Towards a Theory of Postmodern Humour:

South Park as carnivalesque postmodern narrative impulse

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Abstract

The philosopher Martin Heidegger describes humour as a response to human '*thrownness*' in the world. This thesis argues that there is a form of humour which can be usefully described as postmodern humour and that postmodern humour reflects the experience of being '*thrown*' into postmodernity. Postmodern humour responds to and references the fears, fixations, frameworks and technologies which underpin our postmodern existence. It is further contended that *South Park* is an example of postmodern humour in the way that it exhibits a *carnivalesque postmodern narrative impulse* which attacks the meta-narrative style explanations of contemporary events, trends and fashions offered in the popular media. *South Park's* carnivalesque humour is a complex critique on a society in which television is a primary instrument of communication, a centre-piece to many people's lives, and a barometer of contemporary culture, while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that the medium being satirised is also used to perform the critique.

A large portion of this thesis is devoted to examining and interrogating the discursive properties of humour as compared to seriousness, an endeavour which also establishes some interesting links to postmodern philosophical discourse. This can be succinctly summarized by the following:

1. Humour is a form of discourse which simultaneously refers to two frames of reference, or associative contexts. Therefore humour is a bissociative form of discourse.
2. Seriousness is a form of discourse which relies on a singular associative context.
3. The legally and socially instituted rules which govern everyday life use serious discourse as a matter of practical necessity.

4. Ambiguity, transgression and deviancy are problematic to serious discourse (and therefore the official culture in which it circulates), but conventions of humorous discourse.
5. Humorous discourse then, challenges the singularity and totality of the official discourses which govern everyday life. Subsequently, humour has been subjected to a variety of controls, most notably the 'policing the body' documented in the writings of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault.
6. Humour can therefore be understood to function in a manner similar to Jean-François Lyotard's concept of little-narrative's, which destabilize the totality of official meta-narratives.

Furthermore, this thesis proposes strong links between the oppositional practices of the medieval carnival, as outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin, and the produced-for-mass-consumption humour of *South Park*. However, it also demonstrates that although *South Park* embodies the oppositional spirit of the carnival, it lacks its fundamentally social nature, and therefore lacks its politically resistant potency. More specifically it is argued that the development and prevalence of technologies such as television, video/DVD, and the internet, allows us to access humour at any *time* we wish. However, this temporal freedom is contrasted by the spatial constraints inherent in these communication/media technologies. Rather than officially sanctioned times and places for carnivalesque social gatherings, today, individuals have the 'liberty' of free (private) access to carnivalesque media texts, which simultaneously help to restrict the freedom of social contact that the carnival used to afford. Further to this, it is argued that the fact that *South Park*, with its explicit derision of authority, is allowed to circulate through mainstream media at all, implies asymmetric conservative action on the part of officialdom. In this sense it is argued that postmodern humour such as *South Park* is allowed to circulate because the act of watching/consuming the programme also acts as a deterrent to actual radical activity.

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1.0 Introduction: *South Park*, Humour and Social Commentary

> *South Park* remains among the bravest, most outspoken and most politically aware shows on television. Were it not so dense with insight and observation, it's unlikely any debate would exist on the specific political concerns of its two creators.
>
> Lonnie Harris [1]

> We find just as many things to rip on on the left as we do on the right.
>
> Trey Parker, co-creator of *South Park* [2]

Humour is a particularly effective vehicle for publicly expressing controversial views, as evidenced by the long historical association between humour and oppositional socio-political commentary.[3] From the ancient myths of trickster gods, to the classical Greek comedies, to medieval jesters, to political cartoons, to *South Park*, humour has played a vital role in providing a public forum for oppositional voices. In this sense, the significance of humour cannot be overstated as it enhances our understanding of the world by challenging the stability of the official discourses that shape the truths of our time.

As the recent controversy in New Zealand surrounding the broadcast of the *South Park* episode 'Bloody Mary' (episode 914, first aired 07/12/05) demonstrated, by its very nature as social satire *South Park* provokes both denigration and celebration.[4] In fact ever since the first episode aired on the American cable channel Comedy Central in August 1997, the programme's creators have been both accused of undermining the moral fibre of society and acclaimed for their insightful, relevant, and irreverent humour and social commentary. Although in a recent interview Matt Stone and Trey Parker, the co-creators of *South Park* did note that the nature of the complaints against the show had shifted in emphasis from their use of scatological humour and profanity, to their social commentary.[5]

Nevertheless, despite the moral outrage that *South Park* continuously provokes, in the highly competitive world of commercial television the fact that *South Park* is still being produced is testament to its popularity. In the nine series that have aired to date, the show has addressed many serious and contentious issues, including global warming (episode 302, 'Spontaneous Combustion', first aired 14/04/99), racism (episode 408, 'Chef Goes Nanners', first aired 05/07/00), consumerism (episode 407, 'Cherokee Hair Tampons', first aired 28/06/00) and stem-cell research (episode 702, 'Krazy Kripples', first aired 26/03/03), with the later series exhibiting a more overt focus on commenting on current affairs and the media.[6] The effectiveness of this form of humour and social critique is due to the currency and familiarity of the targets as well as its oppositional perspective [see section 3.7 for discussion of oppositional political humour]. However, the creators go to great lengths to include (and mock) the multiple perspectives of any issue they address, though there is a marked tendency to inflate the stereotypical characteristics of the two main conflicting arguments. This aspect of *South Park's* humour is dealt with in greater detail in later sections where it is related to postmodern thought and the writings of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and French philosopher Henri Bergson.

South Park is the unpredictable end result of two University of Colorado students, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, being asked to produce a Christmas video card for Brian Graden, an executive at Fox Studios, based on their first film *Cannibal the Musical.*[7] Parker and Stone leapt at the fee-paying opportunity and produced *The Spirit of Christmas.* The simple stop-motion

animation of construction paper cut-outs featured the four boys who went on to become the main characters of the *South Park* series and landed Stone and Parker a development deal with Comedy Central.

The first episode of *South Park*, ('Cartman gets an anal probe'), aired on Comedy Central on 13/08/97. It immediately drew attention, as it was the first animated comedy on American television to receive the restrictive 'adults only' TV-MA rating.[8] Despite its rating and late-night time slot, *South Park* quickly became (and remains) Comedy Central's highest rating original series and firmly established the channel within the competitive North American cable television market.[9] A sanitised version of *South Park* was screened for the first time on a syndicated television network in the U.S.A. on 19 September 2005.[10]

South Park is centred around the lives of four small town South-Colorado nine year old boys: Stan Marsh; Kyle Broflovski; Eric Cartman (Cartman); and Kenny McCormick. Stan and Kyle are the animated alter-egos of Parker and Stone respectively and provide a sense of calm in the chaos of *South Park*, they are also the characters most often used to articulate and deliver the ironically performed, parodic 'moral of the story' at the end of each episode, invariably beginning with "You know, I have learnt something today." Cartman is the obligatory comedic fat friend who is made fun of for his weight and outwardly repressed (though actually a sexually promiscuous drug-fiend) mother.[11] Cartman can also be understood as a psychopathic and grotesque elaboration and exaggeration of

the Archie Bunker style character, a familiar feature of American situation comedy. Kenny is the comedic side-kick and poor friend who knows a lot about sex, has unemployed, alcoholic parents and is killed in practically every episode of the first five-series. In the same manner as *The Simpsons* the local townsfolk, teachers, shop owners, and officials also feature to varying degrees in different episodes. However, as it is created for late night broadcast on a cable channel, *South Park* has a certain degree of license denied to *The Simpsons,* which is created for prime time broadcast on a free-to-air network. Stone and Parker have stated that the bulk of their inspiration for *South Park* comes from a satirical view of Hollywood and the television industry, and that they are particularly fond of lampooning celebrities, celebrity, media hype and current events.[12] This element of their humour is enhanced by the speed of the technologies that are used for creating *South Park.*

