings from singular symbolic representations.

Reichl and Stein (2005) believe that the point of humour is to provoke laughter which is a "device which is self-consciously employed and strategically positioned in textual structures" (Reichl and Stein, 2005: 1). The representations in S*outh Park* simultaneously critique and encourage laughter through many humorous techniques including satire and self-reflection, and, in this way, *South Park* uses the type of comical laughter that Bataille (1992) suggests leads to sovereignty because of its refusal to submit to reason, and as a result, deconstructs categories of reason and meaning. At the same time, the humour used in *South Park* acts as a smokescreen to cover the social critiques valourised throughout the series. This type of humour can be perceived to encourage the type of laughter that Bakhtin (1968) believes to be transgressive and a liberating weapon. Musila describes a modern satirist as a person who uses visual and textual modes to provoke laughter by diminishing a subject "by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation" (2004: 107). This occurs by,



metaphorically, placing himself on the periphery of society allowing a critique of the socio-political scene (Musila, 2004) while playfully evoking pleasurable laughter from their audiences. In essence, the ethical criticism of humour is that a joke is never treated as a joke, it is always an insult (Gantar, 2008). For the purpose of this study postcolonial humour and carnival humour will be focused on as forms of transgressive and subversive humour that are used in the *South Park*.

South Park uses humour as a source of pleasure at the expense of the content represented in excessive contexts (Ott, 2008) within the series. Gantar (2008), in her investigation of the ethics of laughter, describes laughter as the external display of our instinctual prejudices that extend as a public projection of our desire to distance ourselves from the 'other'. *South Park* often alludes to the 'other' as a means of highlighting the flaws of prejudice, while simultaneously highlighting prejudice to encourage laughter. This brings about the ethical question of the humour in the series. In *South Park* the main protagonist Eric Cartman is a eight year old racist, sexist, bigoted and homophobic boy who embraces any kind of discriminatory prejudice known to mankind. However when laughter is the reaction to his hateful comments the ethical lines are blurred. True to the nature of *South Park*, Reichl and Stein suggest that such laughter results "from the ambiguity of the readers implied position towards the identity positions of the protagonist" (2005:16). Ramsey-Kurtz (2008) approaches this dilemma in analysing humour of the 'other' suggesting that humour allows its audiences to laugh with the enemy without the accusation of treason. However, the question that critics are asking when assessing the relationship between humour and ambiguity is who is really laughing and whose side is the laughter on? Ultimately, laughter does not side with anyone because, there are no limits or boundaries to humour. Erichsen (2005) investigates this social function, questioning humour's social values within ridicule and its cultural position of humour. Reichl and Stein (2005) suggest that ultimately the legitimacy of laughter is culturally located. As humour is a matter of the subjective paradox, its legitimacy is also individually based.



Carnival laughter[41] will help me better interpret the type of laughter and humour in *South Park* because carnival laughter is significantly particularly different to other humorous forms. While an individual may laugh at the silly innocence of a child, carnival laughter is cruel, liberating, complex and contradictory. Storey (1997) describes carnival laughter as ridicule fused with rejoicing, the celebration of the festival bringing together all the members of a community to eat, drink, and 'be merry' while mocking each other at the same time. Lachman elaborates by suggesting that carnival laughter, "rises above and transcends the objects at which it is temporarily aimed: official institutions and the sacral. It is a laughter that shakes the species-body of humanity, it is the collective and directed at the world wide" (Lachman, 1987: 123). *South Park* subverts social norms in the name of humour which degrades and materialises the sacred such as 'celebrities' and public figures. To degrade is to "bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better" (Bakhtin, 1968: 21). This materialises within *South Park* through the carnivalesque humour that is directed at verbally and graphically insulting the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs. This type of laughter manifests itself in the carnivalesque in many forms, namely ritual spectacle, comic verbal compositions, and through various genres of billingsgate. It is the carnival style of degradation that makes carnival parody particularly unique (Bakhtin, 1968).

Among many qualities, carnival laughter is ambivalent because "it asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (Bakhtin, 1968: 12) and I believe that *South Park* portrays a similar kind of ambivalence and grotesqueness in its representation of 'celebrities'. This can be observed in *South Park* within the context of the ambivalence of carnival laughter in two forms. The first is in the relationship between life and death which epitomises the humour of the grotesque and, the second is through satire and parody. Bakhtin (1968) discusses his notion of grotesque realism which describes the polar binaries in the distortion of the

[41] In his analysis of the content by author Rabelais, Bakhtin (1968) delves into the history of the marketplace and folk culture. Bakhtin (1968) dissects the concept of carnival laughter and its relationship to ambiguity. One must note that the notion of the carnivalesque evolved out of the context of the carnival, in this way 'carnival laughter' is the same as referring to as 'carnivalesque laughter'.

human form, more specifically the bodily lower stratum, where what is grotesque about the image is contrasted with an element of revival or renewal. Such scenes would refer to images such as a woman giving birth where the scene is 'grotesque' because of the combination of one body within another. Where the grotesque is pleasurable is through a moment where laughter occurs due to the excesses of the scene. It is ambiguous because, while childbirth is grotesque, it also symbolises the beauty of the birth of life (Bakhtin, 1968).

Likewise, *South Park* presents 'celebrities' in a grotesque way by focusing on their excesses. The function of the carnival-grotesque is to "consecrate inventive freedom… [and] to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally acceptable" (Bakhtin, 1968: 34). However, Bakhtin (1968) believes that the carnival humour of the grotesque has been distorted in the twenty-first century. This can be seen in *South Park* where the foolish mockery of 'celebrities' shows no aspects of renewal or intention of social change, but simply pure ridicule and abjection.

The second form of the ambiguous nature of carnival laughter is through parody and satire. The sense of embracing everyone for "all were considered equal during the carnival" (Bakhtin, 1968:10) is a feature that can be used to better understand the diversity of iconic symbols that are represented in *South Park*. Arguably the laughter encouraged in *South Park* is similar to the cruel laughter that Doker (1994) and Storey (1997) accredit as carnivalesque. This cruel laughter was created with the objective of, if only temporally, creating a utopian world removed of all hierarchies. Satire and parody were and are used to bring the powerful and status elite 'back-to-earth'[42] (Bakhtin, 1968). This type of ambivalence is prominent in *South Park*. However, Mbembe (1992) is supportive of a more masochistic (Weate, 2003b: 34) type of laughter between the power system and the people, yet agrees with the ambivalence in the social transgressive nature of the carnival laughter when

[42] It is this context from whence the saying originally developed.

applied in a postcolonial context. In this sense, the Mbebean perspective of carnival laughter will aid my reading of *South Park* by gaining a better understanding that, while this laughter is playful it is not necessarily a laughter that prevents *South Park*'s audience from further consuming celebrity culture[43]. "The key question is no longer how ambivalence comes into effect or is realised, but rather which function ambivalence has for the prevailing culture and its patterns" (Lachmann, 1987: 132).

Within the Mbembean context of the powerful state and the oppressed subject, the resulted inability to resist the powerful leads the subjects to look to other resolutions for liberation (Adeeka, 2002). In the context of this thesis humour is the resolution for liberation from celebrity culture. According to Mbembe (1992) the humour of the subjects in the postcolony is produced with a "conscious aim of avoiding… trouble that ordinary people locate the fetish [powerful] of state power in the realm of ridicule; there they can tame it or shut it up and render is powerless" (Mbembe, 1992: 9). In other words, through ridicule, the subjects are able to 'deceitfully' toy with the prospect of confronting the powerful. Mbembe (1992) rejects the carnivalesque sense of resistance through laughter but rather relies on the 'humour of play' (Weate, 2003b) as a response to the dominate power.

In the spirit of the carnival Mbembe (1992) places great emphasis in his research on the obscene and the grotesque as sources for cynical laughter (Weate, 2003a). Musila (2004) uses Mbembe's inversion of carnival power to assess distortion in graphic images and hyperbole as the catalysts for malicious laughter. The relation here is that both agree that although laughter is cynical, deceitful and malicious, it is not resistant but rather a response to dominance forcing many politicians - through the cynical laughter of society - to assess and reflect on their own vulgarities (Mbembe, 1992). Similarly to the temporary equality of the powerful and the 'subjects' in the carnival context, "ribald laughter and the mockery of figures in power give voice to the people" (Mcnee, 2001) within the postcolony. Ultimately, laughter in the postcolony is

[43] Mbembe believes that when 'the people' laughed at 'the commandant' the pleasure was not of resistance but escapism.

a manifestation of subversive humour that is ambiguous because ambiguity is on both the side of the 'subject' and the powerful. In this sense, Mbembe (1992) questions to whom laughter's loyalty lies. While the 'subject' uses laughter for empowering joy (Cixous, 1975) the status of the powerful is not affected by the submissive laughter because they have allowed the laughter.

In essence, the humour in *South Park* provides comic relief. As Zinn states "we laugh, because we feel the global liberation" (2003: 133). Eco (1984) says that the liberation is the result of the recognition of the inadequacies in social structures where laughter occurs. However, in the end we shudder because, though our laughter frees us, it does not change the structure. Gournelos examines the role of irony in the satirical animation genre with a specific focus on *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, suggesting that *South Park's* episodes "mock not the belief, but the believer" (2008: 12). This postmodern characteristic exposes hypocrisy of social conventions in society (Gournelos, 2008) through irony, satire and parody. Hutcheon points out the relationship between irony and parody, explaining that modern parody is the "ironic playing with multiple conventions" presenting texts in an extended form with critical differences (1985: 7).

While Wrenn (2005) questions the objective of encouraging laughter as a means of social critique[44], cultural products within the genre of insult create a liminal space where parody, satire and irony are used to cause laughter. As Feurle puts it "laughter is… created when taboos are broken" (Feurle, 2005: 281). *South Park* parodies public figures by referring to their excesses, for example when a 'celebrity' breaks a social taboo this will be imitated in a satirical context in the series. Fiske assesses the relationship between the excessive and popular culture, as well as parody concluding that "excess involves elements of parodic, and parody allows us to mock the conventional, to evade its ideological thrust, to turn its norms back on themselves" (1989: 114). The excessive that becomes the topic of satirical and parodic insult within cultural products provides pleasure for audiences through laughter

[44] Specifically within a postcolony context.

(Fiske, 1989). The critical laughter follows both the Bakhtinan and Mbembean notions of laughter. It is the pleasurable laughter at the inadequacy of the ideological norms that have been experienced in an abnormal form, allowing audiences to laugh at the failures of social convention (Fiske, 1989). This laughter is pleasurable for it distracts the audiences from their personal excessive failures (Fiske, 1989) and exposes the failures of the powerful elite as “nothing more than a common-or-garden arse that defecates like anyone else’s” (Mbembe, 1992: 11).

The success of satire, parody and irony is dependent on the contextualisation of the respective *South Park* episode. Hutcheon (1985) believes the success of the parodic text is based on the understanding of the contrasted conventional backgrounds from which the insults have emerged. Rybacki and Rybacki make a similar suggestion saying that “humour may be the one [genre] most closely tied to the particulars of the rhetor’s culture and its success is most dependent on the audience’s knowledge of that culture” (1991: 310). This is the result of the increasing distrust of the cultural arts of “external criticism to the extent that they have sought to incorporate critical commentary within their own structures” (Hutcheon, 1985; 1). Thus social satire and parody act as a means of social critique and in the process create new levels of meaning for social conventions (Hutcheon, 1985). In essence, the laughter encouraged in *South Park* aims to lampoon the iconic to the same level as the average man through changing the type of public sphere or contextual identity that the icon occupies (Habermas, 1991). Creating transgressive pleasure from the changing nature and function of images in postmodern conditions (Ott, 2008).

South Park uses satire and parody as fundamental techniques in its witty inversions of reality to encourage laughter. Halsall says that humour and its relation to ‘celebrities’ and public figures in *South Park* “arises from the contrast between the realistic face and the absurd and incongruous activities that the creators have them perform” (2008: 27). Musila (2004) refers to the art of caricature as an important contributing factor in paradoxical representations. Interestingly, in *South Park* the characteristics are relatively

proportional and normal looking. However, public figures are caricatured in grotesque forms (Halsall, 2008). In his analysis of the carnivalesque in relation to the satirical genre, Karimova (2010) specifically notes the following *South Park* comic techniques that correlate with the carnivalesque and the resultant laughter: laughter for the sake of laughter, mocking the present official political system, religious dogmas and authoritative figures, grotesque realism, billingsgate (abusive) language, degradation of high images, celebration of lower bodily stratum (genitals and reproductive organs), masquerade, and not fearing death. The final comic technique, which parallels *South Park*'s degradation of 'celebrities', is the crowning and decrowning of the king (Bakhtin 1968)[45]. Satirical adult animations, such as *Beavis and Butthead*, *The Simpsons* as well as *South Park* use the medium of television to critique social narratives concerning politics, gender, and race as mentioned above (Gray and Lotz, 2010). Many key themes have developed through research and analysis of theoretical texts, such as the representation of 'celebrities' and the deconstruction of their 'celebrity' status through the humourous techniques of satire and parody.

Whilst laughter is thought to be solely the physical response to humour, it is a pleasurable response and one that *South Park* fans experience constantly. However, the pleasures experienced by said audience through laughter is not only encouraged by humour and the physical experience of laughing but is methodological as well. Halsall (2008) and Ott (2008) both discuss that the audience of *South Park* experience visual pleasures such as abjection which provokes laughter. Through using visual analysis, my reading of this 'visual pleasure' will greatly enhance my reading of *South Park*, for "visual analysis emphatically seeks to incorporate affect and ideology. For, between affect and ideology that exerts power over subjects when they perform acts of looking, images can be seen at their most 'active', not only having a social life but also impacting on that of the people who interact with them." (Bal, 2008:170). Ott (2008) suggests that the pleasures found in *South Park* do not simply emerge in the experience of watching the series but also in the pleasure of

[45] For a more detailed and contemporary discussion of these characteristics look at Karimova, 2010.

deciphering the polysemic codes within it[46]. I refer to this as a methodological pleasure where the audience is experiencing the pleasures of knowledge through the ability to decipher codes that others may not be aware of. It is the pleasures of deciphering the semiotic and intertextual encoded messages in each episode.

South Park uses intertextual references as a means of alluding to aspects of contemporary society that audiences have previously consumed. The small town setting of *South Park* is an intertextual reference, alluding to the small towns that are characteristic of the United States and America. Similarly this setting is an intertextual reference to other satirical animations whose settings are also in small towns, such as *The Simpsons*. Intertextuality can occur in any form in any cultural text, "any text that has slept with another text…has necessarily slept with all the texts that other text has slept with" (Stam, 2000)[47].

This is literally seen in *South Park* when school teacher Mr. Garrison embodies the opinions of the American religious community who believe that evolution should not be taught as part of the school syllabus[48] (Gournelos, 2008). The school's headmaster calls in Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist, to teach the class about evolution. In the end Mr. Garrison[49] and Dawkins become lovers bringing together all the intertextual connotations of their beliefs into the bedroom. The objective of an intertextual reference is to allude to the texts or signs' previously associated discourses (Andersson, 2004). Barthes refers to this as a 'circular memory of reading' where every element that is experienced by the consumer is reproduced over and over in all products of popular culture[50]. An example of the type of intertextual stereotyping that is common in *South Park* can be seen in Token. As the only

[46] Ott (2008) also refers to Barthes (1977) when discussing another type of pleasure that Ott (2008) refers to as the pleasure of drifting through television channels and when *South Park* is momentarily paused on that the individual will still be able to enjoy the pleasure of laughter. [Just check this. It is a bit unclear]
[47] cited in Andersson (2004:1).
[48] 'Go God Go' – S10E12
[49] Mr Garrison had a sex change and is now known as Mrs. Garrison
[50] for more information the use of the texts previous discourse within new texts also look at Macdonald (1962) and Jenks (1993).

African-American in South Park, he is able to play the base guitar even though he has never played before.

Intertextuality can "highlight a trend embraced by a section of the audience, or add a footnote" (Andersson, 2004: 19), and is a technique in *South Park* that enhances the social critiques within the series (Weinstock, 2008). Ott (2008) suggests that, due to the rich polysemic nature of *South Park*, for symbolic references are open to multiple interpretations for the signifier carries many different connotations with it. Thus the pleasurable experience for an audience member can be experienced in many forms. The audience's interpretation of the symbolism of the intertextual reference can carry the discourse form the original context, acknowledge the combined connotations of the old and new context or not even be aware of the allusion as a reference due to the level of normalisation of sign[51]. Such normalised objects, like the popular American restaurant 'Casa Bonita'[52] and 'Prius cars'[53] have entire episodes dedicated to them. The most relevant form of intertextual referencing in relation to the object of this research is 'celebrity intertextuality'. This is the presence of individuals who are already established in some form of culture. These individuals will bring with them other textual denotations and connotations that are associated with their specific cultural forte (Marshall, 1997). 'Celebrities' and public figures will also bring with them the context of excess that is associated to them, such as Jennifer Lopez who appears in South Park in the form of Cartman's left hand which brings not only Lopez's boyfriend Ben Affleck to town but the paparazzi as well. However, while this type of intertextuality is vital to the satirical messages in *South Park*, the series also inverts it by using the voices of famous 'celebrities', such as George Clooney[54] and Jay Leno[55] as the barks of Stan's dog and meows of Cartman's cat respectively.

[51] These different experiences of intertextual references is described by Allen (2000) and Culler (1998).
[52] 'Casa Bonita' – S7E11
[53] 'Smug Alert!' – S10E2
[54] 'Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride' – S1E4.
[55] 'Cartman's Mom Is a Dirty Slut' – S1E13.

The pleasure of deciphering the intertextual references lies in the audiences' "pride in the ability to get the reference" (Andersson, 2004: 11). This does not, however, restrict this pleasure to the cultural elite for it has become a pleasurable feature within many popular culture products[56]. This pleasure can provoke laughter, as is the case in *South Park*, through parody for it is "one of the major forms of modern…. inter-art discourse" (Hutcheon, 1988: 2). Parody thus allows *South Park* to refer to 'celebrities' and the excesses of their 'celebrity' and personal contexts with the expectation that the audience will decode the critique through associating the mockery to information that they have previously consumed about said 'celebrity'. Reader suggests that the "star is an intertextual one, relying as it does on correspondences of similarity and difference from one film to the next, and sometimes too on supposed resemblances between on- and off-screen personae" (1990: 175). *South Park* focuses on the absurdities of these on- and off- screen personae to humourously expose the excesses of celebrity culture.