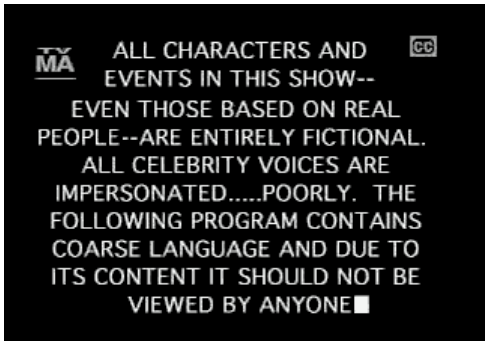
The *South Park* creative team have developed an incredibly fast production process, using the computer software MAYA, with which entire episodes can be created in a matter of days, allowing a very quick response to current events and the latest media phenomenon/release.[13] Both Parker and Stone maintain that this has become the very foundation of their creative process, because if they do not rush they are not funny.[14] The speed of their production process also ensures that the topics they are addressing are still very much in the media and therefore the popular consciousness of their audience. For instance, eight days after the debacle of the contested 2000 presidential election in America, an episode of *South Park* aired which

depicted an equally-contested kindergarten class election result, delayed due to an undecided voter named Flora (episode 413, 'Trapper Keeper', first aired 15/11/00). Another example is episode 715 ('It's Christmas in Canada' first aired 17/12/03) which showed a bearded Saddam Hussein hiding in a makeshift bunker, and aired a mere three days after his reported capture. The current events that *South Park* satirises are not restricted to matters of such importance however. Anything that draws media attention is liable to be targeted. In the episode 'It Hits the Fan' (episode 502 first aired 20/06/01), *South Park* characters used the word "shit" 162 times, in response to the huge media debate generated by an episode of *Chicago Hope* in which a main character said "shit" without being censored/bleeped. They have also devoted entire episodes to mocking celebrities such as: Paris Hilton, Jennifer Lopez, Ben Affleck, Tom Cruise, Barbara Streisand, David Blaine, and the the list goes on and on.

The humour of *South Park* is constantly situated within resistant readings of other media texts and current events.[15] This penchant for playfully referential of-the-moment-ness is no doubt a source of attraction for many viewers. The humour of *South Park* is consciously current, self-consciously hip, self-consciously oppositional and the programme as a whole embodies a certain childlike sense of 'getting away' with something, which is in some sense enhanced by the use of children as main characters [see section 8.2 for a discussion of *South Park's* use of children as main characters]. Like its famous predecessor, *The Simpsons*, *South Park* has managed the difficult task of attaining both cult-status (sub-cultural credibility) and mainstream

success.[16] This is possibly due to the highly self-reflexive nature of both series, demonstrating a seemingly subversive 'meta-knowledge' of themselves by including in their humour, mockery of the processes of their own production, both as television texts and cultural commodities.[17]

However, *South Park* is more than just a parody of television, it exposes televisual limits and reflects on its pervasiveness as a medium for communicating social norms and values. The disclaimer, aired at the beginning of each episode, introduces *South Park's* self-reflexive and critical treatment of the character of television. The disclaimer [see image 1.0] also indicates to the viewer that they should interpret the programme humorously, as well as introducing the first notions of a crude production ethic. As a text it is a parody of itself: it fulfils the role of a disclaimer as well as undermining this very role with satiric edge. This form of double-coding is suggested by some writers to be a defining characteristic of postmodern media texts as it questions the familiar modes of representation while simultaneously making explicit and wry reference to the fact that they must be employed.[18]



1.0

The high level of popular culture and media referencing in *South Park* makes it accessible to a wide international audience despite its parallel predilection for specifically American concerns and sophisticated allusions to "high-culture" through references to literature, politics, history, and

religion. The anarchic blending of high and low culture in such a manner is one of the hallmarks of the carnivalesque, a concept developed by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin which has become closely associated with postmodernism and academic discussions of popular culture.[19] In fact there are many aspects of *South Park* that lie at the heart of postmodern thought. *South Park* interrogates institutions and institutional knowledge and erodes the stability of social hierarchies and social distinctions of practically every description. High-culture icons such as the biblical Madonna and Karl Marx are treated with no more or less reverence than the MTV Madonna and Groucho Marx.

Very broadly, *South Park's* humour attacks the overriding seriousness of everyday life, as distilled and packaged in ostensibly authoritative media representations of contemporary society. In this sense *South Park's* humour can be considered as analogous to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *little-narrative*, which attacks the illusion of certainty and totality of *meta-narratives*, which in this case are the media circulated explanations of contemporary events and their historical antecedents [see section 2.3]. Furthermore, the television broadcasting of *South Park* creates an audience who, in the act of *laughing at* the targets of humour within the show (and therefore implicitly and vicariously *laughing with* its creators and millions of fans), participate in a vicarious group/cultural experience centered around the subversion of the contemporary consumer culture. Ironically they are also participating in the culture that is satirised by watching/consuming the show.[20] This thesis

hopes to establish that the act of consuming the socio-politically oppositional action inherent in *South Park's* contemporary satire, also acts as a substitute to actual political action. This is one of the fundamental assertions of this thesis and it is developed more fully throughout the later sections. However at this stage it is important to note the significant position that media products and technologies have in contemporary culture. Subsequently, *South Park's* satire depicts a world of consumerism and commodification populated by parents that are idiotic or absent, which leads the children to construct their own knowledge base in unauthorised arrangements of popular culture, playground knowledge and sound-bite information gained through the media.

Although I have quite casually referred to *South Park's* humour as postmodern, both *humour* and *postmodern* are terms that are in fact very slippery and difficult to define. Interestingly though, many of the words and concepts that have been used in historical discussions of humour have reappeared in discussions of postmodernity. Humour relies on ambiguities, uncertainties and shifts in perspective, as well as playing with the limits of language, logic and representation; these are also key areas of interest in postmodern thought. The following chapter is divided into five sections and offers a very brief introduction to the main ideas associated with postmodernism, postmodernity and postmodern thought as they relate to the study of popular culture and humour. Later sections will take up some of these themes in a more focussed manner. The brevity of the following chapter is due to the standard and abundance of already published material

devoted to postmodernism, while also allowing for more space to be devoted to exploring the concept of humour which has been comparatively overlooked and under theorised.

2.0 The postmoderns: a brief introduction

> The postmodern, its parameters, and even its very existence as anything but a marketable myth for academics and broadsheet art pages remains an active site of disputation and debate.
>
> Jason Rutter [21]

The postmoderns (postmodern, postmodernism and postmodernity) are notoriously difficult to define. Essentially they provide rubrics for a wide variety of intersecting, competing and overlapping concepts and practices, as British sociologist Dick Hebdige notes:

> When it becomes possible for people to describe as 'postmodern' the décor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record…a television commercial, or an arts documentary, or the intertextual relations between them, the layout of a page in a magazine or a critical journal, an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack on the metaphysics of presence, a general attenuation of feeling,…the "de-centring" of the subject,…the decline of the university,… broad societal and economic shifts into a media, consumer, or multi-national phase,… when it becomes possible to describe all of these things as postmodern… then it's clear we are in the presence of a buzzword.[22]

Buzzword or not, concepts associated with the term postmodern have influenced practically every sphere of life and for that reason alone it deserves serious attention. Insofar as this Thesis is concerned postmodernism is important to discuss as it is often associated with *South Park*, though equally as often what it actually means to be postmodern is left unexplored. Furthermore, it is proposed that *South Park* as a cultural product of postmodernity reflects the material, cultural and epistemological conditions of the era.

2.1 Postmodernity

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.
Karl Marx [23]

Postmodernity is a breaking apart of reason: Deleuzian Schizophrenia.
Michel Foucault [24]

History used to be divided into periods by historians in order to help describe the past to a contemporary audience, highlighting the perceived successes and innovations of the present as compared to the follies, falsities and inadequacies of the past. However, today the media informs us of entering a new historical era, such as "post-9/11", which (with only slight tongue in cheek exaggeration) seems to occur whenever something is accorded significance by an American politician. Through live-on-location telecasting of current events, journalists are constantly deciding and defining (for us), the significant events of the day and inviting us to 'watch history as it happens.' This thesis regards the immediacy of communication and the significant role that the media plays in shaping contemporary popular opinion as fundamental characteristics of today's society. It is a further assumption of this research that we are currently living in postmodernity and that the centrality of the media (industry, conventions and technologies) is reflected and referenced in postmodern cultural products, including humour.