The pleasures of humour, especially in *South Park*, are not only a result of understanding the paradoxical and satirical contexts and representations but also through the ability to decode the messages in the series. Such as the ability to interpret the ideological aspects of our socialised lives which are made visible in the series and interpreting the context in which these social aspects are being parodied. Another pleasure includes knowledge as to which 'celebrity' or public figure is being represented and what excesses of their career and personal lives are being satirised. Representation is an important concept in understanding the means by which elements of the world are depicted to the population, "things don't mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs" (Hall, 1997: 25). The success of the representation of 'concepts and signs' is dependent on the key factor of the audience's ability to acknowledge the representation and decipher the symbolic connotations associated. The audience's knowledge is based on the masses' socialisation within their community. In her discussion of T. S Eliot's poetry, Hutcheon says that it is knowledge that is "necessary to understand

[56] For more on the relationship between intertextuality and popular culture look at Kaplan (1987), Allen (2000), Stam (1992) and Andersson (2004).

his allusive or parodic poetry" (1988: 2). Hall's theory of representation states that representation is a concept that permits interpretive meanings to be made and shared among communities and that representation acts as a bridge between meaning and language in the form of cultural frameworks (Hall, 1997: 15). Foucault argues that a representation is not a mirror reflection of society and that audiences may decode the message differently from the author's intended message (1980). Barthes (1997) discusses this relationship as the death of the author.

Ott (2008) refers to this analytical ability as an in-group[57] pleasure. The benefits of the circulation of in-group meanings of a text is pleasurable through sharing and decoding. The pleasure can be through the consumption of that 'celebrity' and their products. However Stevenson (2005) stresses that modern audiences need to be located in more complex frameworks. This is because while theorists such as Fiske (1991) and Kellner (1989) defend the agency of the consumer, in the same way as they tend to assume that all 'fans' of a specific 'celebrity' will fit into one category. Ott (2008) refers to this in-group pleasure as that of superiority among frequent watchers of *South Park* who, for example, will be able to understand how Barbra Streisand came to be represented as a robotic monster in season fourteen due to watching the first season of *South Park*. The pleasures of intertextuality within *South Park* are also internal for a signifier from an episode will be referred to in other episodes. The signifier will appeal to the new plot and context of the episode while still carrying its original connotations. *South Park* audiences are thus rewarded for watching the series for they will experience a greater humorous pleasure by decoding the internal allusions. 'Celebrities' are common internal signifiers in the series, as seen with Paris Hilton who is presented as a drunk in the episode 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset' and in a later episode is seen on the cover of a rehabilitation pamphlet[58].

In the end this literature review has brought many interesting factors about *South Park* to light. In essence, by clarifying knowledge of cultural studies,

[57] Such as communities of fans.
[58] 'Guitar Queer-O' – S11E13.



popular culture, and television and films studies this dissertation will be able to better examine the thematic concerns of *South Park*. Bennett and Frow (2008) justify such an act as the result of the blurring of lines of different social disciplines within cultural studies. It is a postmodern evolution as cultural studies borrows resources from the different social science departments in support of theoretical development. Through assessing some key literature on cultural studies, satirical animation as a genre, and the role of laughter, humour, satire, and parody in relation to my understanding and experience of *South Park* some key elements have evolved. The ambiguous, polysemic and satirical nature of *South Park* is literally supported, as well as the element of pleasure that is not only prominent in the physical reaction of laughter but also methodological. In order to be able to investigate where and how satire, parody, and irony function within the series, there are some valuable theoretical building blocks that are going to be used to frame this study of *South Park*. In order to be able to better understand the methodological relationship between these above mentioned key factors and their relevance to this dissertation, the methodology of visual analysis and how it will contribute to this dissertation will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.





THEORETICALLY FRAMING SOUTH PARK.

Through assessing literature around *South Park* and its relation to topics such as popular culture, celebrity culture, the genre of satire, and humour, some key trending topics have come to light. These include ambiguity, polysemia, pleasure and satire. When these topics are theoretically adapted some noteworthy characteristics of *South Park's* nature arise. These characteristics are self-reflection, intertextuality, and critique through satire and parody. This theoretical framework will discuss and use these characteristics, in relation to visual analysis, to theoretically grasp the ambiguity of humour in *South Park* for an enhanced understanding of the discursive space of excess that the series critiques. These 'trending topics' and characteristics can also be seen in the carnivalesque, which will, theoretically, frame this thesis.

According to Bakhtin (1968), the term 'the carnivalesque' is used to refer to the festive celebrations of the medieval and early Renaissance times. These festive celebrations (or rather the 'carnivals') became a frequent part of society, using any event as an excuse to celebrate. Such civil and social ceremonies included knightings, the crowning of a new King, and even religious events. All became part of the humourous rituals. Often these rituals resulted in feasts such as the 'feast of the ass' and the 'feast of the fools', "nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized" (Bakhtin, 1968: 5). The 'feast of the fools' was a yearly carnival initiated after the solemn service by clergymen, riding through the town on a wagon and throwing animal excrement at the onlooking crowd. To have a greater understanding of the carnivalesque, it is important to position this concept within the greater context of medieval literature and the implications of its classification as a humorous genre of folk culture. This chapter, while gaining a better understanding of the genre of medieval humour, will also explore how the key features of this genre, including ambiguity, billingsgate language, and physical distortion, are evident in *South Park* and will use the theory of the carnivalesque to better understand the intention behind these features.

In order to examine these features I refer to analytical techniques of visual analysis because, unlike a semiotic analysis of an image, within the context of 'television studies' visual analysis includes analysing factors such as sound, music, and language. All of which are vital in understating the contexts of visual representations within the series. Ambiguity in *South Park* is presented in the form of humour, used to encourage both laughter and a critical approach to the content of the series. Coincidentally, a key aspect of visual analysis is its focus on the relationship between ambiguity and visual texts. Within visual analysis, the first sense of ambiguity, that will be used to assess *South Park* - is the ambiguity in the word 'object' where a living object (in the case of this dissertation a 'celebrity') can also be seen as a textual discursive object for analysis. Hooper-Greenhill refers to the Chambers Dictionary which defines 'object', not only as a material thing, but also a purpose or aim, as well as a thing, target, and intention such as a person or thing to which actions, feelings, or thoughts are directed (2000: 104). The objective of this study is to assess how *South Park* uses laughter and humour to unpack the absurdities of 'celebrities' and public figures where the 'objects' of focus are *South Park* and the representations of selected 'celebrities' and public figures.

When this feature of visual analysis is used to assess the relationship between S*outh Park* and celebrity culture, one can observe the ambiguous representations of 'celebrities' in *South Park.* While, in some cases, the series will support or even voice its approval of some 'celebrities'[59], it will also simultaneously discourages the worshipping of 'celebrities' due to their personal and professional absurdities. This is seen in the episode 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset'[60] where socialite and heiress Paris Hilton opens a store in South Park selling products that encourage the girls in the town to be "stupid spoiled whores"[61] just like her. In reality, Hilton became an international 'celebrity' after a sex tape was leaked to the public. She then embraced this fame to create an economic empire. In the episode the parody of Hilton, who is always drunk and coughing semen, is questioning society's

[59] As in the case in the episode 'Mecha-Streisand' – S1E12.
[60] S8E12
[61] This quote, said by Hilton, has been taken directly from the episode, 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset' – S8E12

obsession with such an unworthy icon. Wendy Testaburger[62] voices this critique against the ideological conception that women should act like "stupid spoiled whores" inverting the master narrative encouraged by Hilton.

Visual analysis is an attractive analytical tool specifically for this dissertation and examining *South Park* because "visual analysis critically analyses the master narratives that frame events of seeing and their objects, and that are presented as natural, universal, true and inevitable. It attempts to dislodge them so that alternative narratives can become visible" (Bal, 2008: 179). This desire to "dislodge" master narratives is not only a postmodern feature of visual analysis but 'television studies' as well. Allen and Hill define television as "a set of formal, narrative, and representational structures and capacities" (2004: 1). While narratives are necessary in defining genres, and character and sitcom types, television studies examines the postmodern "abandoning [of] master narratives… and privileging modes of thinking and representation" (Casey et al, 2008: 212). *South Park* challenges master narratives, practically those of worship and celebrity culture. This is because "postmodern texts characteristically eschew the codes and conventions of realism and narrative" (Casey et al, 2008: 213). This desire to dismantle and invert are aspects that exhibit visual analysis to be anti-elitist which will support my analysis of *South Park's* anti-elitist representations of 'celebrities' and pubic figures. Ultimately, under the umbrella of visual analysis, this thesis will turn to semiotic theory and intertextuality as analytical tools. Visual analysis will also contribute to the following discussion of *South Park's* carnivalesque characteristics of self-reflection, intertextuality, and critique through satire and parody.

Despite Storey (1997) suggesting that postmodern television, through commodification, has reduced the complexities of the world to an "ever-changing flow of depthless and banal visual imagery" (1997: 196) he still acknowledges that television and its subject matter is necessary for analysis. This is not only due to televisions strong connections to intertextual references but because postmodern television is a site of intersection where

[62] Wendy is a female student at 'South Park Elementary' and Stan's girlfriend.



multiple conflicting cultural messages collide. *South Park*, as a televisual text, exhibits the importance of studying cultural messages particularly through its use of intertextuality and in its many different shapes. Lindvall and Melton in their approach to intertextuality and cartoons epitomise the importance of the relationship between animation and postmodernism saying that "postmodern sensibilities are stylistically realised in this artform with the fusion of high and low art, the tinkering with hybrid forms, the tones of irony and parody, the incredulity toward metanarratives, and the principle of double coding, all of which frolic merrily in the realm of the intertextual" (1994: 64). *South Park* also utilises excess to enhance its satirical representations of 'celebrities' and public figures. While intertextuality is a postmodern device in popular culture excess presents an "overflowing semiosis, the excessive sign performs the work of the dominant ideology" (Fiske, 1989: 114). The excessive qualities of celebrity culture become topics of explanation as a source of humourous pleasure for viewers when 'celebrities' are placed in different contexts, other than what onlookers are accustomed to (Fiske, 1989).

Visual images are important to cultural development for much of social life is influenced by what we see and how we consume and interpret images. It is because of the niche power and cultural influence of visual culture that visual analysis is necessary. Bal says that visual culture:

> …endorses the idea that images exist for viewers, who can do with them what they please, and will do so within frames of reference that society has set up for them…. For visual analysis, whether or not a reading is the right one is not the issue. Instead, visual analysis is interested in the act of interpretive recycling of visible objects… and ponders how every act of using an object is necessarily an interpretation of it (2008: 165).

While Bal (2008) greatly emphasises the role the socio-political background of the audience[63] plays in the analysis of the denoted and connoted intertextual messages, van Leeuwen says that "there are other contexts where the producers of the text have an interest in trying to get a particular message across to a particular audience" (2006; 95). Echoing the filmic theories of Metz (1974), visual analysis sees the importance of contextualising or framing the intertextual object of investigation. For example, the re-presented elements taken from the film trilogy '*The Lord of the Rings*' in the episode 'The Return of the Fellowship of the Ring to the Two Towers'[64] need to be contextualised in order to understand the style of clothing and discourse in the episode. Foucault (1975) equates this previous understanding as knowledge that 'colours the gaze' and, in the process, makes visible aspects of the object that were previously invisible. Other contexts that drop hints to the viewer with regards to better understanding the content of the episode is suggested in the title. For example, those familiar with the paradoxical nature of *South Park* and the film trilogy '*The Lord of the Rings*' will decipher the content of the episode 'The Return of the Fellowship of the Ring to the Two Towers' from the title.

While *South Park* is highly visual and many symbolic connotations will be deciphered from the pictorial representations, visual analysis is limited in its privileging of visual culture as the only instrument of knowledge, because the visual is "considered as evidence, as truth and fact" (Bal, 2008: 174). As a solution to this limitation, semiotics will be used as an analytical tool to further understand the relationship between *South Park* and intertextuality. Johnson–Woods (2007) estimates that within the first nine seasons of the series, nearly a hundred television programmes and over a hundred and sixty films have been verbally and visually intertextually referenced. It is clear that intertextual allusions are not merely a trait that *South Park* has become famously known for, but also a vital feature to the approach through which the series makes social commentary (Semmerling, 2006). The context and extent to which

[63] The notion of audience agency and the influence that their socio-political influence can have on their interpretation of the text is also a topic of focus within cultural studies as well as postmodernism in the greater context.
[64] S6E13.

South Park uses intertextual references to abject topics in society is on a much larger scale than any other series within the satirical animated genre such as *The Simpsons*. Knox writes about this double-codedness in his essay 'Reading the Ungraspable Double-Codedness of *The Simpsons* (2006) drawing a parallel of intertextual techniques used in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. Knox says that "*The Simpsons* uses the animation form to feature a heavily self-reflective and intertextual aesthetic that displays a sense of ironic knowingness often considered a quality of postmodern television" (2006:74). Numerous academic studies on satirical animation tend to compare *The Simpsons* and *South Park* because these qualities are also true to *South Park*, actually so much so that Stone and Parker created the episode 'Simpsons Already Did It'[65]. Weinstock rightly says that "one needs to acknowledge that the *South Park* did not simply emerge out of nowhere" (2008a: 79) and will reflect its influences from other popular culture products, particularly those within the same genre. Knox (2006) says that this cartoon-with-in-a-cartoon technique is a metaphoric and postmodern device which is satirising audience consumerism. Andersson (2009), on the other hand, explains that the relationship between intertextuality and postmodernism can be described through the mutual lack of expectation for originality, breaking down the many forms in which intertextuality can appear within cultural products. These include allusion, celebrity intertextuality, autocitation, genetic intertextuality, and mendacious intertextuality (Andersson, 2004: 21- 41).

Terrance and Phillip are two Canadian 'celebrities' who star in their own series *The Terrance and Phillip Show*, and star in their own film within the *South Park* film called *Asses of Fire*. These two characters appearances, like the appearance of most Canadians in the series, are physically geometrically-figured with egg shaped heads that separate in half through the mouths when speaking. Phillip, otherwise known as Sir Phillip Niles Argyle of Montréal, has blonde hair and a blue long sleeved shirt with the letter "P" printed on the front. His best friend and co-star Terrance, (also known as Sir Terrance Henry Stoot from the "small village" of Toronto) has black hair and wears a red long

[65] S6E7. For more information on this topic and episode look at Weinstock, 2008b

sleeved shirt with the corresponding letter "T" printed on it. These characters are the intertextual replicas of *South Park*'s creators Stone and Parker who even supply the voices for Terrance and Phillip respectively[66]. Despite Terrance and Phillip winning a Nobel Peace Price and being the most famous celebrities in the universe of *South Park* the parents of their biggest fans Eric, Stan, Kyle, and Kenny are not able to understand the appeal of the toilet humour in the show that includes Terrence and Phillip telling jokes about farts, finishing their sentence with farts, and even farting on American president Barack Obama's face[67]. The characters Terrance and Phillip act as an example of a self-reflective intertextual methodological pleasure in the series. One needs to be a regular consumer of S*outh Park* to truly understand the relationships of Terrance and Philip to Stone and Parker, as well as their relationship with young boys of S*outh Park*. These relationships are an example of the superiority pleasure of fandom within the series, partnered with the ability to decipher the intertextual references within the text. Most notably while Terrance and Phillip act as self-reflective beacons of *South Park*, their show *The Terrance and Phillip Show* also acts as a presentation of the self-reflective nature of S*outh Park* itself.

Halsall (2008) and Savage (2004) both describe this self-reflective input as a hint from Stone and Parker to scholars and audience members. Through self-reflection this personal abjection through the 'Terrence and Phillip Show' acts as a metaphoric symbol of how contemporary society should consume and interpret[68] the cultural significance and ideological content of *South Park.* Postmodernism enables a greater reading of this self-reflective nature for it is also a postmodern characteristic to not only subvert social ideologies but to be self-reflective within the same context. Knox (2006) believes that two key characteristics of *South Park* valourise the series' relationship to postmodernism and the carnivalesque. These are its grotesque nature and representations, and its self-conscious manifestations. *South Park* is unique in

[66] While Terrance and Phillip are the intertextual replicas of Stone and Parker, the creators also provide the voices for most of the main characters in the series. Trey Parker provides the voice for Stan Marsh, Eric Cartman, Randy Marsh, and Mr Garrison. Matt Stone provides the voice for Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick, Butter Stotch, and Jesus,
[67] 'Eat, Pray, Queef' S13E4
[68] Also see Knox 2006, Summerling, 2006, and Gournelos 2009.



its awareness that while it encourages critical laughter about outside content, the series uses self-reflective representations to prevent becoming the topic of critical laughter in other texts. This self-reflection is not simply present in the series but in the actions of its creators as well. Aware of this irony - that the series critiques celebrity culture and itself - Parker and Stone attended the 2000 Oscar Awards satirically crossed-dressed wearing dresses that had been previously worn by actresses Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Lopez (Gournelos, 2009). The self-reflection illustrates that while *South Park* is able to humourously approach its own flaws, this sense of critique through satire and parody is present.

Boyd and Plamondon (2008) discuss the music featured in both the *South Park: Bigger, Louder & Uncut* film and episodes in the series, suggesting that the success of the humour in *South Park* is dependent on the proper utilisation of satire. Satirical animation as a postmodern genre has been critically discussed earlier in this chapter. However, Groening believes that in the relationship between *South Park* and satire "the progressive potential of satire means that viewers who identify with the characters are also given the opportunity to realise that they themselves share these prejudices and stereotypes" (2008:117). Satire is portrayed through *South Park*'s extreme use of crude animations and obscene quantities of abusive language that illustrate that *South Park* does not just talk and present vulgarity but celebrates it as well (Karimova 2010). Some of the most popular intertextual parodies in *South Park* are those of the 'celebrity' and public figure (Weinstock 2008b) as a means of satirising not the absurdities of the individual 'celebrity' or public figure, but the culture of celebration that surrounds them. Ironically, despite criticising celebrity culture, Parker and Stone have themselves become a product of celebrity culture[69] (Savage 2004).

Postmodernism "challenges traditional notions of democracy, citizenship and public administration" (Boje, 2001: 433) and embraces techniques such as

[69] Many academic scripts have been written on this irony including Ross 1998, Irwin and Lombardo 2001, Rhodes 2001, Savage 2004, Leonard 2006 and Gournelos 2009.

satire to exploit the productive qualities of power (Storey, 1997). This 'exploitation of power' is present in *South Park* and most critical research on *South Park* discusses the series as a postmodern product. Hutcheon (1989) scrutinises postmodernism and its concern to "de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as natural are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us" (1989: 2). In this sense, postmodernism characteristically and ironically emphasises the realisation that cultural forms of representations are the result of mass media and mass consumption which has encouraged ideological thought (Hutcheon, 1989). Consequently, cultural products such as "arts and artefacts [are] not only [seen] as aesthetic objects or reflections of the spirit of their times, but also as instruments furthering the ideological foundations of society" (Gowans, 1981).