Postmodernity, or post-modernity is the historical era that postdates the historical era of modernity. The modern age, or modernity is generally considered to have begun in the Renaissance and became epitomised in The Enlightenment's 'administrative rationalization and differentiation of the

social world.'[25] There is no doubt of the strong links between the modern and the postmodern, in fact postmodernism has even been described as modernism in its 'nascent state.'[26] Both modernity and postmodernity are characterised by a challenge to the idea of an objective reality. However, where modern thought lamented the loss of certainty and sought to overcome it using rigour, reason and empirical research, postmodern thought delights in the freedom and plays 'merrily in the realm of the intertextual.'[27] There is no definitive date for the end of modernity and the beginning of postmodernity, although Charles Jencks has offered the absurdly precise time of 3:32pm 15 July 1972, the exact time that the Pruitt-Igoe housing development in St. Louis Missouri U.S.A. was demolished.[28] Generally the postmodern age, or, postmodernity is considered to have begun around the middle of the twentieth century and is characterised by an increasingly global consciousness and acceptance of cultural diversity, due in part to the development of new media technologies.[29] It is not all tea and biscuits though - due to the highly mediated nature of the popular culture(s) of postmodernity, the contents of this global consciousness are shaped by the specificities of media themselves as well as the machinations of governmental and commercial imperatives.[30] Commenting on this, Frederick Jameson points out the dominance of American values in the postmodern psyche:

> this whole global, *yet American*, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world: in this sense, as throughout class history, the underside of [postmodern] culture is blood, torture, death, and terror.[31] [my italics]

By this view, the dominance of American values, interests and images in the popular culture of postmodernity is a direct result of the pervasiveness of America's international presence and influence in the realms of economics, politics and the military.[32] This is however, only one movement of postmodernity and a growing recognition of local identity, culture and uniqueness is yet another movement. Though importantly, localised movements, by very definition, never match the mass-media visibility of the American film, television, fashion and music industries.

Postmodernity is often characterised by fragmentation and the breakdown of inherited traditions of family and social structure. This fragmentation reflects at a socio-cultural level Lyotard's thoughts relating to the breakdown of the grand-narratives, or meta-narratives of modernity (Marxism, psychoanalysis, religion, science, reason) in favour of the little-narratives appropriate to postmodernity. Little-narratives challenge the stability and authority of meta-narratives by communicating more specific, local and individual experiences rather than the totalising explanations of meta-narratives.

In the 18th century Italian historian Giambattista Vico identified a four stage cyclical pattern of growth and decline through which a culture progresses, the fourth of which is described as:

> The age of dissolution and *ricorso* or recycling. The human origin of institutions and standards is revealed; people no longer revere them, and seek their own private pleasures instead of the public good.[33]

The characteristic psychological state associated with this stage involves 'uncertainty about things-in-themselves' and 'mimicking as a way of taking action.'[34] Bearing in mind that Vico developed his ideas in the 18th century, these sentiments are curiously similar to those used to describe characteristics of postmodernity. Within literary theory Vico's four stage schema of cultural development and decline has also been usefully linked to the dominance of particular modes of speech: metaphor; metonymy; synecdoche; and irony respectively. Irony has long been used for comedic and satiric purposes, but as a dominant mode of expression it poses a variety of challenges to communication and traditional notions of truth. This is due to the very nature of irony itself, which, like humour, attempts to convey information concerning two things at once and is therefore a highly ambiguous form of communication [see sections 3.2, 4.2 and 4.4 for further discussion of humour's capacity for communicating two ideas simultaneously]. Continuing this line of thought, if we accept the structuralist position that humans construct meaning through language then it would necessarily follow that if irony was the primary attribute of the language of postmodernity, its inherent indeterminacy would be reflected in its cultural expressions and worldviews. American philosopher Richard Rorty describes the postmodern ironist as someone who fulfils three conditions:

> (1) she has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realises that argument phased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her

> vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that is in touch with a power not herself.[35]

For Rorty a person's final vocabulary is 'the set of words they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives', they are both the means and the limits of a person's understanding of the world.[36] A postmodern ironist recognises the presence and validity of other final vocabularies, the limits and partiality of their own final vocabulary, and the absence of an objective reality – a postmodern ironist is wryly realistic concerning the conditions of existing in postmodernity. Although Rorty does not emphasise the point himself, (aside from mentioning books), it is pertinent to note the importance of communication/media technologies in the development of postmodern irony.

Notable features of postmodernity are: the centrality of the media industry and media technologies in contemporary social life; knowledge of the social and discursive construction of reality; the commodification of culture; recognition (if not acceptance) of diversity; and the breakdown of inherited traditions, institutions and knowledge(s). It is proper then that we now turn our discussion to how these material conditions of postmodernity have been expressed in postmodernism.

2.2 Postmodernism

> Postmodernism attempts to describe and explain human existence from perspectives different from those of modernist and post-Enlightenment thinkers.
>
> Pat Brereton [37]

Postmodernism is the cultural and artistic aesthetic of postmodernity. It is what Jameson describes as 'the cultural logic of late capitalism'. Jameson

describes postmodernism as an explosion of culture into every sphere of society 'to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become "cultural".'[38] This idea is also central to the theories of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard who claims that postmodernism represents a stage of socio-cultural and economic development:

> …in which it is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artefacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the economic.[39]

Both Baudrillard and Jameson consider postmodernism to be an expression of the capitalist economy which underpins postmodernity, and in their view postmodern culture is itself an economic activity.[40] This complex socio-economic self-awareness is also brilliantly expressed in the postmodern art of Andy Warhol. Warhol made the repetition of images associated with consumerism and popular culture, artistic, whilst simultaneously making art a popular and mass reproducible commodity. This element of postmodernism can also be seen in the manner in which 'postmodern' television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy* self-reflexively refer to their production, circulation, and status as media and cultural commodities.

As the 'post' suggests, postmodernism both contains and self-consciously seeks to surpass the cultural and artistic limitations of modernism. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, Lyotard astutely

describes this situation using a genealogy of artists and shows how modernism's accelerating drive for newness eventually produced postmodernism:

> All that has been received, if only yesterday… must be suspected. What space does Cézanne challenge? The impressionists'. What object to Picasso and Braque attack? Cézannes. What presupposition does Duchamp break with in 1912? That which says one must make a painting, be it Cubist. And Buren questions that other presupposition which he believes had survived untouched in the work of Duchamp: the place of presentation of the work. In an amazing acceleration, the generations precipitate themselves… Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant.'[41]

The process of questioning the questioning of predecessors that Lyotard describes as so central to the development of postmodernism in the visual arts was also simultaneously happening in literature, criticism, architecture, science, sociology, philosophy and history. However, the acceptance, use, and meaning of postmodernism in each of these fields is, and will likely remain, highly debated. At a fundamental level postmodernism poses a challenge to orthodoxy and traditional notions of authority, history, legitimation, and representation by questioning the assumptions, knowledge(s) and authorities which underpin them. That is not to say that postmodernism is entirely subversive, though subversion is most definitely a movement, or series of movements within it. Postmodernism is the cultural expression of postmodernity and just like any other cultural expression (such as kinship, building, art, cooking) postmodernism is articulated differently in different contexts, though the general themes of uncertainty, fragmentation, double-coding, and intertextuality are fairly constant.