Marxist theory reduces the knowledge received by audiences, through cultural productions, as ideology. Foucault criticises this believing that ideology would reduce the relationship between power and knowledge into "a question of class power and class interests" (Hall, 1997; 48). Postmodernism views ideology as "both a system of representation and as a necessary and unavoidable part of social totality" (Hutcheon, 1989: 6), however, similarly to the means by which postmodernism subverted elements of modernist thought, so it has also subverted power through representations and satirical laughter. Ultimately it subverts the social and ideological production of meaning (Hutcheon, 1989: 6).

South Park creators Stone and Parker use laughter in the series to liberate both themselves and their audience from conventional conceptions (Quigley, 2000). As has been mentioned previously, there are "no sacred cows" (Halsall, 2008: 130) in the selection of topics, issues, or people to satirically represent or mock. Hutcheon (1989) discusses representation within postmodern theory, suggesting that representation mimics a naturalised position and is used to mediate what is cultural, such as ideology. Foster (1983) approaches postmodernism as a resistance to developed theoretical and cultural practises, even that of cultural studies. *South Park*, for example -



inverts the economic objective of our contemporary theoretical era by making new and old episodes available to watch for free on many media forms including online at the official *South Park* website[70]. The product is not sold but freely shared (Gournelos, 2009). This raises questions within the 'cultural industry' about which has more value, the economic benefits or the social critiques within the series.

Throughout his career as president of the United States of America George W. Bush[71] was featured in many *South Park* episodes. In the episode 'Super Best Friends'[72] President Bush is trying to decide whether to give American illusionist David Blaine and his followers' tax exempt status. In the episode President Bush also attempts to kill Kyle and Stan due to their discovery of the role his government played in the September 11th terrorist attacks[73]. Finally, in connection to Presidents Bush's controversial declaration of war on Iraq and leader Saddam Hussein, President Bush is seen being convinced by government officials that Hussein is building weapons of mass destruction in Heaven. President Bush then informs the United Nations of Hussein's plans, only to be questioned on whether he is "high" or stupid. He dismisses that he is "high" but not that he is stupid. The critical, satirical and paradoxical context in which President Bush has been placed needs to be examined in greater detail. However, the fact that he is parodied in the series to such an extent, along with many other politicians and 'celebrities', demonstrates that *South Park* does not support their power status. Similarly, if we are to consider the kinds of objects that visual analysis has been focusing on in the attempt to subvert social normalities, we can see that the relationship between *South Park* and visual analysis is based on a mutual anti-elitist nature.

These *South Park* characteristics of intertextuality, self-reflection, and critique through satire and parody not only clarify the relationship between *South Park* and visual analysis, but also cultural studies and postmodernism. They act as

[70] www.southparkstudios.com
[71] George W. Bush served as the 43rd President of the United States. President Bush was a member of the U.S Republican Party and served as president from 2001 to 2009.
[72] S5E4
[73] The episode is titled 'Mystery of the Urinal Deuce' - S10E9

analytical tools in this research, enriching the examination of the extent to which laughter is encourage and used in the series as a form of social critique. These characteristics, while all linked through their relationship to *South Park*, are also linked by their sense of play. Each characteristic exhibits features of critical representation, demonstrating that the context of each episode is always a context of play. What is established here is that *South Park* is anti-elitist and critical in its representations of itself and our social context through satirical and paradoxical distortions and laughter through a playful or festive nature. These are also features that can be observed in the carnivalesque and carnival laughter.

Carnival laughter, through ridicule, acts as a path to freedom by blurring the lines between reality and play, empowering the participants by resisting the hardships of reality through laughter (Bakhtin, 1968). It is important to note that the humourous manifestations of carnival culture were born within the marketplace, a realm dominated by the peasants of those times. However, the spectacle did not discriminate. As opposed to the 'official feasts' that positioned individuals based on their social ranking, the carnival festivities did not. Bakhtin describes this as the very essence of the carnival: to embrace everyone for "all were considered equal during the carnival" (1968: 10). Taylor refers to this subversion or dismissal of an individuals' power as the "de-privileging of the dominant order" (Taylor, 2012: 197). Thus, subversion is the result of the pre-modern carnival humour of peasants, ridiculing the social elite and noble clergymen (Boje, 2001) through the spectacular which emphasised the madness and crude nature of the power relations (Karimova 2010). Similarly, in *South Park*, icons in society such as 'celebrities' and pubic figures are lampooned to the point were their social ranking and power is *temporarily* dismissed making them equal to the characters and audience of the series.

Halsall states that "to downplay the carnivalesque qualities of So*uth Park* is to ignore the cathartic release that Parker and Stone's satirical potty humour generates" (2008: 24) through comic devices of political incorrectness, spectacular irreverence, and the combination of incongruous and bizarre



situations. Weinstock (2008a) suggests that the key relationship between the carnival and *South Park* is located in the liminal space where parody and satire are intertwined with the objective to mock symbols that are iconic in American culture. Many, if not all, of *South Park*'s episodes echo the many pleasures of the carnival, Fiske (cited in Quigley, 2000: 4) defines the carnivalesque as the "pleasure of the subordinate escaping from the rules and conventions that are agents of our social control" (Fiske cited in Quigley 2000: 4), and *South Park* offers its audience this pleasure in many ways, particularly through the inverted representation of societal norms and conventions.

The content of *South Park* frequently refers to such codes of social convention and norms, relying on its audiences' ability to decipher the codes in order to understand the extent and context of the satirical critiques and political incorrectness. As a result, the spectating process is vital in understanding television theory and its relation to *South Park*. Fuery (2000) connects this relationship to the carnivalesque, suggesting that films and television texts are themselves a types of social inversion because the act of watching is participating in the carnivalesque act where "the social restrictions and constructed orders, established laws and hierarchies, are forgone and the potential for inversion is allowed" (2000:115). While Kristeva (1984) suggests that a polyphonic quality in a text is fundamental to the carnival structure, Lister and Wells (2006) believe that visual cultural studies is a re-working of postmodern cultural media studies supposing that the everyday life has become one of visual culture because of film and television. In essence, through using analytical techniques from film and television theory, this research aims to use a semiotic theory of visual signs to motions pictures in order to explain the significance of laughter that is encouraged (and often aimed at) celebrities in *South Park*.

Many of the techniques and devices of the carnivalesque can be used to read the laughter in *South Park* as a social critique of celebrity culture. Carnival laughter is particularly different to other humourous forms. While an individual may laugh at the silly innocence of a child, carnival laughter is cruel, liberating, complex and contradictory. Storey (1997) describes carnival

laughter as ridicule fused with rejoicing, the celebration of the festival bringing together all the members of a community to eat, drink, and be gay while mocking each other at the same time. This experience offers the people involved in the spectating process a temporary utopian world of equality where the distinction of hierarchies does not exist (Lachman, 1987). Carnival laughter is the ritual of removing the powerful from the context of the 'sacred' into that of the profane and is directed at verbally and graphically insulting the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly, and the reproductive organs. Halsall refers to these humourous forms in her analysis of *South Park*, suggesting that (like the discourse in the series) these humourous forms are "completely distinct from the official ecclesiastical, feudal, and political discourse of medieval times – and, by extension contemporary life" (2008: 24).

I argue that, as with the critical laughter encouraged in *South Park*, carnival laughter is festive and the laughter of all people. It has a universal scope with great emphasis on gay ambivalence. Its festive scope of paradoxical humour ranged from mocking prayers to sermons and kings to heroes. This is because in those temporary moments of communal laughter we are all kings (Bakhtin, 1968). Similarly, where the nature of carnival humour does not discriminate in which objects are topics of ridicule, *South Park* has and will continue to mock all aspects of contemporary American life. The range of topics, products, and people that are mocked in *South Park* is nothing unusual to the satirical genre of humour. However while other series[74] that are included in the genre of satirical animation are self-reflective, it is the crude level by which *South Park* is self-reflective that makes it unique and more characteristically related to the carnivalesque.

However, Bakhtin (1968) disapproves of this 'modern interpretation' of the satiric devices, suggesting that it is modern degradation through parody and satire which has lost its positive spin due to the loss of ambivalence in the humour. Contrary to this description, while applicable to some modern cultural

[74] Such series include *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *American Dad!*



texts, *South Park* has maintained the ambivalence that is characteristic of the carnival satirical humour (Ott, 2008). Its creators, Stone and Parker use carnival laughter in the series to liberate both themselves and their audience from conventional conceptions, particularly those that are considered excessive. The excessive is a key characteristic of carnival laughter, popular culture, and *South Park*. This is because "excessiveness invites its denigrators to attack it (popular culture) as 'vulgar', 'melodramatic', 'obvious', 'superficial', [and] 'sensational'" (Fiske, 1989). As a product of popular culture, *South Park* does not merely abide by these qualities but is true to the genre of satirical animation and exposes the excesses of American culture.

Carnival laughter developes an acceptable form of entertainment that is popular through the use of toilet humour, this is because "carnivalesque laughter frees the viewer from the restrictions and regulations imposed by society" (Karimova, 2010: 45). Bakhtin (1968) discusses some of the key characterises of the carnivalesque (all of which are evident in S*outh Park*); laughter for the sake of laughter, mocking the present official political system, religious dogmas and authoritative figures, grotesque realism, billingsgate (abusive) language, degradation of high images, celebration of lower bodily stratum (genitals and reproductive organs), masquerade. It does not fear death, and the crowning and decrowning of the king or contemporary 'celebrities'. However, while the Bakhtinian notion exemplifies the carnivalesque, Deleuze (cited in Smith 1996), Kristeva (1980), and Derrida (1995) offer different perspectives on the carnivalesque. Whereas Bakhtin focuses on the emotional intensity represented in the text, Deleuze (cited in Smith 1996) places emphasis on the aesthetics of the intensity whilst Derrida (1995) believes that carnivalesque texts must offer the opportunity for the viewer to ask questions, be suspicious of the representations and analyse the intertextual references. Finally Kristeva (1980) suggests that the author of the text and the spectator both play a role in the production, destruction and consumption of the carnivalesque. There is evidence of postmodern cultural studies in all of these interpretations of the carnivalesque, and while all these

carnivalesque approaches help theoretically construct this thesis, they will also be used as analytical tools in examining cultural texts[75].

Mbembe (1992) continually refers to the carnivalesque in his analysis of the relationship between the state and the people within the postcolony context of Africa. In his book '*On the Postcolony*' Mbembe (1992) selects a series of characteristics of the carnival from his readings of Bakhtin that he embraces, inverts or all together rejects to substantiate his argument. Similarly to the children's play in *South Park*, the Mbembean perspective of pleasurable humour is immediate gratification of the 'people' that is allowed by the *commandant* otherwise known as the authority. In the clichéd fashion of postmodern cultural products, such as *South Park*, its ambiguous nature both supports this Mbembean notion while tending to represent authority figures or "adults as incompetent, unable to understand, and the children as superior in insight and ability" (Fiske, 1987: 242).

What is evident is in academic work is that the application of the carnivalesque is contextually sensitive. As a result it is important to assess how the carnivalesque and Bakhtin (1968) has been applied to *South Park*. *South Park* uses the techniques of the carnivalesque to offer new perspectives and socially critique societal conventions as evident in the work of Gournelos (2009) and Johnson –Woods (2007). Quigley touches on some of the controversial topics undertaken in *South Park* such as homosexuality, religious difference, the cult of celebrity, mass media marketing to children, and sexual harassment. All of these are critiqued with the objective to transgress "the boundaries of the acceptable in order to comment on our postmodern, mass mediated society" (2000: 4). Ott (2008) and Hallsal (2008) examine the types of pleasures experienced through the carnival qualities of *South Park*. In his discussion of the pleasure Ott (2008) approaches *South Park* humour as the form of postmodern irony that stresses humility over superiority. In their discussion of pleasure and television studies Casey says that the "use of the term 'pleasure'

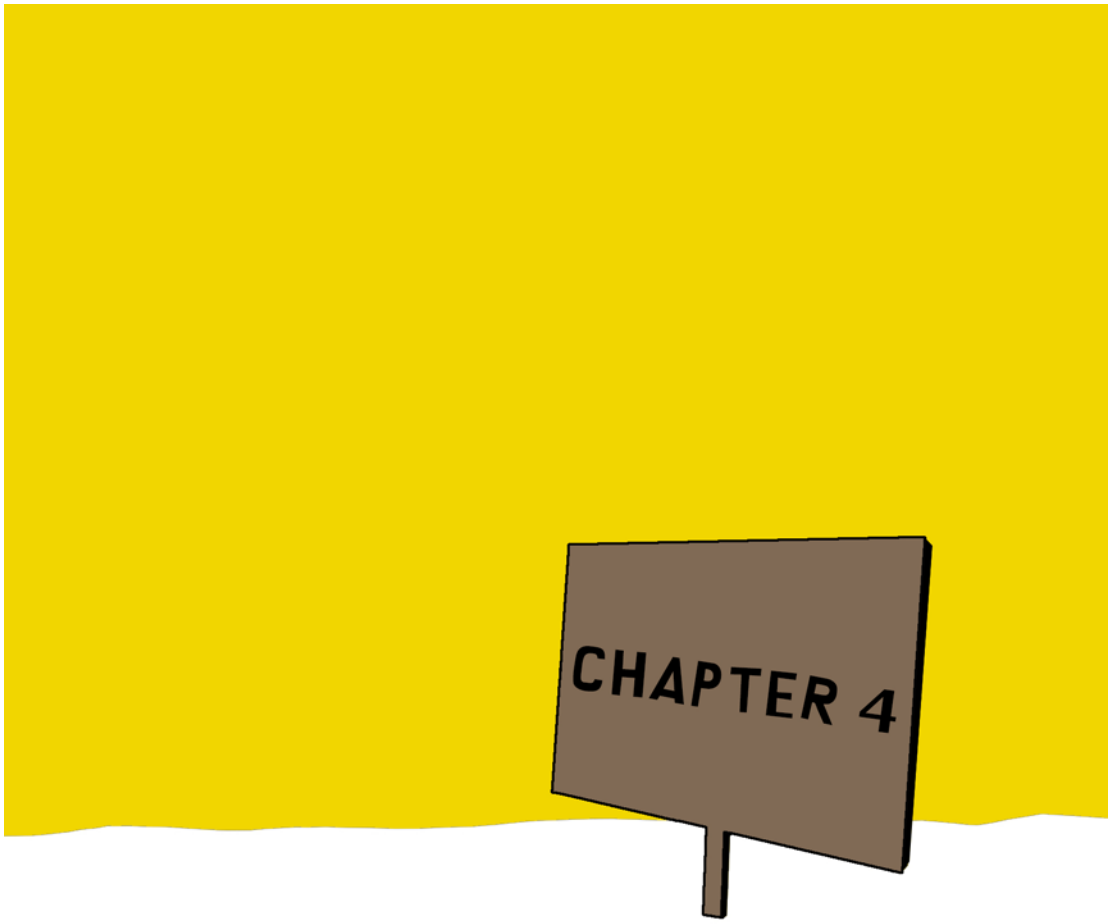
[75] Such as analysing events (as discussed by Castle 1986; Kolyanzin 2002) as well as contemporary society (as discussed by Mitchell 1995; Lewis and Pile 1996; Lindahl 1996; Nurse 1999; Karimova 2010)

within television studies is far from unproblematic" (et al, 2008: 194). This is due to assumptions that viewers watch television out of pure choice, and the questions as to whether television is consumed only as entertainment. In the end, Casey suggests that the question to consider is what each "each audience member would consider pleasure" (et al, 2008: 194).

Ott (2008) discusses the pleasure of the liberating excessive nature of carnival play as homologous to childish play, such as that of the series' protagonists Kyle, Stan, Cartman, and Kenny. This suggests that this sense of play is childish and thus provides freedom by avoiding the objective of any transgressive outcome. The Bakhtinian notion says that "children's play is carnivalesque because carnival not only celebrates laughter and excess, but also challenges symbolic inversion or world-upside-down depictions, the very rules that replicate social order" (Bakhtin, 1968: 197).

What this discussion has attempted is to demonstrate the close relationship between the carnivalesque, carnival humour, and how these are reflected in *South Park*. The techniques and academic research on the carnivalesque will be used as necessary tools to better our understanding of pleasure, satire, and parody in *South Park*. Through visual analysis, semiotics, and intertextuality the many critical representations and pleasures in *South Park* will be discussed. Similarly, through his application of carnival characteristics to the postcolony, Mbembe (1992) has pinpointed pleasures that are derived from the changing nature and function of images in postmodern conditions (Ott, 2008) This acts as a reminder to acknowledge (for the chapters to follow) the different contextual settings of a cultural product and how context will affect the symbolic meaning[76] of the content or text, especially in relation to *South Park* and 'celebrities'.

[76] Further discussion of the contextual effect of a carnival analysis can be found in Mitchell, 1995 Lewis and Pile, 1996. Lindahl, 1996. Nurse 1999. Or Tokofsky, 1999.



METHODOLOGY.

The many types of carnival like humour used in *South Park* liberates its audiences, through providing alternative perspectives to mainstream norms and conventions. While this documents aims to investigate how *South Park* uses humour to highlight the excesses and absurdities of celebrity culture, it is through referring to social codes that the series audience is able to decipher the irony, parody, and satire used in the series. Methodologically this dissertation turns to the techniques of qualitative research to emphasis the importance of textual analysis and how it will be beneficial in the analysis chapter. The discussion on textual analysis will lead to a discussion on the types of data interpretation that will be used to analysis the selected *South Park* texts; the data interpretation devices include semiotics and intertextuality.

4.1 Research design

Codes, signs, and symbols act as indicators of socio-cultural systems of communication. Methodologically, in order to analyse such systems in a critical discussion, the research type will be categorised as qualitative or quantitative. This is not to say that in some events the two research types can not both be used within one article of any type of research. However, in the case of this dissertation, qualitative research will be used. Qualitative research aims to observe human behaviour and responses to texts (O'Sullivan et al. 2003) through interviews and small focus groups. As a result, through both physical and theoretical research, the scholar is able to "genuinely understand the world through their eyes" (Bryman, 2008: 394). In this case, by saying "their eyes" Bryman (2008) is referring to the audience's perception of the text. However, in the case of this dissertation, while the qualitative research design will allow for an understanding of *South Park* through my perceptions; qualitative research will also aid in distinguishing the many alternative discursive spaces from the many voices of the *South Park* characters.

While reception analysis is one branch of qualitative research, the second step, or what some consider another branch of qualitative research, is content

analysis. Content analysis is where the information and communication systems are deciphered from the 'data' such as interviews and or, in the case of this research, an anthology. The information presented is then linguistically interpreted, providing space for other forms of analysis such as textual or discourse analysis (O'Sullivan et al. 2003). Contrary to quantitative content analysis which is "used to test explicitly comparative hypothesis by means of quantification of categories of manifest content" (Bell, 2006: 13), qualitative content analysis is used as a technique to aid researchers in the creation of their hypothesis and, as a result, is known as the theory of inductivity (Bryman, 2008). In the reverse behaviour of deductive, and thus the quantitative method, inductive research "involves drawing generalizable inferences out of observations" (Bryman, 2008: 11). This implies that the hypothesis and objective of research is materialised only after the analysis in the area of interest is finished. While there may be a defined argument for this investigation, there is no identified hypothesis. As a result, it is evident that an inductive and ultimately qualitative approach will be used in this investigation.

In an analysis of discursive cultural texts, such as *South Park,* qualitative research will aid this study (of the connoted significance of signs in the series) by understanding *South* Park greater social impact as a text of entertainment. This research will argue that *South Park* uses laughter as a vehicle through which to unpack symbolic connotations because the contextual space where laughter is encouraged becomes the focal point where qualitative analysis is most necessary. However, this is problematic because, in the words of Andersson, "an objective textual analysis cannot be attempted" (2004: 7). This is due to the analyser's socio-political and cultural background, limiting the extent of knowledge to the symbolic significance within the text. In the end, this will affect the results of this analysis of *South Park*. Despite this, the investigation's "focus [is] on gaining insight into their [the texts] meanings and values and how these may relate to aspects of social and cultural experience and dynamics" (O'Sullivan et al. 2003: 264). In essence, without a hypothesis, the analysis is free of subjective interference. It is the inductive nature of qualitative research that prevents the results from being swayed by the researchers' objectives, for my objectives are unknown. This is a strength that



aids the fair generalisation in the outcome of the information. In her research Musila studies Gado's anthology of political cartoons suggesting that "within this anthology format the cartoons are freed from an auxiliary role as collaborative reinforcement of the editorial positions on the respective issues, and instead become autonomous texts in themselves, open to interpretation in their own right as cultural productions" (Muslia, 2004: 3). Similarly to Musila's work, this dissertation is based in the research of animation. This methodologically inspired me and, as a result, an anthology of *South Park* episodes will be used as the subject matter for examination in this study. Through creating an anthology of *South Park* episode each segment can be analysed as an individual standing text. This anthology of *South Park* episodes will be examined by using the analytical techniques of semiotics and intertextuality.

4.2 Data Interpretation

Semiotics:

Semiology is the theory of signs understood through the signifier (the sign) and the signified (the object). Braudy and Cohen describe a sign as "an index to the extent that its significance depends on a real connection between the sign and what it signifies" (2009: 82). In this, case animations are graphic signs that signify an object in reality. Semiologist Charles Sanders Peirce (1935) suggests that the significance of a sign[77] is dependent on human convention and the basic similarity of the sign to the object. This is the result of conventions and codes and the recognition of their resemblance through reading and interpreting the signs. The signifier is a mimic representation of the object and not a mirror reflection. For example, in *South Park* the picture (image) of Stan signifies a young boy even though there is no natural resemblance between him and the object (reality) of a real boy. This is seen in the episode "Bloody Mary"[78] where Pope Benedict XVI is summoned to Park

[77] According to founding linguistic semiologist Saussure the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. This is due to a set of conventions that have come to define the relationship.
[78] S9E14

County Colorado after a statue of the Virgin Mary is discovered. It is evident that the mimic representation is not a direct reflection of the Pope. However there are signs that show this resemblance, such as facial features. Signs that are interpreted indicate that it is a representation of a religious figure. These signs are understood through social conventions such as the cross around his neck (the holy rosary), the typical style hat worn by the pope (mitre), his staff (crozier) and his attire.

As this illustrates, reality cannot be literally mimicked through media forms for the sign can only be signified through the aural-visual or textual form of language (Hall 1997). However, what is most important to acknowledge, in relation to signs and codes, is that the connotations and denotations of a sign are socially constructed. Furthermore, the encoded narrative is determined by shared cultural referents (Hall in McQuail, 2002). Thus, in a semiotic analysis of a text, such as an animation, "we are able to see them [the texts] as sites for active engagement with, and response to circulating discourses within a given context" (Musila, 2004: 68). By using semiotics to analyse *South Park* as a motion picture, we are able to include both visual and verbal textual codes and cultural signs. This is because "semiotics is extremely useful in its attempt to describe precisely how television produces meaning and its insistence on the conventionality of the signs. For if signs are conventional, they are also changeable" (Seiter, 1992: 63). Sieter (1992) suggests that semiotics helps in deciphering signs, codes, and symbols in a text. In terms of 'television studies', it also raises important questions on the content of televisual texts in terms of gender, race, and class.

Animations are fictionalised accounts of reality. While an individual will decipher that a sign is signified in the text, Barthes (1977) suggests that the body or object not only acts as a signifier and also a site for parody. Parody is imitation with the intention of mockery (Huntcheon, 1985) and is obviously present in S*outh Park* through the use of distorted representations, contextual surroundings, and hyperbolic devices to make social commentary. Musila says that "the process of exaggeration and distortion in caricatures is the precise act that communicates interpretations and attitudes towards the



realities being parodied" (2004; 68) and emphasises the importance of the cultural "anchorage" of the distorted object.

Such distortions come to represent the attitudes of Stone and Parker, particularly through the representations of 'celebrities' and public figures in the series. For instance, the style of dress and accents are among the many denoting signs that suggest that the episode 'It's a Jersey Thing'[79] is not only satirising the members from the series '*Jersey Shore*' but the New Jersey community as a whole. The reality television 'celebrity' Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi from the series '*Jersey Shore*' is represented in this episode. Snooki is parodied in such a distorted form to the point where her body is no longer human. Paradoxical and satirical distortions of 'celebrities' and public figures are characteristic of the satirical animation genre and thus *South Park*. Snooki is discovered terrorising 'Skeeter's Bar' in *South Park* (a comment on her drinking and partying habits) and only flees the scene after raping a man. She is later discovered in another bar by the young boys where she terrorises the children, and rapes two boys while repeatedly shouting "Snooki want smoosh smoosh!". Linguistic semiotics suggests that "Smoosh Smoosh" together with the creature's physical actions is a term for sex, and allusion to Snooki's public sexual deviances.

The idiotic creature is orange in colour (often associated to individuals who use fake tan as Snooki is well known for) with a stumpy tail and rat-like features. The physical body is distorted with exaggerated fat rolls and hunched back. Specific to the genre, Stoner and Parker use such distortions to connote certain ideas that the audience will decode by referring to a store of signs they share as a community and with the artist (Grossberg et al; 2006). Such signs that connect the signifier (Snooki) to the signified (real Snooki) are symbols that are conventionally associated to Snooki, such as the style of hair, the large gold hooped earrings, the copious amounts of makeup and the black bra under a transparent vest.

[79] S14E9

What this brief analysis has illustrated is that the content of *South Park* is predominantly contextually based on the audience's socio-cultural ability to interpret the intended paradoxes. As a discursive site *South Park's* polysemic nature makes it a rich text for a semiotic analysis. As a result, this dissertation will be using semiology as an analytical tool to decipher the symbols and signs that indicate techniques of humour and laughter in the series in order to focus on the excesses and absurdities of the represented 'celebrities' and public figures. Hall (1981) says that distortion and exaggeration of such excesses and absurdities, along with incorporation, resistance, negotiation, and recuperation are all forms of the cultural struggle. With the evidence of the excesses and absurdities decoded from the text, we will be able to interrogate the social critiques made in *South Park*.

Intertextuality:

The methodological pleasure of the relationship between *South Park* and intertextuality[80] has been discussed earlier in this dissertation. Thus, the following discussion will focus on the use of intertextuality as an analytical tool for the chapter to follow. *South Park*, as a textual site within popular culture, relies on intertextuality and the previous consumption of other products from popular culture to insinuate specific ideas and values. Intertextuality can come in the form of transformation, as seen within the context of *South Park*, where it is actively re-working existing traditions and activities in order to present them in different ways (Hall, 1981). Culler's (1998) approach to intertextuality is unique in seeing the process as one of presupposition, describing the study of intertextuality as "not the investigation of sources and influences, as traditionally conceived; [because] it casts its net wider to include the anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, which are the conditions of possibility of later texts" (1998: 22).

[80] In its original form, Saussure (1966) believes intertextuality to be prominent in the art of linguistics, and since the research of Saussure, intertextuality has evolved to include many shapes and forms of all artistic texts.

This illustrates that while an individual will experience pleasure through deciphering intertextual allusions, in some cases the encoded message may be too common to realise the pleasurable experience. Still and Worton suggest that different audience members may not have the intertextual knowledge of the allusions:

> …a deliberate allusion to a work unknown to the reader, which goes unnoticed, will have dominant existence in that reading. On the other hand, the reader's experience of some practice or theory unknown to the author may lead to a fresh interpretation (1990: 11)

Similarly, Eco (1990) has suggested that the repetition of the intertextual symbol needs to be innovative and well executed in order for a consumer who does not observe the intertextual message to still enjoy the text.

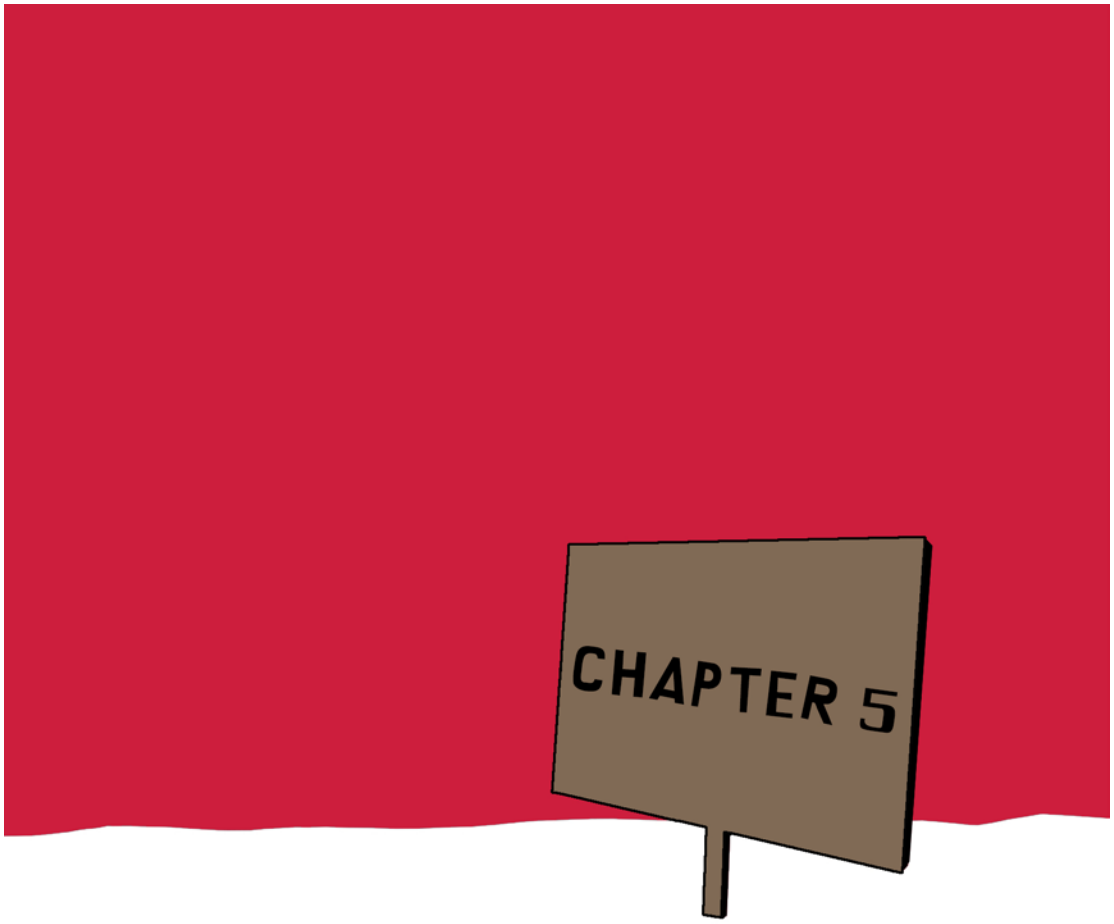
Strinati (2000) describes the mass media as a mirror that once reflected reality, but now shows mere glimpses of it. However, it is through the mass media that intertextuality is able to flourish through its cyclic consumption and reproduction. Jenks talks about the theory of cultural reproduction, which he describes as the "experience of everyday life – albeit through a spectrum of interpretations" (Jenks, 1993: 1). Intertextuality as an analytical tool will enable a reading of, not only the specific intertextual references in *South Park*[81], but will also identity subtle allusions to cultural reproductions such as humour. Intertextuality will be used to distinguish the allusions in *South Park* and better understand the context of excess to expose the absurdity of the topical text or ideology[82]. Intertextuality will also analytically highlight the intertextual nature of parody that is vital to this analysis and my objective of focusing on the imitation of 'celebrities' and public figures. Nietzsche says that "truth is nothing but the solidification of old metaphors" (cited in Jenks, 1993: 3). This implies that the cultural conventions and signs or metaphors that

[81] Such as 'celebrities' who carry with them connotations associated with their representation.
[82] Fiske (1989) discusses the reproduction of the excess in popular culture products as a social critique.

audiences choose to consume from a text are never original for they are all reproduced and re-consumed in different structures.

The many different types of intertextuality are also evident in the series including quotation, allusions, celebrity intertextuality, auto-citation, genetic intertextuality, intratextuality, and mendacious intertextuality (Andersson, 2004). These will be used in the analysis chapter to justify the sources of my thematic concerns. These many different types of intertextuality will help highlight the references to excesses, such as those of society and 'celebrities, and demonstrate that the success of the allusion is dependant on the audiences' understanding of the intertextual references. Culler (1998) suggests that "you cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done. Within the context of what is known, it must propose modifications or elaborations" (Culler, 1998: 24).

While located in the research deign of qualitative research, the following chapter will use semiology and intertextuality as tools for data interpretation to assess the satirical and paradoxical representations of 'celebrities' and public figures in *South Park*. As an introduction into this analysis a discussion of data collection and the journey to the thematic concerns will follow to justify the anthology of *South Park* episodes that are analysed.



ANALYSING THE REPRESENTATIONS OF CELEBRITIES AND PUBLIC FIGURES IN SOUTH PARK.

5.1 CONTEXTUAL IDENTITY AND PLAY

5.2 BILLINGSGATE LANGUAGE AND AMBIGUITY

5.3 THE GROTESQUE AND OBSCENE BODY

Despite the outrageous context in which all the *South Park* characters are portrayed, there is always a sense of truth and rationality within each episode. The fictional series uses humourous techniques to lampoon reality in that each episode is constructed as a parable. Whether the theme of the episode is related to religion, politics, current events or 'celebrities' there is always a moral lesson at the conclusion of the episode. These humourous techniques used by creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker include satire, parody, exaggeration and distortion. These techniques are used in the series to mock reality as we know it. In this analysis these techniques have been thematically categorised in order to demonstrate how they have been utilised in *South Park*.

Gunter (2000) refers to this type of analysis as a rhetorical analysis as it questions how the message is presented visually and textually, focusing on composition, form, metaphors, and arguments. The thematic subheadings for my analysis are 'Contextual Identity and Play', 'Billingsgate Language', and 'The Grotesque and Obscene Body'. These are reoccurring themes within every episode that makes up the sixteen seasons of *South Park*. Through a visual analysis using intertextuality and semiotics as key analytical tools, I will examine how critiquing laughter is the result of parody and satire to assess, within the thematic subheadings, the lampooning of 'celebrities' and public figures.

The amount of data is extensive. With over two hundred episodes throughout the fifteen seasons of *South Park*'s duration.[83] I, ultimately, needed to select the necessary episodes and representations that would directly contribute to the objectives of this research. Thus, an elimination process required a selection method. In 2010 *South Park* celebrated its two hundredth episode by referring to all the 'celebrities' that the series had ridiculed throughout its past episodes. The 'celebrities' who spoke and had vital roles in this two hundredth episode became 'celebrities' of focus. Collectively, there are over two hundred and twenty 'celebrities' featured in *South Park* and while the

[83] At the time of writing, two episodes of season sixteen had been released. As a result, the anthology of episodes was selected from the full fifteen seasons.

series is an internationally known series that lampoons well known ‘celebrities’ and icons, not every audience member will know all of these individuals and their roles in society. Thus, there will be a greater focus on ‘celebrities’ who are better known internationally. This international recognition will be based on ‘celebrities’ and public figures who have been in the news for a large scandal at some stage or more recently. The selection of ‘celebrities’ was then categorised into ‘departments’ of fame. This included sports ‘celebrities’, political ‘celebrities’, musicians, religious icons (‘celebrities’), and actors. Due to the definition of ‘celebrity’ – that which allows individuals to be famous solely based on their personal and professional lives – there is another category of ‘other’ which includes talk show hosts, socialites and heiresses such as Oprah Winfrey, the Kardashians sisters and Paris Hilton. The object of the categorisation is to ensure that at least one ‘celebrity’ from each department is analysed in order to valourise the diversity of the lampooning of ‘celebrities’ in the series.

Initially the focus of this study was specifically on selecting a group of ‘celebrities’. However, obstacles arose, for while the singular representation of individual ‘celebrities’ is relevant to understanding the physical parody, it disengaged the relevance of the representation from the satirical context of the episode(s). While assessing the means by which laughter targets ‘celebrities’ and celebrity culture, an understanding of the episodes plots, the presence of billingsgate language, and the contextual displacement are all important in understanding the series’ intentions. As a result, from the selection of ‘celebrities’, an anthology of episodes became the basis for analysis. Each episode was scrutinised. The chosen episodes had to feature a ‘celebrity’ or public figure in a lampooning context. The plot of each episode is written as an allegory with the chosen ‘celebrity’ used as an example to teach the people of the town of ‘South Park’ and the show’s audience important lessons. For this reason, great emphasis was placed on the relationship between the plot of the episode and the ‘celebrity’ or public figure.