2.3 Postmodern Thought

The idea that unifies postmodern thought is 'a loss of belief in an objective world' and scepticism of inherited knowledge(s).[42] Postmodern thought considers meaning and knowledge to be created through a complex process of socio-discursive negotiations. By this view, the notion of Truth relates to a particular attitude that is taken in relation to certain statements, rather than a stable and definite relationship to a non-verbal reality.[43] Subsequently, Truth is further understood as a series of statements and assumptions about the world that are legitimised by a ruling authority.[44] And language is best understood as a tool used for constructing meaning through socio-linguistic performances, or engaging in language games.[45] As postmodern thought has freed language from the burden of describing reality, it is often characterised by its playful, performative and radical use of language with which it challenges traditional concepts of objectivity, subjectivity, normality, authority, progress and history.[46] It is in this sense that postmodern thought is considered a disruption of the certainty inherited from Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Descartes and Bacon. These philosophers epitomise Enlightenment thought in the way that they considered empiricism, scientific method, and Reason as evidence of human progress and tools for creating a perfect society based on universal laws discovered through the rigorous study of nature. In the process of their studies Enlightenment thinkers created a number of new branches of knowledge and new ways of describing the world. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard describes these knowledge's as grand-narratives or meta-narratives. Meta-narratives can be summarily described as explanations,

knowledge, or theories that are posited as total and timeless certainties, such as Marxism and its total faith in a proletariat uprising.

In his much cited phrase Lyotard offers the succinct description of postmodern thought as 'an incredulity towards meta-narratives.'[47] Essentially Lyotard is suggesting that we need to challenge the pursuit of universal truths and total explanations, and instead pursue lines of questioning and thought which emphasise the experience of the individual, are accepting of the presence of uncertainty, and recognise the influence of context in the generation of meaning. It could be said that Lyotard rejects the totalising concept of Reason in favour of more context and temporally specific reasons, or little-narratives.[48] Later sections [sections 3.8 and 4.6] will accord much more emphasis to Lyotard's concepts of little-narratives and meta-narratives and their relationship to *South Park* and its particular form of humour. There is also an entire section dedicated to mapping some of the parallels and intersections between postmodern thought and humour [see section 4.6].

2.4 The Postmoderns: a summary

Postmodern thought, postmodernism and postmodernity all indicate a preoccupation with history and historical processes by expressing a direct relationship to their historical predecessors; modern thought, modernism and modernity – suggesting both a movement from the past as well as a continuance. This preoccupation with history is evident in postmodernism's

excessive use of quotation, nostalgia and parody, and in postmodern thought, by the expressed awareness of the intertextual, discursively based and context specific nature of knowledge and meaning. This thesis hopes to establish that *South Park* also exhibits these characteristics and that it can therefore usefully be described as postmodern humour. Not all contemporary humour is postmodern, postmodern humour is a form of humour which has emerged in postmodernity and can be considered next to other forms and styles of humour such as black humour, satire, parody and jokes. It is necessary now to move away from postmodernism and shift focus onto the comparatively under-researched though equally as elusive concept of humour.

3.0 What is humour?: Introduction to a long view

Laughter is a commentary on finitude — a response to the ambiguity of human "thrownness" in the world.

Martin Heidegger [49]

Humour is untranslatable, otherwise the French would not use the word.

Paul Valery [50]

It would be very hard to find a person who would claim to have absolutely no sense of humour. However, it would be equally as hard to find someone who could explain with any precision exactly what a sense of humour is. Interestingly, at the first International Conference of Humour and Laughter in Cardiff, 1976, the response of attendees was 'overwhelmingly negative' towards even attempting to define humour.[51] Nevertheless, for over two millennia, humans have mused over its origins and functions, and most prominent thinkers have included some thoughts on humour in their writings.

Although later sections will take a more in-depth look at theories of humour, it is useful to briefly introduce the main schools of thought on the subject here. Traditionally, theories of humour have been divided into three very broad categories: *superiority theories*, which date back to the Ancient Greek philosophers and suggest that we laugh at others who we perceive as inferior to ourselves [section 4.1]; *relief theories*, which originated in the early psychoanalytic writings of Freud and claim that people joke in order to relieve pent up psychical energies that would otherwise manifest in more damaging ways [section 4.3]; and *incongruity theories,* a concept that also originated in philosophy and argues that humour arises when there is an incongruity between what is *expected* and what *occurs* [section 4.2].

Essentially each of these categories of theories offer useful insights into certain instances of humour; superiority theories provide a good explanation for ethnic humour, relief theories are useful for explaining political humour, and incongruity theories explain why puns and word plays are funny, but none totally explain humour in its myriad of forms and functions, or offer anything approaching a total explanation, though they are often presented as such.

British novelist and essayist Arthur Koestler offers the very general definition of humour as *any* type of stimulation that elicits 'the laughter reflex.'[52] Obviously, this assumes that laughter is a definite and repeatable response to humorous stimuli and that *funniness* is an innate quality of humour rather than a process of negotiation. It is from this position that explanations tend to become circular, with humour being defined as 'something funny' and funny being defined as 'something humorous' and both of them evidenced by the laughter of another. This last point, the laughter of another, also introduces the fundamentally social nature of humour, as it is the presence and laughter of another that defines something as funny and therefore humorous, and vice versa. In a social context humour is a complex discourse event which can both unite people by expressing group solidarity and divide them by reinforcing standards of acceptability in regards to the values/norms that are appreciated and/or denigrated in the humour. It is in this sense that anthropologist Henk Dreissen likens jokes to a brief and humorous form of anthropological text which critiques society by using a 'strategy of defamiliarisation' in which

'common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions.'[53]

Humour is multiform; it used for different reasons in different contexts and therefore resists a unitary definition. Accordingly, the following sections take a long view of humour, approaching the concept in a variety of ways that set the scene for understanding how humour functions in contemporary society and in particular establishing the context in which postmodern humour has emerged and circulates.

3.1 A brief etymology of humour

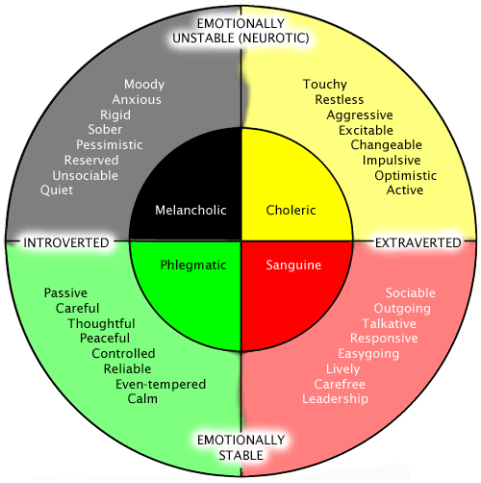
> The… emergence of words within languages nearly always points to changes in the lives of people themselves.
>
> Norbert Elias [54]

Today the terms *humour* and *funniness* are used in a manner that assumes they are practically interchangeable. However, humour has not always been synonymous with funniness. Derived from the Latin *humor*, the ancient Greeks, and later, medieval physiologists, believed that there were four *humors*: blood; yellow bile; phlegm and black bile. These were internal fluids that were thought to determine the state of one's health, mind, and character. Accordingly, the perfect health and temperament was considered a result of the harmonious balance of all four humors.[55] Around the middle of the first century A.D. Galen characterised the humor/personality relationship in the following schema:

- Yellow Bile: Bad temper, irritability, choleric
- Black Bile: Gloomy, pessimistic, melancholic
- Phlegm: Sluggish, non-excitable, phlegmatic

- Blood: Cheerful, passionate, sanguine.[56]

This was the first recorded personality typology.[57] Galen's ideas concerning the four humors became the centre-piece of medieval medical knowledge and through the work of psychologists such as Hans Eysenck, Galen's ideas still have a certain degree of currency.[58] Eysenck, whose father incidentally was a comedian, considered there to be intrinsic links between biology and personality, and his use of Galen's schema is easily seen in this diagrammatic representation of his personality typology [see image 1.1]. Although it is somewhat of a side note at this stage of discussion, humour is often based on the use of stereotypical or bizarre/eccentric personality types. The quintessential comic characters are 'monomaniacs, fixated on one particular passion, dominated by a humour: some are misers, some are hypochondriacs, some are boasters, and so on.'[59] This is suggested by some humour theorists to be humorous because it 'represents a violation of the code that humans are supposed to be reasonable individuals, that we should be flexible and fit in with others.'[60]