Although most of the selected episodes will be applicable to this research, the focus is specifically on understanding the mockery within the liminal space of excess that surrounds the 'celebrities' and public figure as a result of their professional and personal absurdities. Hence, the context of the episode needed to be focused on the 'celebrity' while the 'celebrity' is visually or verbally lampooned. The selection of 'celebrities' that will ultimately be included in the analysis will also have a subjective element. Subjectivity is considered to be a weakness of qualitative research and it will essentially affect the conclusive outcome of this research (Bryman, 2008). This is due to the socio-political context of the analyser. This will also play a role in the selection process of 'celebrities'. The analyzer needs to have a basic knowledge of the 'celebrity' or public figure. This is necessary as it assists in acknowledging their presence in an episode, as well as recognising their social contribution and general context of fame. These factors are all important to consider in relevant as to why the 'celebrity' and public figure has been featured in *South Park*. Thus, my familiarity with certain 'celebrities' and public figure will play a bias role in their inclusion in the analysis.

While the analysis could be extensive, incorporating many of the 'celebrities' and public figures featured in the series, the following twelve episodes, along with ten respective 'celebrities' or public figures will be analysed. I will examine the following episodes; 'Mecha-Streisand' featuring singer Barbra Streisand (S1E12), 'Super Best Friends' featuring The Prophet Muhammad (S5E4), 'Christian Hard Rock' with Jesus Christ (S7E9), 'The Passion of the Jew' and Mel Gibson (S8E4), 'The Jeffersons' featuring Michael Jackson as Mr. Jefferson (S8E7), 'Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset' featuring Paris Hilton (S8E12), 'Trapped in the Closet' with Tom Cruise (S9E12), 'Britney's New Look' with Britney Spears (S12E2), 'About Last Night…." featuring President Barack Obama (S12E12), 'Sexual Healing' with Tiger Woods (S14E1), and finally the episodes '200' (S14E5) and '201' (S14E6) which feature all of the above mentioned 'celebrities'. Other episodes that refer to or feature any of the above mentioned 'celebrities' or public figures will be referred to in the analysis, but are not part of the anthology. Most importantly, through distinguishing the anthology for analysis, certain thematic concerns



came to light. These thematic concerns will be used as subheadings as a means of understanding the different themes throughout the series and the relationship between the themes and the intention of the representations of 'celebrities' and public figures.

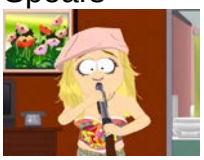
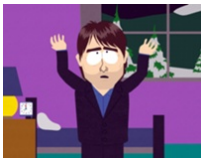
Politicians	**Religious Icon**	**Sports Celebrities**	**Musicians**	**Actors**	**Other**
Barack Obama 	Jesus Christ 	Tiger Woods 	Britney Spears 	Mel Gibson 	Paris Hilton 
	Muhammad 		Michael Jackson 	Tom Cruise 	
			Barbra Streisand 		

Figure 1
The selected 'celebrities' for analysis in category of fame.

Through scrutinizing the series I observed five themes that are constantly coming to light in every episode. The process of coding in thematic analysis is described by Ezzy as "the process of identifying themes or concepts that are in the data" (2002: 86) and most notably these themes, while seen in every episode, greatly contribute to the type of humour portrayed in *South Park*, especially within the liminal space of excess. These thematic concerns are drawn from Bakhtin and Mbembe's research around the carnivalesque. Despite these two theorists having contrasting views about the nature of carnival laughter, they both agree that these themes are essential to the foundation of carnivalesque satirical and paradoxical humour. As tools in the

series, the thematic concerns that constitute my analysis are all highly effective in unpacking the absurdities that surround ‘celebrities’ and bringing these absurdities to light. My first thematic concern is Contextual Identity and Play. This analysis includes an examination of how the sense of play in the series and context of the episode changes the ‘celebrities’ identities. The second thematic concern focuses on abusive language that is directed at the ‘celebrity’ but still maintains a postmodern sense of ambiguity in the insults. This is assessing the Billingsgate Language and Ambivalence in the series. The last theme and topic of analysis will use the building blocks of semiotics and different forms of intertextuality to investigate the exaggeration and distortion of the ‘celebrities’ bodies as a means of critiquing their absurdities. This is done through examining The Grotesque and Obscene Body.



5.1 Contextual Identity and Play

The context of representation in *South Park* paradoxically presents the absurdities of a 'celebrity's' real life context, pointing to the liminal space of excess where these representations become humourous. The sense of play is a defining characteristic of *South Park*, not only because the series is perceived through the playful naïveté in the eyes of children, but also because Stone and Parker use this context of play to defend the outrageous representations in the series. Through focusing on the contextual identity and play, this analysis will use semiotics and intertextuality to assess the means by which *South Park* represents 'celebrities' and public figures within a satirical context in order to develop a critique. Reader suggests that placing 'celebrities' and public icons within a new cultural text is a form of intertextuality that relies on the "correspondences of similarity and differences from one film to the next, and sometimes too on supposed resemblance between on and off-screen personae" (1990: 176).

The focus is on the contextual representations of the selected 'celebrities' and public figures' excesses and absurdities within the series. The context in which these excesses and absurdities are represented contributes to the humourous liminal space for the context of the episode affects the identity of the satirised 'celebrity' and public figure. This is achieved through the contextual sense of play and will assist in developing a greater understanding of the discursive space of humour and laughter encouraged in *South Park*. Out of the anthology of selected *South Park* episodes, the sense of play and its effect on the contextual identities of the following 'celebrities', icons and public figures will be analysed: American president Barack Obama, sportsman Tiger Woods, singer Michael Jackson and religious icon The Prophet Muhammad.

South Park plays with the excesses of a 'celebrity' or public figure's identity through changing the context of their identity. Through assessing the absurdities of 'celebrity' and public figure *South Park* highlights their flaws, creating a pleasurable liminal space where humour and laughter occur due to

paradoxical and satirical critiques. In many satirical animations, such as political editorial cartoons, these excesses and absurdities portrayed through exaggeration and ridicule are aimed verbally and visually at the physical body. Advantageously, *South Park* is in an episodic televisual format allowing the series to both physically and verbally refer to the absurdities of the featured 'celebrity', but contextually lampoon them as well. Fiske (1989) says that contextual lampooning is the result of norms that have exceeded and lose their status as common or natural, thus becoming a topic open for discussion and ridicule.

President Obama, since his induction, has been parodied in many *South Park* episodes. Physically, he is represented as an African-American man with large eyes that are characteristic of the characters in *South Park*. His face features an exaggerated large nose, black eyebrows and a small mole just above his nose on the left. Unlike other *South Park* characters President Obama walks with both legs while often seen wearing a blue suit with a white collared shirt and tie. Obama's physical appearance corresponds to the political discursive space that he occupies. However, in the episode 'About Last Night…'[84] his attire changes to a slick black suit with a black t-shirt underneath, once it is revealed that Obama is not a politician but one of the world's best diamond thieves. He explains the plan to steal the Hope Diamond from the Smithsonian Institute to his 'gang', whilst holding a tumbler of whiskey in one hand with his other hand casually placed in the front pocket of his jacket. Contrary to his belief in justice and democracy, mentioned in his presidential speech[85], the contextual power of a public figure (or more specifically Obama's contextual power) is subverted "not to cause social change but rather in the name of humour" (Musila, 2004: 112). While the series is suggesting that Obama is one of the world's greatest thieves along with fellow politicians McCain and Palin, the contrasted reactions of the people are so extreme it reveals the true undercurrent opinions of the American people.

[84] S12E12
[85] The transcript to Obama's Inaugural speech is available at *The New York Post* website at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/20/us/politics/20text-obama.html?pagewanted=all



The reactions of McCain supporters undermines Obama abilities as president for they have such little faith in Obama's ability to lead that they try to kill themselves while the Stotch family[86] build an ark to hide in. In contrast, Obama



Figure 2[87]

Barack Obama giving his acceptance speech.

supporters, depicted through Randy Marsh[88] and his fellow supporters' hard partying, put too much faith in Obama and his "Yes We Can" slogan. Ike[89] is a McCain supporter and, while he is too young to talk, he is very upset that McCain lost. In an attempt to stop his crying Kyle says "it's okay, Ike. Obama will do fine" suggesting that while Obama was the prime choice for president he will only do "fine". Later Kyle also says to Ike that "the economy could easily stabilise with Obama's plan" showing that while there is faith in Obama the boys consider his skills as average with a sense of doubt.

[86] A local family in *South Park* consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Stotch. They are the parents of Butters who is a frequent character in the series and friends with the four main characters (Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny). To learn more about the Stotch family have a look at 'Butters' Very Own Episode' – S5E14.
[87] Image retrieved from the world wide web at: http://www.i-am-bored.com/bored_link.cfm?link_id=79520. 2013.
[88] Randy Marsh in the father of one of our key characters, Stan Marsh.
[89] Ike is Kyle's little brother who is adopted and a Canadian.

The day after Obama has been elected the garage door to the Stotch family's ark opens to a sunrise over the town of South Park. Relieved that the world has not come to an end due to Obama's win, and somewhat apprehensive about their overreaction, McCain supporters and their fellow American people are ignorant to the fact that their new president has just literally robbed them. In the end Obama gives up his career as a thief to be the president, suggesting that he will be using similar leadership skills of thievery in politics. Mbembe (1992) suggests that, through the playful context of celebration, the identity of an individual or group changes. The aggressive attitude of McCain supporters becomes submissive when they come to terms with the political fate of their country, while the Obama supporters are wildly celebrating. Mbembe (1992) describes the relationship between the people and the powerful within the carnivalesque as one of domination. Within this Mbembean perspective, there is no space for resistance from this domination. Thus, the people must simply embrace the pain as an accepted form of enjoyment (Musila, 2004). In the end the celebration of Obama's win is submissive for it has been arranged by those in power. As McCain phrases it "we run a particularly brutal campaign so that the nation is as distracted as possible".[90]



Figure 3

Obama and John McCain explaining the plan to steal the Hope Diamond.

[90] Parodying the 2008 rally campaigns between Obama and McCain

Obama is arguably considered a 'celebrity', within the definition of what a celebrity is. An icon becomes a 'celebrity' when there is public attention on their personal lives (Turner 2004). In a parody of Obama's acceptance speech, while referring to democracy and justice, Obama also refers to his daughters, saying "Sasha and Malia, I love you both more than you can imagine, and you have earned the new puppy that's coming with us to the White House. We will name him 'Sparkles'". Later in the episode, we learn that Michele Obama is not really his wife and the girls, Sasha and Malia, are not his daughters. Rather, the relationship is a scam where her role in the con is "to pretend to be married to this bozo (Obama)" and to hack the laser system protecting the diamond.

However, along a more assertive path, the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque suggests that, in the festive context of the average man, the levels of social status are temporarily disengaged. Obama's causal exterior and ambiance abides by a code that suggests that he is like the common person, a key feature of his appeal. These characteristics have been satirised, associating Obama's calm and sophisticated persona with the qualities of a high end thief. The means by which Obama and the other politicians 'played' the country's people identifies the pleasure of how his contextual identity has been parodied. In the more recent episode 'Obama Wins'[91] Obama is again represented as corrupt after he comes to an agreement with the Chinese to guarantee a second term as president. The perspectives of Bakhtin (1968) and Mbembe (1992) meet in the carnival notion that the satirical mocking and lampooning of individuals, political systems, and religious dogmas is a form of acceptance while correspondingly critiquing.

Similarly, *South Park* accepts the flaws of Michael Jackson while also reprimanding him. Jackson is presented in the series in disguise and goes by the name of Mr. Jefferson[92]. He is living in the town of South Park with his son Blanket who says South Park was their choice of location because Mr. Jefferson wanted to "get away from it all. He said he wanted peace and quiet,

[91] S16E14
[92] 'The Jeffersons' – S8E7

and to live with a bunch of hicks who don't know anything". It is understood that Jackson has changed his identity, based on his contextual surroundings. Known as a "rich black man" who evaded false molestation accusations in his previous town, Jackson uses the fake name Mr. Jefferson and a fake moustache (so fake that the moustache barely sticks to his face) to avoid public attention. While the residents of South Park are unaware that Mr. Jefferson is, in fact, Jackson, significant intertextual references emerge that identify particular signs that are iconic markers of Jackson's career. Mr. Jefferson is seen wearing the Jackson trademark white glove on his left hand[93] as well as a white v-neck t-shirt. Later in the episode, Mr. Jefferson is presented in a red jumpsuit with black lining, a replica of the jump suit from Jackson's 1985 music video "Thriller".

Mr. Jefferson's home is filled with toys and video games, and there are even more toys in his garden including a train and a giraffe. Mr. Jefferson's home is the ideal environment for a child with Cartman asking "dude, why isn't my house like this?!". The zoo like dwelling is a parody of Jackson's excessive home and personal zoo known as 'Neverland'. His son Blanket is neglected by Mr. Jefferson because his desire to "play" distracts him from his role as a father, at one stage Mr. Jefferson even dangles Blanket out his bedroom window, a parody of Jackson's same actions after the birth of his son Prince Michael Jackson II (otherwise known as Blanket). Blanket's face is constantly covered, satirising Jackson's desire to hide his children's identities from the media. Mr. Jefferson is so desperate to play with the boys he appears at Stan's window in the early hours of the morning. The risk that the children could possibly be molested by Jackson is constantly suggested throughout the episode[94]. As soon as Mr. Jefferson climbs through Stan's bedroom window, the pair are joined by a jealous Cartman (who wants to play with Mr. Jefferson all the time), Kyle, and Blanket who Kyle finds walking around the town alone. Mr. Jefferson suggests a sleepover and they all get into bed together. Through the eyes of the children this sense of play is innocent and

[93] The white glove was debuted by Jackson on television during his 1983 performance of "Billy Jean" at Motown's 25th anniversary TV special. Form there on it is known as a common wardrobe feature for Jackson (Keke, 2009).
[94] Stan even has a dream of Mr. Jefferson and Cartman kissing.

fun forming Jackson's identity as a playful father. However, from an adult perspective, Stan's parents are uncomfortable to find Mr. Jefferson in their son's bed the next morning.



Figure 4

Michael Jackson having a 'slumber party' with the boys dressed as Peter Pan.

While the portrayal of a grown man playing with children brings an air of perverseness to the episode, a similar feeling is presented when Mr. Jefferson arrives Stan's window dressed up as Peter Pan. While this suggests that Blanket, Kyle, Stan and Cartman are the 'lost boys', the costume also signifies the persona of James Barrie, the writer of Peter Pan, who is rumoured to have molested his adopted children (Rennel, 2008). All of these paradoxical references contextually correspond to the absurdities of Jackson's identity and it is the satirising of his real life context and these absurdities which is humourous. Fiske (1987) suggests the messages in the text can either be accepted, negotiated, or rejected by individual audience members. Interestingly, *South Park* tends to offer each of these means of consumption within the text through the constantly opposing opinions of each boy in the group. Kenny, for instance, agrees to help the boys save Blanket from Mr. Jefferson. Despite his actions being morally correct, he sees it as doing the

boys a favour, stating “you guys owe me for this”. On the other hand, Stan and Kyle act as voices of reason, trying to help Blanket to escape from the abuses of Mr. Jefferson. However, while the episode is satirising Jackson and his parenting, Mr. Jefferson is clearly unaware of how his actions may appear inappropriate. He blames the adults, even suggesting that “all the adults are trying to get us”.

South Park and the absurd events that occur in the town are portrayed to the audience through the eyes of the innocent children. Their sense of play allows a double standard in understanding the childish or adult connotations of signs in the text. Correspondingly, the Bakhtinian claims that “children’s play is carnivalesque because carnival not only celebrates laughter and excess, but also challenges symbolic inversion or world-upside-down depictions” (Bakhtin, 1968: 197). Mr. Jefferson’s desire to ‘play’ with young boys is seen as an innocent past time among those involved, believing that Mr. Jefferson is making up for his missed childhood which was spent performing.

This naïve sense of playful and childish perspective is also seen in the satirical re-presentation of golfer Tiger Woods. In the episode ‘Sexual Healing’[95] the world’s most famous men, including president Obama, are all involved in a scam to convince women that rich famous men cheat because they suffer from sex addiction. *South Park* inverts the conventional understanding of sexual addiction, suggesting that men who cheat on their partners are not sex addicts but simply rich men who take advantage of the sexual opportunities offered to them. Kyle is the voice of reason in the episode, suggesting that ‘sexual addiction’ is not connected to money. Butters is completely ignorant towards the situation, representing the curiosity involved with sex. He states that “I just can’t stop thinking about bush”. While this statement appears to refer to the image of a naked woman that the boys were shown in class, Butters is confused because he is too young to know what it is that he has seen. This is evident when he asks “what is it? What does it mean?... Is it a live bush? Are there berries?”.

[95] S14E1

Woods is in his mansion in Florida on Thanksgiving evening in 2009 when, in the early hours of the morning, there is a domestic disturbance. Despite Woods' attire of a red collared golf t-shirt and cap, it is his wife Elin Nordegren who is 'swinging the golf club' in an attempt in injure Woods. To the distress of Nordegren, Woods has received a text message from a "low life hooker". Paradoxical to the absurd events that occur on Woods' Thanksgiving evening, he tries to escape, only to crash into a fire hydrant and then a tree. Nordegren is still using a golf club to beat Woods. However, when the police arrive, the couple lie about the how the accident occurred. The subversion of these true events is presented through play – literally – for the boys are playing the latest playstation game called 'EA Sports Tiger Woods PGA Tour 11'. In the game one player (in this case Cartman) is playing as Woods who is trying to avoid getting beaten by Nordegren, played by Kenny.

The literal and figurative sense of play becomes the pleasurable vehicle for humour. This is due to the context of representation that paradoxically represents the absurdities of Woods' true life sex scandal. The liminal space of excess created by the absurdities of the scandal are portrayed through the 'EA Sports Tiger Woods PGA Tour 11' playstation game. The resultant "humour arises from the contrast between the realistic face and the absurd and incongruous activities" (Halsall, 2008: 27) of Woods and the game. After Kenny dies, Cartman is seen playing the game with Stan, Woods is playing a round of golf when Nordegren, controlled by Stan, appears and starts to abuse Woods with a golf stick while shouting "how many women did you fuck? how many!?". In his attempt to win the game, Stan uses specific buttoned sequences on his remote control to weaken Woods, causing him to loose endorsement deals. The ultimate blow to Woods comes through Nordegren's using the "Pre-nup Power-up" to win the level.





Figure 5 and 6

Left: Cartman and Kenny playing 'EA Sports Tiger Woods PGA Tour 11.

Right: The television screen of the game. Cartman is playing Woods attempting to escape.

The game is a parody representing the actual events and relationship of Woods and Nordegren which is presented to the audience through the eyes of the children playing the game. Ott says that "by creating a world that is seen through the eyes of children, *South Park* challenges narrative rituals and encourages a textual pleasure that is homologous with children's play" (2008: 43). This is necessary to consider in relation to how audiences should interpret not only Woods' sex scandal but the episode as well. While Woods' sex scandal is being parodied, the narrative of men and sex addiction is being satirised. Through Kyle, it is suggested that sex addiction should be controlled by oneself and is not the result of a spell put on men by a wizard alien.

Within the carnival, the contrast of official ceremonies and non-official ceremonies is very distinct. The acknowledgement of social ranking at the official ceremony in terms of both the Bakhtinian and Mbembean notions of the carnivalesque, is emphasised for it separates the powerful from the average man. Formal etiquette is expected from every attendee. Similarly, during Woods' public apology, he and Nordegren are calm while he speaks formally, corresponding to the expectations of social etiquette. This is strongly contrasted with the public apology in the 'EA Sports Tiger Woods PGA Tour 11' playstation game where Nordegren arrives on stage and abuses Woods while he responds with billingsgate language. Both the language and physical actions illustrate that while Woods is a 'celebrity' with high social ranking, he

too has affairs and uses abusive language like an average man. Mbembe (1992) suggests that while those in power do not want such flaws to be uncovered, it is through carnivalesque rituals of satire and parody that the powerful is exposed as normal. The satirical approach to men who cheat on their partners presented in the episode also correlates to the types of masochistic power suggested by Mbembe (Weate, 2003b). While in a rehabilitation centre, Woods and a selection of fellow rich 'celebrities' who have been publically shamed for their sexual addiction are in a therapy session being taught to avoid, not "drugs and alcohol", as suggested by Woods, but rather getting caught cheating on their partners. Publically, however, it is suggested throughout the episode, even by the president of the United States of America, that sex addiction is the result of a wizard alien spell. Sex is actually the addictive power force that controls Woods and rich famous men.

This double-codedness (Knox, 2006) is key in the examination of satirical and paradoxical connotations in texts such as the episode 'Sexual Healing'. The polysemic nature of *South Park* is characteristically postmodern for it offers "a multitude of often conflicting voices that work to inject noise into the harmony of a hegemoic system" (Gournelos, 2009:4). Casey (et al, 2008) suggests that some cases of television propaganda, 'closed' polysemic texts are produced where the text is structured so that one intended message is privileged above the many possible messages. However, "the degree of polysemy or closure will also depend upon the audience. What appears to be a closed text to one person may take on an entirely different meaning to another" (Casey, 2008: 210). The differently interpreted messages are dependent on the individual's' socio-cultural background but can also be swayed by the audience's responses to the characters. While some may side with the somewhat rational statements of Stan and Kyle, others may find more pleasure in siding with the bigoted Cartman.

Such conflicting voices are presented in the series through the many prejudices, particularly those expressed by Cartman. When a new boy is introduced to the class, Cartman refuses to sit next to him. He asks the

teacher if the new Muslim student has been checked for bombs[96]. Cartman then assumes that because the little boy is Muslim, he must be planning on setting off a bomb at the location in *South Park* where Hillary Clinton is campaigning that day. He contacts the president of the United States to warn him. A wild goose chase ensues and it is discovered that a snuke[97] has been implanted in Clinton's body. While Clinton's life is in serious risk, we learn that the bomb has not been planted by Muslim terrorists but Russian terrorists who have been hired by the British. Cartman continues to play the game of detective, using his farts to "torture" the Muslim boy's parents for information. However, when he is kidnapped, he says "I'm not playing anymore". The whole event, through the perspective of a young child, has been a game, although with greater consequences. In the end of the episode, it is, in fact, Cartman's bigotry that saves the day. Although he targets the wrong terrorist group, his prejudices play a vital role in capturing the Russians. While the episode aims to illustrate that America has enemies besides the Muslim community, the Muslim community and their leader Muhammad are referred to and satirised in *South Park*.

The Muslim Prophet Muhammad is one part of the league of 'Super Best Friends'. The group is composed of the icons from different religious beliefs (well all except the fictional comic character Sea Man and his companion Swallow). Jesus Christ introduces the league to Stan: "Buddha, with the powers of invisibility; Mohammad, the Muslim prophet with the powers of flame; Krishna, the Hindu deity; Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet; Lao Tse, the found of Taoism; and Sea-Man, with the ability to breathe underwater and link mentally with fish and Moses". The league is required to stop a cult group known as Blaintology[98] from receiving a tax reprieve and becoming a recognised religion. Stan blatantly points out that while the followers of these religious icons are fighting, the leaders are, in fact, friends. Muhammad elaborates, saying that they are more than friends, they are "super best friends, with the desire to fight for justice."

[96] 'The Snuke' - S11E4
[97] A snuke is a bomb that is implanted into a woman's vagina, in this case Clinton's.
[98] Based on magician David Blaine



Along with the power of harvesting fire from his hands, Muhammad is wearing a yellow robe with an orange turban. He is also wearing two scarves, one green and the other red in colour, and a darker red sash. While still presented as a religious icon, Muhammad is represented in human form and by association to the league a superhero and an equal icon to all the other religious icons in the league. The episode aired prior to the 9/11 terrorists attacks on the United States and there was no reaction from the Muslim community to the superhero fire harvesting depiction of Muhammad. However, post the terrorists attacks the manifestation of fear of violence from radical Islamic groups has since prevented many satirical publications and television programmes from depicting Muhammad (Weinstock, 2008b).

In the episode '200'[99] this hypocrisy is highlighted when the league is revisited years later. While the class of Cartman, Stan, Kyle, and Kenny are on a tour of a fudge making factory, the boys come across actor Tom Cruise who is packing fudge into boxes. When Stan points out that Cruise is packing fudge, Cruise takes this as an insult to his sexual orientation. He then calls a meeting with every 'celebrity' who has been ridiculed throughout the past nine hundred and ninety nine episodes that the series is composed of. He says "shockingly, I've just been slandered once again in the town of South Park, something I know you can all relate to" and gets the 'celebrities' to all agree to sue South Park. In an attempt to get the 'celebrities' to drop the lawsuit, Stan and his father Randy return to the fudge factory to apologise to Cruise. Cruise agrees to drop the lawsuit if the town arranges a meeting between him and Muhammad. The reaction is a problematic one.

When Randy tells the towns' people that Cruise wants to meet Muhammad a distressed Mr. Garrison[100] states "are you nuts? If Muhammad appears in South Park, we get bombed!". Stephen responds "now we don't know that. Maybe enough time has passed that it is now okay to show Muhammad in public". This conversation and the reactions of the town's people, of South

[99] S14E5
[100] The boys homosexual school teacher who had a sex change from a man to a woman and then back to a man.

Park, throughout the series excessively mocks the socio-cultural and political context, created by Muslim extremists, that (for some members of the global community) surrounds Muhammad. Representing Muhammad in a cartoon form has been a contentious topic since the 2005 Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy[101] where a Danish newspaper depicted illustrations of Muhammad which offended the Danish Muslim community and spread to become a global topic of debate. This led to widespread protests and violent riots by Islamic organisations[102]. In the episode Cruise wants Muhammad for he is the one person on this "earth who is completely free of slander". Muhammad is free of slander due to public fear induced by the excessive reactions of the Muslim community. However, the 'celebrities' (and the 'ginger' children who steal Muhammad for the same purpose) believe that Muhammad's "power that makes him impervious to being made fun of" is due to the "goo"[103] inside of him.



Figure 7

The league of 'Super Best Friends'

[101] For more on this topic look at Q&A: The Muhammad cartoons row (2006).
[102] Ibid.
[103] The celebrities intend on using a "Goo Transfer Machine" to access Muhammad's "Goo".

Stand and Kyle meet with the league of 'Super Best Friends' in an attempt to bring Muhammad to South Park. However, a debate ensues with Jesus stating that, since Stan was there last, "much has changed" and that Muhammad can not make public appearances. As Buddha explains "we simply cannot risk any violence from the Muslim people". While the boys are suggesting ideas on how to present Muhammad without provoking violence (such as in a pirate costume or in a suit of armour), Jesus says "boys, you need to understand that people get very offended when Muhammad is mocked because he is a religious figure". Ironically, at that moment – to satirise both Jesus's statement and the Muslim community – Buddha starts snorting cocaine. Eventually Muhammad is brought to South Park in a windowless U-Haul[104] van. In order to transport Muhammad to Cruise's limousine, the people of South Park dress him in a bear costume. However, ginger extremists bomb Cruise's limousine and the episode comes to an end.

In the following episode '201'[105] the town's people debate allowing Muhammad to step out of the bear costume. The risk is that if they do not give Muhammad to the ginger extremists, they will blow up their town. However, if they do there is a high possibility that Islamic extremists will blow up the town. This ambiguous debate is a parody of the debate between *South Park* creators and *South Park*'s parent company Comedy Central. The bear costume unzips to expose Santa Claus. Muhammad is, in fact, with Kenny in a dark alley. When Muhammad is presented, he is covered by a large black rectangle symbolic of censorship. This satirical illustration is mocking the context of excess that surrounds the controversy of presenting Muhammad in an animated or cartoon form. After episode '200' aired, Stone and Parker received a threat from an Islamic organisation. Comedy Central decided, without the permission of Stone or Parker, to further censor the following episode '201' by bleeping out any mention of Muhammad, due to fear of Muslim extremists reactions. Arguably, by Comedy Central bleeping out any mention of Muhammad, the satirical point of mockery is emphasised. Ultimately, the two episodes show that, as a religious icon, Muhammad has

[104] An American company that offers storage and transportation resources.
[105] S14E6

no choice as to whether he be presented or not due to the unpredictable violent actions of his followers bombing the town of South Park. Symbolically, while the context of fear is restricting the people of South Park from allowing Muhammad to appear in public, the fear of his followers' reactions also restrict Muhammad from defending himself.

In essence, through the playful context within the series, 'celebrities', public figures and religious icons are utilised for their comedic value and for facilitating social critique. By focussing on the absurdities that surround individuals such as Obama, Woods, Jackson and Muhammad, we are able to see the humour in such absurdities due to the carnivalesque technique of embracing excess. Through the playful context of the episodes, the series critiques the social status of each individual 'celebrity' and public figure, by exposing their or their followers' flaws. The concept of the carnivalesque suggests that by satirising such an individual, the mockery and ridicule will bring them 'back-to-earth', temporarily reducing the ridiculed person's status to that of the average man. By changing the contextual identity of the elite, *South Park* has not managed to reduce their power – because, in each case, the status of the individual is still a factor. Obama is still the president, Woods and Jackson are both famous 'celebrities' in their respective episodes, and Muhammad is a religious icon. This leans towards a more Mbembean perspective where parody and satire are used as tools to suggest critiques of the powerful in order to promote change.

5.2 Billingsgate Language and Ambiguity

The presence of ambiguity in *South Park* is undeniable, and notably, is a key carnivalesque as well as postmodern characteristic of contemporary cultural products. Throughout many of the *South Park* episodes, social critiques are suggested but not used to encourage social change (Weinstock, 2008a). The actions of the town's people are parodies of contemporary society. Yet, episodes will often conclude by suggesting that agency is a human right. To gain a greater understanding of the means through which *South Park* uses laughter and humour to bring the absurdities of 'celebrity' and public figures to light. This analysis will focus on the linguistic ambivalence used to lampoon 'celebrities' and public figures. The liminal space of excess where this laughter and humour manifests is fuelled by insulting the absurdities of 'celebrities' and public figures.

Billingsgate language is used in the series to highlight the flaws of the selected 'celebrities' and public figures and, in doing so, insult them. While in some cases the insults are overt in the series, at other times their linguistic structure is ambiguous. This sense of ambivalent terminology in the name of humour is characteristic of the carnival (Bakhtin, 1968) and a source of carnivalesque humourous pleasure (Halsall, 2008). Lachamnn (1987) suggests that, when investigating ambivalence in a text, the focus should not be on how it comes to effect or is realised in the text, but rather on the function in the text and its effect in prevailing culture. This analysis will asses the use of billingsgate and ambivalent terminology in relation to 'celebrities' and public figures in order to decipher the route of the critiquing humour. This will be conducted through a discussion of the portrayal of the following 'celebrities' in *South Park*: singer Barbra Streisand, socialite Paris Hilton, religious icon Jesus Christ, and actors Tom Cruise and Mel Gibson.

Stone and Parker introduce the episode 'Mecha-Streisand'[106] by saying, "a lot of our fans ask us, do you really hate the celebrities you make fun of in South

[106] S1E12

Park? And the answer is, of course not. It's all just in good fun... except when it comes to Barbra Streisand! We hate her!". This is evident not only through the grotesque physical representation of Streisand, but also through the billingsgate language used to insinuate their "hate". While on a school tour of an archeologically site, Cartman finds a strange triangle shaped object. Thinking it is worthless, he throws it on the ground and Kyle picks it up. The boys soon find out that the triangle is, in fact, the very valuable Triangle of Zinthar. The Triangle of Zinthar is one half of the Diamond of Pantheos. When the diamond is full Streisand believes she will become "the biggest, most famous person ever" by transforming her into a giant robot like monster. Film critic and historian Leonard Maltin says that her transformation will make Streisand "the most threatening thing ever known to mankind": "Mecha-Streisand".



Figure 8

Barbra Streisand torturing the boys by singing.

When Streisand lands in the town of South Park in her pink helicopter, she expects the town to give her a rousing welcome because of her famous persona. However, she is disillusioned when the boys and Officer Barbrady reveal that they do not know who she is. On her mission to become "Mecha-Streisand" she is portrayed as "egomaniacal and tolerant" (Becker, 2008) through her actions of attempting to kill the boys, torturing them and destroying the town of South Park. She is also verbally abusive, referring to

Stan as a “piss-ant little hick” and using her voice to torture the children. The descriptions of Streisand refer to the excesses of her diva-like attitude where the insults are not intended to be ambiguous but a signifier of her reputation.

Streisand is constantly referred to as a ‘bitch’ throughout the series, not only by the boys, but also Officer Barbrady and the Mayor. Maltin refers to her as “more than a bitch”. He deems her a “calculating, self-centred egotistical bitch” and these qualities are satirically, and playfully, represented when Streisand literally turns into a monster. The offensive opinions of Stone and Parker are further voiced through the boys when Cartman refers to Streisand’s “black heart” and discusses how much he hates her. In the end Mecha-Streisand is defeated by The Cure’s[107] front man Robert Smith who is also represented in a satirical form of a Japanese styled movie monster. The town celebrates because as Kyle phrases it there is “no more Barbra Streisand, everrrrr!”.

Insulting a ‘celebrity’s’ absurdities through abusive language is imperative to the discursive space of excess through representations in *South Park*. The humour in lampooning ‘celebrities’ and public figures linguistically emphasises the insults. Streisand is constantly referred to as a ‘bitch’ which is direct abuse from creators Stone and Parker. This abuse can also be seen in the linguistic references to Paris Hilton; in the episode ‘Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset’[108] Hilton makes an appearance at the Mall in South Park to open her new store. Hilton is introduced to the people as a “woman all you young ones can look up”. However, this statement is contradicted when she drunkenly flashes her breasts to the crowd and coughing male semen (a remnant from her party the night before).

Satirically referring to Hilton’s fame, Wendy - not aware of who Hilton is - asks what Hilton does to be so famous, only to be greeted with responses such as “she’s super rich”, “she’s totally spoilt and snobby”, and, finally, a gentleman responds “she’s a whore”. All of these insulting terms are direct references to

[107] An alternative rock band famous during the 1980’s.
[108] S8E12

Hilton's heiress status and that her fame is a result of a sex tape. The linguistic insults are thus mocking her 'celebrity' status. While the public focus on her personal life makes Hilton a true 'celebrity' (Turner, 2004), the absurdities of her fame are dismantled in the series through animated depictions and verbal insinuations (Sturm, 2008).



Figure 9

Hilton at the opening of the South Park branch of her store 'Stupid Spoilt Whore'.

Hilton announces the opening of her store "Stupid Spoiled Whore" which is full of products to make the local girls just like her. The girls all shop at the store believing that by owning these products, such as stupid spoiled whore clothes, dolls and using the perfume 'Skanque', they too can be 'stupid spoiled whores' just like Hilton. Mbembe suggests that, in relation to escaping the forces of power, "the real inversion takes place when, in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology" (2001: 133). This is clearly evident in the way the young girls attempt to emulate Hilton through buying her products. Wendy, who acts as the voice of reason in the episode,

cannot understand why the young girls have chosen Hilton as their icon. Responding with a Hilton-like attitude, her friend Bebe asserts "the only thing more important than being rich is being famous. Annie, another girl, endorses this opinion when she states that Bebe "really sound[s] like a dumb slut".

These terms such as 'whore' and 'slut' are all directed at Hilton and parodying her fame, suggesting that it is simply the result of her sexualised objectification. The episode title is "Stupid Spoiled Whore Video Playset" which is a game available at Hilton's store. Paradoxical of Hilton's sex video, the game comes equipped with a video camera, a night vision lens, fake money, a 'loosable' cellphone and drugs which are all used to make videos of the girls having sex with boys to upload onto the internet. Hilton hears Mr. Slave telling the girls that being a 'whore' and a 'slut' is not a good thing – emulating the voice of reason - and Hilton challenges him to a 'whore off' which she looses. This suggests that even as a 'whore', she is still a fraud.