1.1

From the late 14th century, probably in response to advances in medical science, the word humour was loosened from its precise medically based meaning and came into more widespread use and was used more generally in relation to everyday temperaments, manners and behaviours. Around the

end of the 16th century this also came to be associated with acquiescing to capriciousness, or behaviours and actions that were apparently without reason. A second general area of usage was in reference to fluids or moistures such as mist, clouds, exhalation, vapour, dew, and all internal fluids of plants or animals.[61] Even today the 'transparent jelly-like tissue' that fills eyeballs is still known as *vitreous humour*.[62]

Humour, in the sense that we commonly use it today has its first recorded usage in England in 1682 and it was for a long time considered a peculiarly English form.[63] As the French had no suitable equivalent, humour was officially accepted into the French language in 1932, though the *Dictionaire de l'Academie Française* is very clear about the fact that humour is:

> A word borrowed from English. A form of irony, at once pleasant and serious, sentimental and satirical, that appears to belong particularly to the English spirit.[64]

It is an interesting side note that may be worth mentioning here that the French also have no native equivalent for the English word *fun*, from which we derive *funniness*.[65]

It has been suggested by some writers that the English language itself promotes a certain amount of humour and playfulness due to the Middle English period in which many words were imported from the Romance languages and English 'acquired a wealth of new synonyms, homonyms, and paronyms.'[66] The current English definition of humour refers primarily to qualities such as 'being amusing' and the 'ability to take a joke', but also to humouring others in the sense of acquiescing to someone else's

whimsy.[67] Ultimately, both require the recognition of a system of logic different to that expected, as well as the acknowledgement and acceptance of that logic. With a joke, this acceptance is signalled by laughing, and with humouring someone, the acceptance is demonstrated by acting in accordance with their logic despite its unconventionality.

It is clear then that humour has always been a fluid concept (excuse the pun) which is closely associated with language, play, logic, personal disposition, and social interaction. The following section builds on these themes and introduces the idea of humour as a form of discourse which challenges the singularity and seriousness of official discourse, authority and traditional logic.

3.2 Bissociation and Serious Discourse

> The person who laughs is the opposite of the fanatic.
>
> Arthur Koestler [68]

Although the previous section established that the modern understanding of the word *humour* appeared in Europe in the late 17th century, that is not to say that there was no humour as such before this time, though it is interesting that the modern understandings of humour and Reason emerged around the same time and place. Bearing this in mind, I believe there is some use in beginning to examine the modern concept of humour in regard to its relation to the modern concept of Reason, and how the inherent seriousness of Reason has shaped the sense that we make of the world. However rather than defining humour as unreasonable or nonsensical, I would like to discuss humour as a form of discourse which operates with

different rules than discourses which are intended to convey Reason, or as I will be referring to it, serious discourse.[69] This division of humorous discourse/serious discourse comes with some problems as it is possible to approach serious issues humorously (such as political satire), and humour can be "taken" seriously rather than accepted as humorous [see sections 3.7, 3.10 and 3.12]. However, Koestler has made a very useful contribution in this area, which can tidy this division up somewhat.

In his essay *Humour and Wit,* Koestler coined the term *bissociation* to refer to what is perhaps the only universal quality of humour, its capacity to simultaneously communicate an idea in 'two mutually exclusive associative contexts.'[70] This is fundamentally different to everyday interactive discourse as well as technical, scientific, and political discourses which all take place 'within a single universe of discourse – on a single plane.'[71] Each one of these serious discourses expresses a particular (in the sense of partial and singular) view of the world that presents itself as a total and timeless certainty, refusing the validity of other views of the world.[72] Hence the impossibility of the serious discourses of religion and science agreeing on the origins of life, or of left-wing and right-wing politicians agreeing on the way that a government should allocate budget funds. The significance of this is that the *bissociative* properties of humour, as a rule, expose connections between two discourses that, when considered in their own terms, regard themselves to be mutually exclusive.

Lyotard picturesquely describes this situation as multiple 'clouds of narrative language elements' with each cloud contained by 'pragmatic valencies, specific to its kind.'[73] Cloud formations provide an ideal visual analogy for discursive formations as it allows for the shifting and transient interactions of 'pragmatic valencies' (i.e. shared terms or concepts) that occur between discourses over time.[74] Also, clouds hover over surfaces and limit (visual) perception – two similarities with discourse that I will suggest to be crucial to both seriousness and humour.

In *The Logic of Sense*, Lyotard's near contemporary, Gilles Deleuze, claims that humour reveals a 'surface of nonsense', a plane of 'pure events considered from the perspective of their eternal truth' as well as a sheet of 'sense which hovers over it.'[75] Maintaining Deleuze's *surface of nonsense* metaphor, this thesis proposes that rather than a single sense hovering over it, there is a fragmented sky of sense packed with Lyotard's clouds of 'narrative elements', each cloud constituting a discourse which creates and imposes a particular sense on the surface of nonsense which contains the un-representable totality of the social world.

Serious discourses maintain themselves within a single cloud of discourse at a time, endorsing a particular and singular view of the world by maintaining a singular associative context.[76] It is proposed that this is markedly different from the bissociative nature of humour, which involves a simultaneous lateral shift between two clouds in a lightning-like connection. Humorous discourse operates in a manner that both formally refers to multiple

discursive-realities and requires the cognitive agility to navigate between their respective interpretive frameworks quickly enough to perceive a previously unperceived link.[77] In this sense, humour can be said to be inherently subversive as it poses a challenge to any serious discourse that claims to make complete sense of the world.

In a Newtonian sense, humour could be described as the equal and opposite of seriousness. Humour can only exist in opposition to seriousness and it is for this reason that we should take humour seriously. Seriousness is the hallmark of authority, stability and the language of officialdom and grand-narratives. Humour is the hallmark of creativity, innovation and the popular language of subversion. The subversiveness of humour is a result of its bissociative properties rather than content, and therefore it poses a potential challenge to *any* system of thought that posits itself as a total truth. Humour exposes the margins of serious discourse, it exists at the very limits of acceptance, one of Lyotard's 'pragmatic valencies'. However it is a pragmatic valency which, due to its marginality, intersects (bissociates) with another cloud of discourse and therefore disrupts the singularity and authority associated with both. The importance of recognising the singularity of authority and plurality of humour cannot be overstated as it is the inherent characteristic of transgressing the official code of singularity, which makes humour so dangerous to authority. Taking this observation to an apocalyptic extreme, sociologist Murray Davis observes:

> Today, expectation systems are still so various that not everything is funny to everyone…. But if in the future a single expectation system were ever to become dominant worldwide (as in some science fiction scenarios),

> mankind's entire mental life could become vulnerable to sudden and total collapse by a joke.[78]

Davis's view is that humour is inherently oppositional and its subversive potential is proportional to the dominance, repressiveness and pervasiveness of seriousness and authority. However, subversive or not, humour is now also a commodity and traded at practically every level of consumer society [see section 3.9 for a discussion of the commodification of humour]. It is the contention of this thesis that humour will likely always be marginalised due to its bissociative nature which challenges the singularity of official or serious discourses. The following sections begin to examine in greater detail the processes which legitimised seriousness and endorsed the official marginalisation of humour, providing the material basis and social reality which enabled postmodern humour to emerge.

3.3 Humorous Discourse

> Through words and concepts we are now continually tempted to think of things as being simpler than they are, as separated from one another, as indivisible, each existing in and for itself. There is a philosophical mythology concealed in language.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche [79]

Contemporary life does not occur within a single frame of reference and no single discourse can offer anything other than a partial description of the world. As humorous discourse refers to two or more discursive realities simultaneously it could be said to be a more substantial mode of communication than its serious counterpart, as it quite literally conveys more information.[80] It is in this sense that we can say that humour is not merely nonsensical or unreasonable; it is a form of discourse that differs from seriousness in important and useful ways. One fundamental difference is that serious discourse involves 'vertical thinking' and humorous discourse

requires ‘lateral thinking.’ This has also been alluded to in the previous section by the analogy of humour requiring a lightening-like connection between two clouds of discourse whereas serious discourse is maintained and contained by a single cloud and the single and partial sense of the sublime it affords.

Psychologist, physiologist and pioneer of ‘lateral thinking’ Edward de Bono has this to say about humour in his book *I am Right, You are Wrong*:

> Humour is by far the most significant behaviour of the human mind… Humour tells us more about how the brain works as mind, than does any other behaviour of the mind - including reason… Humour is so significant because it is based on a logic very different from our traditional logic. In traditional (Aristotelian) logic there are categories that are clear, hard-edged and permanent. We make judgments as to whether something fits into a category or not… [traditional thinking] flows along the main highway patterns, we are not even aware of the potential side-paths because these have been temporarily suppressed by the dominant track. If 'somehow' we can manage to get across from the main track to the side-track, the route back to the starting point is very obvious… The significance of humour is precisely that it indicates pattern-forming, pattern asymmetry and pattern-switching. Creativity and lateral thinking have exactly the same basis as humour.[81]

In this excerpt, as in many of his other publications, de Bono declares an inter-relationship between humour, lateral thinking and creativity, and notes the importance of the challenge that humour poses to the rigidity and dominance of ‘traditional logic’, as well as referring to a certain process of suppression that maintains the dominance of ‘traditional logic’. The implication of this is that the inherent fluidity, plurality, and relativity of humorous discourse imposes such a threat to the rigidity, singularity, and

authority of 'traditional logic' (exemplified by Reason and contained under the rubric serious discourse as used in this thesis) that it needs to be actively suppressed. The workings of this process of suppression are to a certain extent mapped out in the writings of the French poststructuralist philosopher/historian Michel Foucault, and explored with more direct reference to humour in French Historian Jacques Le Goff's essay on the codification and control of laughter and humour in medieval monasteries.[82]

3.4 Seriousness, Authority, and Control

> To understand or define the ludicrous, we must first know what the serious is.
>
> William Hazlitt [83]

In his essay *Laughter in the Middle Ages* Le Goff implies that the restriction of laughter and humour within the monastery was intended to control the thought patterns of the monks. This was to aid in the indoctrination of a dogmatic adherence to the faith, as well as controlling the outward behaviour expected of monks dedicated to religious devotion. The eradication of humour and laughter was an extra precaution (on top of education and confinement) to reduce the potential of thinking in a manner that may have undermined the illusion of totality offered by religious discourse. This is a very tangible example of the suppression that de Bono alludes to in the previous section and provides a useful and observable intersection point of seriousness, control, and authority, all framed by the institutional absence of humour. Enjoying humour is 'eminently opposed' to the controlled existence and 'ascetic ideology' of monasticism.[84]

The *aura* of monastic life is the epitome of seriousness and dignity. This seriousness is linked to notions of single-mindedness and purpose, as well as a total acceptance of a single worldview. This *aura* of seriousness is also evident in the unaffected and purposeful deportment of other figures of authority such as judges, politicians, police officers and even television news presenters. However, as mentioned above, it is not just the presence of seriousness which has become a convention of authority, it is also the absence of humour. This is evidenced by the sheer number of satirical works that have been censored over the years – a clear statement that authorities have viewed humour as subversive and in need of restriction and control [see sections 3.7 and 3.10 for some examples].

All of the themes mentioned above are dealt with in detail in the Italian semiotician, essayist and novelist Umberto Eco's fictional novel *The Name of the Rose*, which is set in a medieval monastery. In this book, a Sherlock Holmes-like monk, William of Baskerville, and his Watson-esque assistant, Adso of Melk, travel to an isolated monastery to investigate a series of murders connected to the sole existing copy of Aristotle's lost second book from the *Poetics* kept hidden in the monastery's labyrinthine library. In the book, Aristotle is reported to praise humour as an art and therefore a worthy area of study. The austere librarian wanted the book kept hidden as he considers humour and laughter a form of corruption because they challenge authority and therefore God by fostering doubts and uncertainty through ambiguity:

> When you are in doubt, you must turn to an authority, to the words of a father or a doctor; then all reason for

> doubt ceases….with his laughter the fool says in his heart, 'Deus non est.'[Trans: There is no god] [85]

In true postmodern form Eco's novel is explicitly ironic and packed with esoteric references, hidden quotes and allusions to other texts. One of the narrative devices of the book is William and Adso recounting the events of the day with specific reference to the context in which they encountered them, outlining the effect that the context had on the interpretation/explanation they came up with at the time. As William explains to his assistant, texts are,

> … multiform; each expresses several truths, according to the *sense* of the selected interpretation, according to the *context* in which they appear. And who decides what is the level of *interpretation* and what is the proper context? You know, my boy for they have taught you: it is *authority*.[86] [my italics]

Again, the idea of authority imposing a single system of interpretation, or sense, upon a naturally more complex and multiform reality appears. It also raises issues relating to society and the central role that language/discourse plays in social formations and politics. A society must share a basic worldview and language in order for it to function.[87] In this sense, seriousness must be considered as a practical necessity and integral to the functioning of complex societies. For a complex society to function effectively there must be a tacit social contract that assumes everyone is communicating "on the same level" as well as the recognition that the "level" of communication varies with the context of the interaction. In general, this means that interactive communication must be conducted within the single pre-established plane of reference to ensure the 'taken-for-

grantedness' of meanings, and also that there be an authority which dictates the plane of reference.[88] Deviations from the accepted/expected mode of discourse cause confusion and misunderstanding, and a constant refusal to conform results in the culprit being labelled deviant and possibly even removed from the population at large [see section 3.11 for a more detailed discussion of this process]. In essence deviants and madmen are created by an interpretive act which exposes an intersection point of language, politics, social control and power. It is clear then that authority and politics not only provide material for the content of humour [see sections 3.7, 3.10, 4.1, 4.3, and 4.5 for examples and discussions of political humour] they also establish the boundaries which dictate when humour is an appropriate or acceptable form of discourse to engage in [see section 3.6]. It is important now to take a closer look at the influence of context on interpretation, the general notion of the social and discursive construction of reality and to introduce the inherent risk of misinterpretation associated with humour.

3.5 Humour and Hermeneutics: Art and the art of authority

> Humour is not just a key to creativity, it is itself a creative act. Like a scientific theory, a painting, or a poem…. It arises out of the same dissatisfaction with the status quo and asserts the same right to evolve new forms of thought and imagery.
>
> Harvey Mindness [89]

Art, humour, and innovation all share a basic pattern in that they appear to rely on a 'diffuse, scattered kind of attention that contradicts our normal logical habits of thinking.'[90] For this reason, art and humour are much more risky modes of communication than seriousness, because the audience must also share the scattered attention of the artist or comedian in order for them to "get" the art or humour in the manner that its creator intends. The notion

of “getting” or appreciating *art* is very much the same as appreciating beauty or “getting” a joke. All three are dependent on a wide range of variables; personal disposition, education, mood, previous experiences, socio-cultural affiliations (actual and empathetic) and the context in which the art/humour/text is encountered. Arguably this final point is the most important as the context in which one encounters a text (whether it be art, literature, theatre, joke, etc) promotes a certain reading and this can be easily charted, whereas other influences (mood, disposition, etc.) are much harder to account for. A famous example of utilising this principle as an artistic and critical comment is Marcel Duchamp’s *ready-mades*. These works relied on the context of the art gallery to goad the audience into perceiving everyday items as works of art. In this situation context functioned as a form of authority by providing a dominant system for interpreting the text and actively intending to suppress other interpretations.

It is clear then that humour is something that relies on context and that context is dictated by authority. Contemporary life involves the necessary shifting between different contexts with each having their own system of prescribed performative and discursive rules.[91] Spaces associated with officialdom such as courtrooms have very strict requirements in regards to language and behaviour, whereas less formal spaces have less formal prescriptions, but are still governed by less directly enforced rules such as manners, taste, respect and the concept of acting “within reason”. Regardless of the level of enforcement, contemporary society is structured around the concept of specific rules for specific spaces, and as Pierre

Bourdieu notes 'the most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes [ideas, behaviours, people, genres] which taste dictates shall be separated.'[92] The bissociative nature of humour enables communication on multiple levels, but also makes humour a risky mode of communication as it transgresses official boundaries as well as requiring its audience to share knowledge of the multiple levels being referred to and also to be aware of the cues that indicate the presence and/or permissibility of humour.