True to the carnivalesque, *South Park* embraces political incorrectness and the mocking of official dogmas. Jesus Christ is a regular in the series, appearing in over twenty-four episodes. Living in South Park, Jesus hosts his own television show called 'Jesus and Pal's'. Often Jesus's moral standings are challenged. As is seen in the episode 'The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka'[109], even the son of God can give into temptations, he lies on his talk show in an attempt to gain a better ratings and starts to loose faith in God when (in the episode 'Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus'[110]) God will not appear at a Millennium New Years party hosted by Jesus. The ambiguous discourse surrounding the linguistic connotations of Jesus in the series challenges the understanding of the blasphemous use of his name. In the episode 'Christian Rock Hard'[111] the boys try to start a band. However, on realising that they are not very good and will not be able to make a platinum album, Cartman suggests that the best way for them to succeed is through selling music that celebrates God. This is because, in the words of Cartman,

[109] S2E6
[110] S3E16
[111] S7E9

Christian rock is the “easiest, crappest music in the world… if we just play songs about how much we love Jesus, all the Christians will buy our crap”.
After insulting the mass consumption of Christian products, Cartman then forms a Christian rock band with Token and Butters called ‘Faith + 1’. Jesus is a constant reference in their music. This is the result of Cartman’s plan to take “regular old songs and add Jesus stuff to them”. Cartman’s plan works and ‘Faith + 1’ becomes a very successful band. However, the discourse in which the name of Jesus is being used is questionable, for example, in one of the songs, Cartman’s love for Jesus seems homoerotic when he sings “I just wanna feel you deep inside of me, Jesus”. The song, ironically, becomes a massive hit. The discourse Cartman uses to describe Jesus, makes it appear as if Cartman is sexually attracted to him. The ambiguity of the lyrics suggests that while Cartman is promoting Christianity and love for Christian faith, he is also blasphemously using the Lord’s name in vein.



Figure 10

Jesus Christ hosting his television talk show ‘Jesus and Pals’.

While, in the epsidoe ‘200’[112], Stan and Kyle are debating with the ‘Super Best Friends’ about taking Muhammad to South Park Stan says in the presence of Jesus “Jesus fucking Christ!” to voice his frustrations. This

[112] S14E5

excessive use of the name of Jesus is intentionally blasphemous in this example. However, there are times when the name Jesus Christ is used ambiguously, creating confusion as to whether his name is being used to call or contact Jesus or blasphemously offend. Arguably, the humourous pleasure is located in the liminal space of the excessive ambiguity. Along with satire, parody and irony, the carnivalesque embraces this liminal space as a means of laughter and critique. In the end, *South Park* is using satire as a form of critique not to mock faith but, rather, religion (DeLashmutt and Hancock, 2008). In effect, this makes the sacred profane and disturbs the conventional parameters that surround the use of terms and names such as Jesus Christ. Mbembe (1992) believes that, when assessing a text that utilises such extensive ambiguity, it is important to examine exactly who is laughing at the end of the joke. While contextually billingsgate insults are specifically directed at Streisand and Hilton, *South Park* uses ambiguity to insinuate insults to other 'celebrities' and public figures. The success of the humourous insults is based on the audiences' ability to understand these intended insults, or whether they find the humour in the insults pleasurable[113]. Similarly to the Mbembean perspective, Reichl and Stein (2005) refer to humour's ambiguous nature as laughter's double vision where humour approaches a topic with the intention of laughter while throwing mocking stones at that topic (Ilona, 2005). In the end Mbembe (1992) believes that, in the fight between power dynamics, humour is used as a façade of resistance allowing the people to be entertained with satire. However, in the end, the powerful are the ones that are laughing.

As a 'celebrity' who is continually mocked by *South Park*, Tom Cruise does not have the last laugh because he does not acknowledge the ambiguity of the insults. While claiming to be a busy actor and opposed to fly fishing, Cruise is found packing pieces of fudge into boxes in a fudge factory. To point out the obvious actions of Cruise, Stan says "hey guys check it out, Tom Cruise is a fudge packer". The term 'fudge packer' is used in contemporary society as a demeaning expression referring to a homosexual individual. The

[113] As is suggested by Casey (et a; 2008), in terms of television studies, the ultimate question should not be which message the viewer interprets but whether the text is pleasurable or not.

use of the term is a parody of the rumours that Cruise is homosexual. While unable to see the obvious connotations associated with the term, Cruise believes it is being used to insult him. While this conversation demonstrates the ambiguity of a statement, it also shows how perceptions of one scene can differ for different individuals. While Stan is insulting the physical action of Cruise, the school teacher Mr. Garrison, who is homosexual, says “hey, is that fudge-packer Tom Cruise?”. His statement is not referring to their context but directly insinuates that Cruise is homosexual.

Cruise’s sexuality is mocked in an earlier episode entitled ‘Trapped in the Closet’[114] where Stan is falsely suggested to being the reincarnation of the creator of Scientology, L Ron Hubbard. This is an example of the intertextual references that occur between episodes within the series as a whole. When Stan is sent up to his bedroom by his parents, he finds Scientology follower Cruise waiting for him. Cruise is hoping to gain the approval of Hubbard for his acting performances.



Figure 11

Tom Cruise packaging fudge.

[114] S9E12

Instead, Stan responds with his personal opinion as he tells Cruise “you're okay, I guess”. Distraught that his leader does not approve of his performances, Cruise locks himself in Stan’s closet. Stan then shouts down the stairs from his room “Dad! Tom Cruise won't come out of the closet”. ‘Coming out of the closet’ is another phrase used in contemporary society, referring to the process whereby an individual makes their homosexuality common knowledge to those around them. This phrase is ambiguously used, suggesting that although Cruise is physically in the closet, he is also figuratively ‘in the closet’, thus keeping his homosexuality a secret. Satirically, mimicking the voice of *South Park*’s creators, the local Sergeant announces in front of the crowd “please come out of the closet. Everybody here just wants you to come out of the closet Tom. Nobody's gonna be mad, everything's gonna be all right. Just come out of the closet”. Eventually John Travolta and R Kelly join Cruise when all three ‘celebrities’ refuse to ‘come out of the closet’.

Bakhtinian carnivalesque suggests that through the ambiguous use of billingsgate language, the text is freed from official culture. However, carnival ambiguity in language is supposed to simultaneously praise and insult. For example, despite Cartman’s words of praise to Gibson, Gibson is simultaneously insulted by the boys. Stan refers to Gibson as “freakin' daffy”, “fucking crazy”, and states that he is “kookoo” and “absolutely out of his mind”. Even Gibson insults himself saying that “when you're a clown, nobody takes you seriously”. Satirically named after Gibson’s film ‘*The Passion of the Christ*’ the episode ‘The Passion of the Jew’[115] demonstrates this carnivalesque ambiguity. When the film ‘*The Passion of the Christ*’ is released at the South Park cinema it causes a stir. Echoing the differing public reactions to the original film, Cartman praises the film, Kyle looses faith in Judaism, and Stan and Kenny disgustingly declare it to be a “snuff film”[116]. Stan and Kenny make their way to Gibson’s home to demand their money back, sardonically suggesting that the torture in ‘*The Passion of the Christ*’ is

[115] S8E4
[116] A Snuff film is a motion picture genre which depicts the actual murder of individuals without special effects.

a fetish that Gibson enjoys. When the boys meet Gibson, echoing their opinions about his fetish for torture, he encourages the boys to abuse him by placing himself on a Medieval style torture bed. When they do not torture him, Gibson then chases the boys around the house, shooting at them with a gun.

Gibson is referred to several times throughout the first fifteen seasons of the series. Gibson's directing skills are utilised by the government to save 'Imaginationland'[117] and when a kindergarten teacher has been arrested for having sexual relations with one of her students she turns to the "the Mel Gibson defence" and blames it on alcoholism[118]. However, Cartman's praise is ever-present as seen in the episode 'Good Times with Weapons'[119]. The boys manipulate a stall owner at the carnival to sell them 'ninja' weapons but when Butters gets seriously injured, Kyle wants to "ditch" the weapons to avoid getting into trouble. Cartman challenges Kyle to throw away his nun-chucks, stereotypically suggesting that Kyle cannot "prove Mel Gibson wrong" because his "Jewish blood" will not allow him to throw away something that cost him money. Cartman, echoing a possible response to the film, also refers to Gibson's film simply as '*The Passion*', and in the episode 'Good Times with Weapons', says that the message in the film is that all "Jews are snakes and liars" and states that if the Road Warrior[120] said it, "it must be true".

To satirise Gibson's 'celebrity' status Cartman's treatment of Gibson evolves from fandom to worship. Cartman is a little boy who is the personification of all the prejudices known to man, who has selected Gibson as a role model for he believes that Gibson has similar prejudices as him. Cartman has so much faith in his interpreted anti-semitic message from Gibson's film that he prays to a *Braveheart* poster of Gibson saying "I want to thank you for all the blessings you have brought me. You have shown me the way so many times in the past and... now you are making all my dreams come true. You give me strength when there is doubt, and I praise you for all you have done. Only

[117] S11E10
[118] 'Miss Teacher Bangs a Boy' – S10E10
[119] S8E1
[120] In 1979 Gibson featured in the film *Mad Max*. After the success of the film Gibson became an internationally known actor. In the sequel to the film *Mad Max 2: Road Warrior* Gibson plays the role of the Road Warrior.

you, Mel Gibson, have had the wisdom and the courage to show the world the truth. From this day forward I will dedicate my life to making sure your film is seen by everyone. I will organise the masses so that we may do thy bidding. Hail Mel Gibson. Amen". Cartman, believing that Gibson's bidding is a second Holocaust, organises a meeting and (dressed as Hitler) uses anti-semitic German phrases to encourage a Nazi upraising. However, when Gibson comes to South Park, Cartman's faith in him is lost when Gibson defecates on his face.



Figure12

Mel Gibson defecating on Cartman's face.

Reichl and Stein describe this ambiguous laughter as the result "of the reader's implied position towards the identity positions of the protagonist" (2005:16). Mbembe's (1992) perspective on laughter illustrates that it is not resistance through lampooning such elite individuals, but rather pointing to their flaws with the aim of promoting socio-political change. In contrast, the carnivalesque suggests that ambiguity and billingsgate language should be used to, simultaneously, achieve laughter through mocking and praising the elite. As demonstrated throughout this section of analysis, abusive language is used in *South Park* to voice the opinions of the people to verbally emphasise the excesses of 'celebrity' culture as well as individual 'celebrities' and public figures. Unlike the carnivalesque's promotion of resistance and social change, *South Park* is using billingsgate and ambiguous language to critique 'celebrities'. It is within the Mbebean perspective the satirical texts offers escapism from the worship of 'celebrity' culture.

5.3 The Grotesque and Obscene Body

The grotesque is a key factor from the carnivalesque that contributes to the disempowerment of 'celebrities' in *South Park*. Bakhtin (1968) dedicates a great deal of the introduction of his work to the development of the grotesque from the Medieval epoch through the Renaissance up to the modernised twenty-first century understanding of the term. Grotesque realism portrays ambiguity through the distortion of the human form, more specifically in relation to the bodily lower stratum, where the grotesque of this image is countered with revival or renewal. One such image is that of a woman giving birth. This image is grotesque because of the combination of one body with another. However the grotesque is able to be humourous in that instant due to the renewable revival of life through birth.

In the episode 'Stupid Spoiled Whole Video Playset' the name of Paris Hilton's store, 'Stupid Spoiled Whore', satirically connotes with her physical form and actions. Hilton is drunk throughout her time in South Park and is constantly coughing sperm due to her 'whorish' sexual actions from the night before with "a LOT of different guys". Based on intertextual references the portrayed actions of Hilton, in the series, are excessive representations of Hilton's true reputation. While her actions are suggestive of who the caricature is based on, there are also symbolic physical signs such as her blonde hair, slim figure, and her accessory dog Tinkerbelle in her large handbag that indicates that it is Hilton. She is wearing a short transparent pink vest, revealing her white bra, a short denim skirt with the straps of her g-string lining her hips above the waist line of her skirt, and bright pink angle height boots. She is also wearing diamond earrings, a diamond bracelet and a necklace that says 'Paris'. *South Park* satirizes the context in which the audience knows Hilton, this is because "like all cultural products, cartoons are informed by the context within which they are produced" (Musila, 2004:20). While the necklace confirms that the caricature is based on Paris Hilton her attire is suggestive of her reputation and fame, which is based on her sexual reputation and heiress status. We are able to decipher this because *South Park* is a popular culture production that refers to a cultural base that is



shaped by the various contextual layers of the contemporary socio-cultural context of the series.

South Park utilises many carnivalesque characteristics, and, through the caricature of 'celebrities' and pubic figures, the series presents a masquerade of the original individual. The body is an important signifier in the lampooning of an individual for it is able to symbolically suggest many aspects about him or her. Various comic devices are used by the satirist to propose social critique, particularly through abjection of the body by distortion and exaggeration. Hilton's face is very long with a masculine jaw line, the size of her nose has been exaggerated and her left eye distorted with a heavy eye lid. These exaggerations and distortions, as well as encoded messages, all allude to Hilton, and her flaws. Bakhtin (1968) criticises the modernised interpretation of the grotesque as loosing the revival aspect, thus changing the meaning of the term to vulgarity. The ambiguous form of the grotesque, in its original form, can be seen in *South Park* when Mr. Garrison's homosexual sadomasochistic partner Mr. Slave engulfs Hilton in his anus. This scene shows the grotesque perspective through the engulfing of two bodies, specifically through the lower bodily stratum with the objective of global renewal without Hilton.



Figure 13

Paris Hilton loosing the 'whore off'

Within the Mbembean perspective, the grotesque becomes an important tool in disempowering the 'celebrity' and public figure through estrangement and defamiliarisation, forcing society to reassess the popular epistemic context of the lampooned figure. Hilton is represented as a 'stupid spoilt whore' correlating with her clothes and actions. Through this symbolic process her sense of superiority through fame is deflated. As has been discussed the representational caricature of the 'celebrity' and public figure carries many connoting messages. This polysemic characteristic reveals the overlapping function between satire and parody, particularly within the carnivalesque (Hutcheon, 1985). Mel Gibson, who is described as "daffy"[121] indicating his bizarre actions which match those of Daffy Duck[122], is represented with an unfit and hairy animated body.

Unlike the physical parodies of other 'celebrities' and public figures, Gibson is depicted with a photographic image of his face attached to an animated form of his body[123]. Barthes (1977) believes that the use of a photograph in pictorial representations acts as the convincing presence of the individual in their exorable absence. Such is the case with Gibson. The photographic representation of Gibson's face is also manipulated as a means of intertextually referring to signifiers that are symbolic of Gibson. After Stan and Kenny steal eighteen dollars from Gibson as a refund for watching '*The Passion of the Christ*', Gibson chases after the boys in the vehicle from his film *Mad Max: Road Warrior*. At this stage, the photographic image has horizontal blue stripes painted on Gibson's face, referring to his successful film *Braveheart*[124]. In the film Gibson is seen with the paint on his face as his character William Wallace is heading into war. Similarly Gibson is wearing the paint on his face in *South Park* for he is heading to war with Stan and Kenny to get his money back and defend his film.

[121] 'The Passion of the Jew' – S8E4.
[122] A Disney character whose key characteristic is that he is crazy.
[123] Besides Saddam Hussein who also has a photographic image of his face attached to an animated body. Hussein can be seen in episodes including 'The Mexican Staring Frog of Southern Sri Lanka' – S2E6, 'Probably' – S4E10, 'A Ladder to Heaven' – S6E12. In the *South Park* film '*South Park: Bigger, Louder&Uncut*' . Other 'celebrities' and public figures living in Hell are also represented with photographic heads such as Adolf Hitler.
[124] In the 1995 film Gibson played the role of 13th-century Scottish warrior William Wallace.





Figure 14

Mel Gibson driving the *Mad Max* vehicle with the *Braveheart* face paint.

Intertextual references, partnered with grotesque distortions and exaggerations, are an important comic and critiquing tool in *South Park*, both to lampoon 'celebrities' and public figures, and to encourage entertained laughter from audiences. Within the Bakhtinian approach, which is achieved in *South Park* (through its childish sense of play, and exaggeration of the excesses of celebrity culture), the function of the carnival-grotesque is to:

> …consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally acceptable (Bakhtin, 1968: 34)

Barbara Streisand is presented as almost completely deformed. Paradoxically Streisand has a large exaggerated nose, she has bags under her eyes and a distinct mole on her cheek. The true distortion takes place when Streisand transforms into a hybrid monster of a robot and Godzilla[125]; "Mecha-Streisand" is originally a basic representation but with the digital development

[125] A lizard like monster from the cult films '*Godzilla*'.

of the series in the episode '200' "Mech-Streisand" is graphically advance. Symbolically the only similarities between Streisand's physical human form to "Mecha-Streisand" is her blonde hair and exaggerated big nose. Her body is still grotesquely robotic with her arms composed of missiles and a chainsaw. Similar to Godzilla, Mecha-Striesand has a lizard-like tail, sharp teeth and s horrific scream which is reminiscent of Streisand's singing voice. She violently destroys the town of South Park while seeking revenge for blowing her up in space[126]. Streisand's death is grotesque death. More specifically, it is an exaggerated representation of the excesses of Streisand's 'celebrity' reputation as monstrous. The grotesque representation of Streisand also correlates with Stone and Parker's opinions, which is not too different from the many non-Streisand-fans in the episode, who admittedly hate Streisand (Pond, 2000) ultimately affecting the context in which she appears[127]. In the episode '200', Streisand is un-happy with how the town of South Park had treated previously (in the episode 'Mecha-Streisand') and joins the other 'celebrities' in their attempt to destroy *South Park*.

Andersson (2004) discusses a selection of categorical types by which intertextuality can contribute to the prosperity of the polysemia of a text. 'Celebrity' intertextuality is the presence of an individual who is already established in another cultural form. When a 'celebrity' is intertextually referred to he or she will bring with them other textual or contextual implications that are associated to them. Such as, Gibson and the association of war through the blue and white paint on his face related to his role in *Braveheart*. *South Park* uses 'celebrity' intertextuality in order to subvert the individual's fame through satirically and paradoxically representing their absurdities in a humourous liminal space, exposing their absurdities as excessive. It is through comic devices of satire and parody, as well as distortion and exaggeration, that *South Park* is able to critique social topics.

[126] Another example of the internal intertextuality of *South Park*. 'Mecha-Streisand' – S1E12
[127] While introducing the episode 'Mecha-Streisand' Stone and Parker say "a lot of our fans ask us, Do you really hate the celebrities you make fun of in South Park? And the answer is, of course not. It's all just in good fun... except when it comes to Barbra Streisand! We hate her!". This hatred also comes from a political perspective with Parker and Stone referring to it as "a Colorado thing" (Pond, 2000).