3.6 Frames and Cues

> First humor is play. Cues are given that this which is about to unfold, is not real. There is a 'play-frame'… created around the episode.
>
> Charles Gruner [93]

As mentioned earlier, the notion of a stimulus-response relationship between humour and laughter is flawed because people do not always laugh in response to something that is intended to be funny, or, they may laugh at something that is not intended to be funny. Based on her many years of field research, anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that a joke must be both *permitted* and *perceived* as a joke in order for it to be successfully accepted/interpreted as humour.[94] That is, in addition to perceiving something as humorous, people need to possess the cultural knowledge to be aware that they have entered a situation in which humour is permitted, or perhaps even expected.

The switch from serious discourse to humorous discourse can occur through cues that identify the communication as humorous and initiate a shift to discursive playfulness ("have you heard the one about..."), actual designated

spaces (medieval carnivals, contemporary comedy clubs) or combinations of both, such as a lively dinner-party. The latter is an example of a transient space, marked out conceptually rather than by a stable physical or visible demarcation, and can occur in practically any shared public space. The separation of playfulness from the seriousness of the everyday world is one of the fundamental characteristics of all play-activities, including humour; it is also of fundamental importance to religion, law and other practices of officialdom.[95] Once entered into these framed play-spaces it is accepted and expected that rules different from everyday life apply. It is in this sense that Heidegger describes the creative potential of bounded spaces rather than their restrictive aspects, 'a boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins.'[96]

The play-frame of humour allows a discursive freedom and representational playfulness as well as an added performative element which is lacking in everyday communications. The knowledge of play-frames is part of a wider culturally specific knowledge base concerning spatial organisation, authority and social structure.[97] It is for this reason that irony is the most commonly misunderstood or misinterpreted form of humour, as it relies on very subtle and ambiguous cues which can easily be missed or misinterpreted, especially by those unfamiliar with the cultural norms. Nevertheless, cues themselves do not guarantee that a specific utterance or event will be perceived as funny. Therefore it could be said that humour is not an innate property, but a property of a social context and negotiation, although it must

also be noted that negotiation of this form does not just occur at random points.

The triple framing of newspaper political cartoons (first within the boundary of the serious news-media newspaper page; then within the ink frame of the cartoon itself, separating it from the seriousness of the newspaper that provides both source material and dissemination; and thirdly the framing of the serious political comment within humorous discourse) makes it a most apt example to further this discussion. Political cartoons also provide a step toward linking this discussion to *South Park*'s oppositional viewpoint and dedication to commenting on prominent people and events as raised in the media and other official channels.

3.7 Political Cartoons and Satire: Explicit reference based humour

> Political jokes are the citizen's response to the states efforts to standardise their thinking and to frighten them into withholding criticism and dissent.
>
> Gregor Benton [98]

Although framed within humorous discourse, political cartoons contribute directly to serious issues and to the serious discourse of real politics [see section 3.10 for an example of this]. Often restricted to just a single scene, political cartoons in newspapers can play an integral role in the way that people perceive a politician, party, or policy. Political cartoonist Nicholas Garland describes his art as a form of subversive portraiture that succinctly conveys complex political commentary in an amusing and accessible manner.[99] He also proposes that the success of political cartooning should be attributed to its tradition of presenting a view of contemporary events markedly different from the sanitised and editorialised versions expressed

more formally in the newspaper in which it appears, and the serious news media in general.[100] Politicians spend a lot of time and money creating and maintaining a public image, and it is essential for the integrity of their careers that they be taken seriously. Garland proposes that political cartoons 'work even harder directly against this effort….to reduce the *dignity* and therefore the *authority*, of those represented.'[101] [my italics] This reiterates how humour can function as a little-narrative which undermines the authority of an official discourse.

The attack on dignity to reduce authority reiterates the importance of seriousness to authority mentioned previously, as well as the subversive potential of humour. Accepting that there are individual cartoonists who use their art to promote their particular political views, in general, the political agenda of political cartooning as a specific form of art and political expression is one of continual opposition rather than a stable position on the political spectrum. The heavy censorship of this form of humour over the centuries attests to the insecurity felt by those in authority to this opposition. The recent controversy concerning the Danish newspaper which published cartoons of the Muslim prophet Muhammad offers an interesting contemporary example of this.

The Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* was researching a story about the difficult time Danish writer Kare Bluitgen was having in getting someone to illustrate his children's book about the Islamic prophet Muhammad, due to fear of reprisal from Islamic extremists. The newspaper contacted forty

cartoonists and asked them to submit their own cartoon depiction of Muhammad, only twelve responded and four of those already worked for the paper. *Jyllands-Posten* printed the twelve images as well as the story concerning the book, framed within the wider issues of self-censorship and freedom of speech. The cartoons outraged certain groups of fundamentalist Muslims who are against any form of idolatry and were particularly incensed by such irreverent depictions of their spiritual leader.

The reaction was so intense that United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has begun working on a UN proposal to prevent the defamation of any religion.[102] The aim of Annan's proposal is to establish something similar to the United Nations General Assembly resolution which condemns any questioning of the orthodox view of the Holocaust – the resolution which officially justified the imprisonment of historian David Irving. The Danish cartoon incident, the controversy surrounding the 'Bloody Mary" episode of *South Park* and the recent imprisoning of historian David Irving for Holocaust denial all expose the meta-narrative impulse of authority and provide clear contemporary examples of the 'process of suppression' alluded to by de Bono previously [see section 3.3]. The divisive and heated debates surrounding these issues are also testament to the mutually exclusive and singular nature of serious discourses. The singularity of serious discourse means that when two serious discourses come into conflict with each other, they effectively engage in an un-winnable argument as they are arguing from two different positions which do not accept the terms of the others. Therefore, the debate is essentially a competition for legitimacy

– a struggle for the authority to speak with authority.[103] Irving was given a three year prison sentence because his point of view differs from the one of the official narratives of World War Two, and if Annan's proposal becomes a ratified United Nations General Assembly resolution then programs such as *South Park* could potentially be forced off the air. It is interesting to note here that *South Park* used an animated Muhammad five years ago in the episode 'Super Best Friends' (episode 504, first aired 04/07/01) and did not receive a single complaint.[104] However, this is probably more indicative of *South Park's* audience base than anything else.

The inherently oppositional character of political cartoons is an avenue for the masses to laugh at the 'the transitory nature of all political power and the vulnerability of even the most mighty.'[105] Note the linkage of politically oppositional humour to the political consciousness of popular culture. This linkage has been identified throughout history in the popular festivities of the medieval carnival and the Saturnalia and Bacchanalia of the ancient world.[106] Though there is the important difference in that the political cartoons represent a shift toward a more private sphere of engagement with oppositional thought/activity, as compared to the free and familiar social contact of the carnival.[107] Lots of people may appreciate the humour of a political cartoon, and may even agree with the underlying political comment, but they do so individually and privately, never having the opportunity to become truly aware of the radical potential that they could wield as a politically charged social mass. That is not to say that political cartooning is completely politically impotent [see section 3.10 for examples

of political cartooning exerting notable influence on the political scene of the day], however, it is the contention of this thesis that it has helped to create and maintain a society in which 'the individual has lost all power, including the power to organize any form of officially acceptable resistance to the status quo.'[108] Therefore despite their generally oppositional view, political cartoons serve the interests of ruling authorities, as it is an art form which people engage with privately and therefore helps to keep resistance unorganised. Furthermore, political cartoons circulate within the 'culture industry' which through its complex links to power is unavoidably involved in maintaining the status quo.[109]