Michael Jackson[128] is living in *South Park* with his son Blanket. He is wearing a disguise to avoid the town's people from knowing who he is. Mr. Jefferson, otherwise known as Jackson, just wants to play with the children. When he first meets Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny he invites them up his wishing tree where he sings for the boys and adds sound effects such as "HeeeeHeee" and "Jeh chabee durtah". These sounds – which are ironically associated with Jackson - are borrowed taken from Jackson's music. Jackson's brown moustache, that does not stick to his face, does not match his black hair. He is wearing his standard white glove on his left hand and his skin tone is pale white. Jackson has large round eyes and a petit pointed nose. The boys are not sure how to interpret Mr. Jefferson's appearance with Kyle softly asking Stan "what's wrong with his face?" and Stan responding "be cool, dude. I, I think maybe he's a burn victim or something". Gesturing to the amount of plastic surgery that Jackson has had, these statements are suggestive of his physical distortion, thus critiquing the absurdities of Jackson's many plastic surgeries.

Similarly to Jackson's surgical and contextual history, he has moved to South Park to escape the child molestation crimes that he has been framed for. It is revealed that the police in every state of America have a traditional 'code' of framing "rich black men". However, after Sergeant Yates' team have left false evidence in Mr. Jeffersons home he is horrified to find that Mr. Jefferson is actually 'white'. In absolute dismay, Sergeant Yates says "Jesus Christ Monkeyballs! We could have made an innocent man go to jail who *wasn't black*". Again, *South Park* is lampooning Jackson's surgeries and the change of his skin tone from black to white through highlighting these as excesses and critiquing it through humourous representations. In an exaggerated dramatic moment, Jackson's nose is accidentally pulled off his face by his son Blanket. His body soon becomes completely distorted as his skin starts to melt off his bones and his body decomposes. He desperately calls his surgeon who cannot get to South Park soon enough. His hair is falling out as he chases the boys who are trying to rescue Blanket. Mr. Jefferson resembles

[128] 'The Jeffersons' – S8E7

a zombie, skeletal-like figure as he appears with a gaping hole where his nose was, thin lips, one heavily lidded eye, and missing limbs with only one functioning leg.



Figure15

Michael Jackson decomposing

In the end, the police try to arrest Mr. Jefferson for child molestation and Cartman comically steps in to defend him, protesting, “I am sick and tired of people harassing Mr. Jefferson! All I've been hearing since Mr. Jefferson moved here are sick lies! That he molests children, that he's a bad father, that he has had plastic surgery”. Returning to Fiske’s (1987) theory of audience consumption, Cartman’s speech echoes, not only the voice of an innocent child, but also the voices of Jackson’s many fans. Jackson constantly maintained his innocence in the scandalous child molestation cases against him and was never found guilty in a court of law[129]. However, while this statement seems to defend Jackson, it also satirically lampoons Jackson’s denial of the excessive amount of surgery he has had. Cartman refers to the “sick lies” that “everyone” has been saying about Mr. Jefferson, that he molests children and “has had plastic surgery”. Unfortunately, at that moment the bottom half of Jackson’s jaw falls off his face and lands on the floor,

[129] CBC News. 2013. *Michael Jackson: Major events in his career, recent developments*. Retrieved from the world wide web at: http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2013/04/29/f-michael-jackson-timeline.html

exhibiting the decomposing symptoms from all his surgeries. While this scene humourously exposes Cartman's ignorance, it also suggests that other aspects of Cartman's speech should be reassessed.

The exaggerated distortion of the body is key to carnival humour as it offers a route of resistance from the realties of social ranking. Halsall (2008) suggests that the pleasures in *South Park* are experienced through using the carnival characteristic of laughter which is achieved through deciphering the polysemic messages of the text. Similarly to the representations of Jackson, Britney Spears's body is equally distorted to comment on her contextual surroundings.

In the episode 'Britney's New Look'[130], Spears' is visiting the town of South Park to escape from the pressures of stardom and the paparazzi. However while she is camping a photographer takes a photo of Spears accidentally urinating on a ladybug. When the town becomes overrun by paparazzi, all trying to get a photo of Spears after her breakdown, she flees to the local hotel, the Komfort Inn. She has medium length blonde hair and her attire includes pin-striped shorts, a multicoloured boob-tube top and a light pink hat. Due to the 'scandal', Spears's crying causes the copious amounts of make-up to run down her face. Cartman, Stan, Kyle, and Butters, who want to sell a picture of Spears defecating on Butters dressed up as a squirrel, pretend to be her children to gain access into her hotel room. When Spears is told by the guard that her children are there to support her, she stops crying. However, when the young boys walk into her hotel room she is so distraught she places the end of a shotgun in her mouth and pulls the trigger. The boys are shocked and overcome with guilt for their role in Spears's suicide. Spears's reaction is the result of her 'context of fame' where she herself sees it as excessive and, thus, inescapable. Musila (2004) suggests that the most affective form of paradoxical caricature is through the exaggerated distortion of the face. This form of paradoxical caricature is seen when Spears survives her attempted suicide, only to be left with one third of her head. Although Spears is now

[130] S12E2

visually horrifying and unable to see, talk and properly function, tabloids refer to it as Spears' new "no top part of her head look". This is a satirical critique of the absurd context in which Spears exists and is represented world wide. The absurdity of how Spears' is represented to the world via the media is mocked, where, instead of her traumatic head injury making news, the media focus on a (barely visible) scar from Spears' breast surgery.

Referring to Spears' past actions, such as shaving her head (Marikar, 2007), Spears' manager helps her escape the paparazzi at the hospital only to drive her straight to the recording studio to record her "comeback album". While at the recording studio, Spears is dressed in a dark grey skirt, white blouse and light grey jersey all resembling the attire from her first music video *Hit me Baby One More Time*. Despite her medical condition and that the lyrics of the song are the sounds of Spears gurgling blood in her bottom lip, the music crew still criticise her for absurdities that are not relevant. They refer to her as "a train wreck", "stoned", "stupid", and "fat". Stan is horrified, pointing out that she is stupid and cannot function because she literally only has "half a brain".



Figure16 and 17

Left: Britney Spears performing after her attempted suicide.

Right: Britney Spears performing at the *2007 MTV Video Music Awards*[131]

Spears then performs her new song at the *2007 MTV Video Music Awards*. This is a direct intertextual reference to Spears' performance which was slandered by the public and tabloids. Her attire included knee high black

[131] Image retrieved from the world wide web at: http://www.mtv.com/content/ontv/vma/2007/photo/flipbooks/show-highlights/14767968-sq.jpg. 2013.

boots, fishnet stockings, and a revealing black and silver sequined outfit. The stage and dancers are also identical representations with dancers on strips polls, the male dancers in suits, and the background composed of large red and pink squares with the silhouette of dancers in each. The intertextual references emphasise the state of Spears as incapable of performing and the failure of the performance.

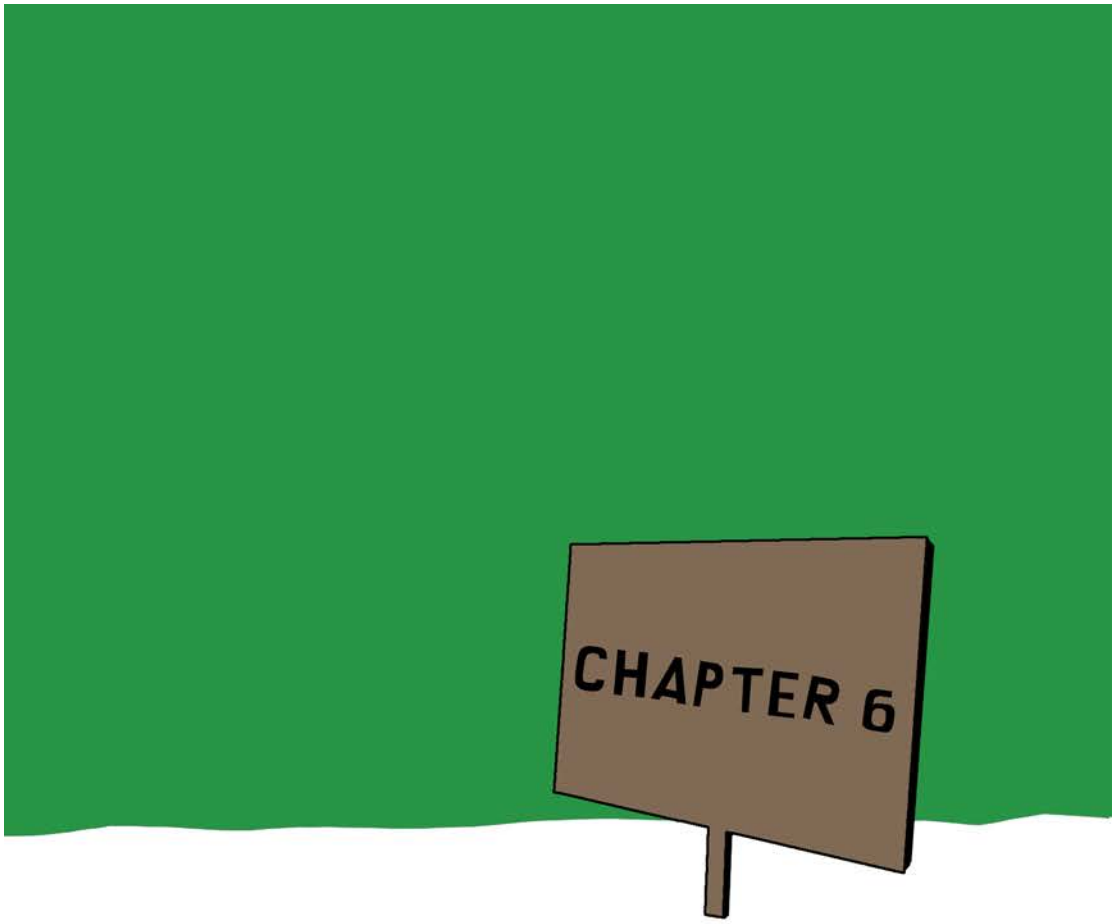
The opinions voiced by the public are also emulated through the audience in the episode with a woman saying “oh my God, she's really gotten chubby” and a man saying that Spears is lip-syncing, only to have Stan point out that it is because “she doesn’t have any lips”. The episode is pointing out the absurdities of the entertainment industry. By assessing these absurdities within the liminal of excess, Stone and Parker are able to critique not only Spears’ flaws and very public break-downs but also criticize the entertainment industry. Stan and Kyle try to help Spears escape the industry by hiding her at the North Pole. However, they are eventually chased into a field where it is revealed that the worlds’ population has built Spears up into an international icon with the objective to sacrifice her for a successful corn harvest. Unlike the traditional sense of a sacrifice, the episode concludes with the media and audiences photographing Spears to death, suggesting that in reality it is the media and its audiences that have caused Spears’s breakdown.

The intertextual references contribute to the polysemia of the text, allowing audiences to interpret representations based on their knowledge of the topical ‘celebrity’ or public figure. While the grotesque distortion of the body, as well as the exaggeration of elements of the body, contributes to the carnival laughter encouraged by *South Park*, it also offers its audience laughter that resists the mainstream representations of ‘celebrities’ and pubic figures. As illustrated in ‘Britney’s New Look’[132] the public have unrealistic expectations of ‘celebrities’ and even though Spears has no head the focus in the news is based on irrelevant factors such as her weight or camel toe in her shorts. While Spears’s physical representation in the series is grotesque with her

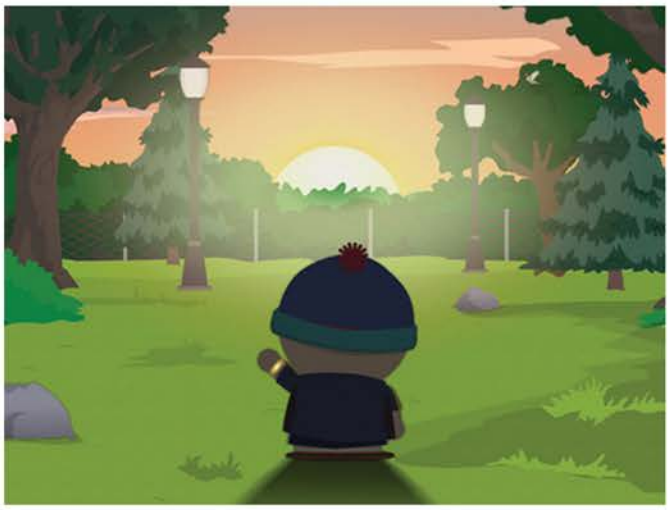
[132] S12E2

head distorted to the point of exposing the inside of her skull. Semiology suggests that Spears' herself is not targeted but rather is the signified symbol with the focus directed at the context in which she exists. Similarly the caricature of Jackson, as a signifier, is shown to be melting as a result of all his plastic surgery. The carnivalesque uses the grotesque as a humourous means of resistance, in the same way Stone and Parker use Spears to demonstrate the need to resist the power of the entertainment industry. Concurrently the episode also point outs that while ridicule is important, it cannot be taken too seriously due to its power which ultimately resulted in Spears' death. In contrast the Mbembean perspective sees the resultant laughter from grotesque lampooning of the body as escapism, exposing the flaws of the power and 'celebrified' both physically and contextually to cause simple change. Despite Cartman's icon Gibson defecating, Cartman continues to treat Gibson like a religious icon and, along with the other boys, still refers to Gibson in a celebrated manner.

To conclude the overall chapter, what has been demonstrated is that *South Park* uses satire, parody and irony in a multitude of ways to illustrate the excessive absurdities of celebrity culture and individual 'celebrities'. Through using visual analysis, semiotics, and intertextuality, this chapter has highlighted how *South Park* changes the contextual identity of a celebrity to ridicule their fame, all through the characteristic sense of children's play. This chapter has also shown how the language in *South Park* – while considered by many as unnecessarily crude and blasphemous – mocks, not only 'celebrities', public figures, and religious icons, but also uses the ambiguity of billingsgate language to mock those that idolise these figures. Finally, the last section focused on a key feature of *South Park* and the carnivalesque, namely the grotesque and obscene body. Through the physical distortion of the body of the 'celebrities' and public figures *South Park* critiques both the physical body and the 'context of fame' and historical action in order to transpose the socially absurd excesses of the 'celebrities' and public figures lives onto their physical form.



CONCLUSION.



In the end, what Stan and Kyle say is true: “you know, I learned something today…”. This dissertation started by suggesting that *South Park* uses laughter and humour to unpack the absurdities of ‘celebrities’ and public figures by assessing the liminal space of excess which surrounds them. Through investigating the tripartite of *South Park*, the carnivalesque, and ‘celebrities’ some very interesting themes have come to light.

Out of the literature referred to in the literature review, four key elements that enhanced this analysis of the series became prominent: the ambiguity of critical laughter siding with the subject of laughter or those laughing, satire that not only defines the genre but ambiguously encourages critical laughter through entertainment. As well as, the polysemic nature of *South Park* encouraging multiple symbolic interpretations of a sign, and the associated pleasures of interpretation. The term “pleasure” within ‘television studies’ is considered problematic due to its dependence on many factors (Casey et al, 2008). This is attributed mainly to the definition of pleasure for each individual. Pleasure is experienced not only through the physical act of watching *South Park* (either online or via a television), but is also through the physical reaction of laughter. Other pleasures include the ability to interpret the intertextual allusions within the series, which encourages the pleasure of in-group superiority. This concept is developed in the literature review into methodological pleasure. These are the pleasures experienced through the ability to decipher the multiple intertextual references and allusions borrowed from contemporary society that are represented in *South Park*.

These elements are approached from a theoretical perspective in the next chapter. The methodological pleasure of deciphering the intertextual references in the series is elaborated by gaining a greater understanding of how intertextuality functions, particularly within a postmodern context. Intertextuality is, in fact, a founding aspect of this research by enhancing the ability of the audience to understand and analyse the representations of a ‘celebrity’ as a textual reference, the context in which this ‘celebrity’ exists, and the absurdities that surround them. In this sense, it became evident that the contextual identity of a ‘celebrity’ is vital in understanding the context of



excess in which they appear in the show. Intertextuality is also used to acknowledge the self-reflective nature of *South Park* through the characters of Terrence and Phillip. This self-reflective nature illustrates that while the series encourages critical laughter directed at aspects of our contemporary reality, Stone and Parker apply the same kind of critical laughter metaphorically to their own series. This sense of critique is the third characteristic that developed out of the literature, where, through the desire to make the sacred profane, Stone and Parker use satire and parody. These comic devices are the heart of this thesis and the analysis chapter shows the many ways that critical laughter is encouraged in the selected episodes of *South Park*.

Through an amalgamation of these elements and characteristics, and partnered with a well developed anthology of data, the thematic concerns for analysis came to light. Arguably, thus far, the literature acts as evidence of the techniques that justify the types of representations and nature of the series which are demonstrated throughout this analysis. By assessing the contextual identity of the 'celebrity' within *South Park*, it is evident that the focus is not entirely on the 'celebrity' or public figure. Here, the importance also lies in the social context in which their absurdities are constructed. In the second section of the analysis, billingsgate language and ambiguity are used to highlight how the series uses language to both celebrate and insult individuals. However, even at the end of this chapter, there is a sense that the show is also directing its critique at those who are able to understand the social context of the insults. The third and final chapter examined the physical representations of 'celebrities' and public figures by focusing on the exaggeration and distortion of excesses that surround or physically represent the topical individual. Intertextuality and parody contributed to understanding the route of the representations by highlighting what aspects of the physical form has been exaggerated and distorted as a means of creating critical laughter. Although the focus of each episode analysed is specifically aimed at representing the 'celebrity' and public figure in a grotesque form, there is still a sense that the critical laughter is also directed at the social context in which the 'celebrities' and public figures exist.

Initially the expected outcome from this dissertation was that *South Park* would highlight the flaws of 'celebrities' with the intention of offering its audience a form of resistance to 'celebrity culture'. The interpretation and understanding of the episode by different audience members is metaphorically presented through each of the boys. While some audience members may correlate with the naïve Butters experience of the episode, other audience members may interpret the message in the episode that same way Stan or Kyle do. Despite the diverse interpretations of the text or episode, the laughter encouraged is pleasurable through seeing the powerful 'celebrity' or public figure in a context of ridicule. Within the carnivalesque context, this type of humour and laughter temporally acts as resistance on behalf of the laughing participants. However, the ultimate outcome from the analysis illustrates that the type of humour and laughter in *South Park* is not resistant. Rather, while the 'celebrity' is being ridiculed for entertainment and critical purposes, the laughter is also directed at the audience. The argument that *South Park* uses humour and laughter to unpack the absurdities of 'celebrities' and public figures, by assessing the liminal space of excess which surrounds them, is clearly evident. The analysis also suggests that the critical laughter is simultaneously directed at the audience who contribute to the success of the celebrated excess.

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