Echoing the much earlier writings of social historian Johan Huizinga, Deleuze links the play aspect of humour to politics and suggests that humour represents 'a downward movement from the law to its consequences… By scrupulously applying the law we are able to demonstrate its absurdity and provoke the very disorder that it is intended to pretend.'[110] This process of scrupulous application is essentially the same process of humorous exaggeration that occurs in the caricaturing which is at the heart of political cartooning, in fact Deleuze continues his argument and states that humour says to authority 'you only exist as a caricature… I disavow you since you negate yourself.'[111] Caricatures reveal a truth by elevating the absurd and exaggerating characteristics of people and concepts into grotesques of their originals. However, successful satire/social commentary requires more than just a sense of the grotesque or absurd, it also requires an easily identifiable target.[112]

3.8 Contemporary Satire as 'postmodern narrative impulse'

> Postmodernity is a breaking apart of reason… Postmodernity reveals at last that reason has only been one narrative among others in history; a grand narrative, certainly, but one of many, which can now be followed by other narratives.
>
> Michel Foucault [113]

Garland describes contemporary political cartoons as being involved in 'undermining [the] dogmas and pomposity' contained in the newspapers in which they appear, as well as the serious world in which they circulate.[114] In this sense they share a great deal with the 'sick disaster joke' as outlined by Richard Ellis in his essay *The sick disaster joke as carnivalesque postmodern narrative impulse*.[115] In this essay Ellis discusses his research into jokes concerning current events that have elements of disaster or atrocity about them. He considers that these jokes are a particular form of satire and that like satire they deserve attention 'because they show a sceptical incredulity towards dominant, media endorsed and/or media engendered explanations of the contemporary issues or events (to) which they relate.'[116]

Ellis suggests that history has taught the public to be distrustful of public officials and that this has extended to official explanations in general, including those offered in the serious news media.[117] He describes these explanations as part of a 'meta-narrative impulse' on the part of officialdom to impose totalising explanations onto the chaos of contemporary events.[118] He argues that contemporary humour with content derived from current events is part of a 'postmodern narrative impulse' that serves to disrupt the media engendered meta-narrative explanations of contemporary events.

Ellis observes that as this form of humour is generally targeted at actual authorities it goes against the 'common flow' of humour, which other research has suggested to be invariably directed downwards in the social hierarchy.[119] The satirical humour Ellis is interested in is, like *South Park*, very much in the tradition of carnivalesque humour as formulated by Bakhtin. For Bakhtin, humour was the sole preserve of the people and was targeted directly at authority, temporarily levelling all forms of hierarchy and social distinction. Ellis incorporates Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque to account for the upwards flow of humour he observes in contemporary satire, and also relates Bakhtin's ideas to the wider context of postmodern thought by showing that both emphasise the relativity of truth and authority as well as the importance of context in the generation of meaning.[120]

It is impossible to overstate the important role that the media plays in shaping peoples worldviews in today's society. As the fundamental interest of this thesis is the postmodern humour of the television series *South Park* it is proper now to turn attention to the affects of televisual mediation of humour.

3.9 Television, comedy and the commodification of humour

> Good art that reaches thirty million people and makes them feel connected may have more to offer now than great art that reaches three thousand and makes them feel more or less alone. In our time the standards for art have changed, expanded.
> The future belongs to Bart Simpson.
>
> Tad Friend [121]

Television is undoubtedly the primary means by which humour is circulated in today's society. In many ways the production of humour for mass

consumption (through television) resembles the mass production of consumer goods.[122] Both involve sustained efforts to identify and target aggregate consumers and share a drive towards standardisation of products in order to meet commercial imperatives as well as the perceived demands of imagined collectives of consumers.[123] There is also a certain creative urgency for new-ness, novelty, the next 'big seller', the next *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons* or *Friends*. Broadly summarising this situation Frederick Jameson says:

> What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.[124]

This also echoes Lyotard's thoughts [quoted in section 2.3] where he describes the drive for newness as central to the emergence of postmodernism.[125] Two key things to note at this stage are the awareness of culture as a commodity and an interest in novelty. In describing these things as central to the cultural dominant of contemporary society (postmodernism) I also hope to establish them as elements which would also necessarily be evident in the humour which is produced in this cultural context.

Although I have emphasised the postmodern predilection for novelty, contemporary television humour is, like all humour, dependant on a mix of novelty and the familiar. Although research has shown that isolated instances of humour do occur across the whole spectrum of television programming, for the purposes of this discussion it is useful to restrict this

discussion for the moment to explicitly humour based programmes such as Situation Comedies (sitcoms), which are 'treated officially as providing temporary relief from the rigours of the serious world.'[126] Sitcoms are perhaps the most clearly identifiable genre of television humour and have even been described as 'our most pervasive, powerful and cherished form of media output.'[127]

The typical structure of the sitcom is based around the social relations of a shared space (such as family house, workplace, bars, etc.) with the humour derived for the most part from antagonism based on an incongruity between the characters, or between the characters and the setting. Although the content of the sitcom has changed in response to changes in society, the basic structure, as outlined above, has changed very little.[128] This can be explained very broadly as a result of the pressures of creating a television series: Organising scripts, sets, production teams and actors in advance to produce relatively brief programmes requires a huge expenditure of capital and concentrated organization.[129] As a result, there is strong pressure to limit variation and in practice the repeated use of established comic characters in the same setting is an effective way of reducing costs and organisational effort.[130]

The idea of repetition is one which integrates well with humour. In fact Henri Bergson considers repetition to be a fundamental element of humour [see section 4.4 for further discussion of Bergson's ideas concerning humour]. This can be seen in the continued success of humorous catch-

phrases and other funny repetitions which are conventional to comedy performances. *South Park* has several of these running gags: every episode finishes with a parodic 'moral of the story', whenever things don't go his way Cartman announces "screw you guys I'm going home", Kenny is killed in almost every episode of the first five series', and when Kenny died Stan would exclaim "Oh my god! They killed Kenny" to which Kyle would add "you bastards". There are many other examples of catch-phrases and running gags in *South Park*, however, the main thing that should be noted is, that it is the mix of expectation, familiarity and novelty (novelty provided by the various situations in which the phrases are repeated) which produces the humour. If these catch-phrases were mere repetition, they would quickly become boring and cease to be funny.

The sitcom, then, is a means of packaging humour for mass consumption and is subject to the same economic and bureaucratic imperatives as any other commercial television product, including News programming. Its success and prevalence makes it a significant force in the battle for television audience share.[131] The longstanding though implicit relationship between humour and 'telling it like it is' has also helped to establish humour as an effective marketing tool, and the use of celebrities associated with humour (usually, though not always comedians) as 'truth tellers' are much sought after by companies to endorse their products.

In his insightful book *The Soundbite Society*, Jeffrey Scheuer suggests the centrality of television in contemporary western society has led to a culture

based on 'instant but shallow communication' in which the language of politics is articulated with the same succinct gloss as a product promotion.[132] Television sound-bites grab the public attention but do not offer any depth of analysis or exposition, as the fundamental aim of television is to get the public attention and sell to them, not educate them. Therefore it could be said that commercial television has an inherent bias towards avoiding the lucid exposition of a topic in favour of a catchy phrase or sensational image which will draw more viewers and therefore generate more profit. Scheuer goes on to say:

> TV… is a relentlessly simplifying and atomizing medium. It simplifies by personalising and dichotomising; by truncating and foreshortening events and personalities; by ignoring organic relationships and suppressing uncertainty and ambiguity. It resists contextual and causal complexity and exaggerates the power of individuals as causal agents at the expense of collectivities and social forces. The language of television inflates the importance of certain subjects while ignoring others that are complicated and telephobic… this is not a product of design it is an act and accident of the mediums nature and language.[133]

Given the nature of our discussion at this particular junction it would be neglectful to avoid even just a passing mention of the work of Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan describes television as a cool medium as it requires a fair amount of participation from the audience in order for them to make sense of what they are watching.[134] Continuing, he proposes that because 'TV ensures a high degree of audience involvement, the most effective programs are those which consist of some process to be completed.'[135] Following this line of thought, television shows which rely on labyrinthine arrangements of intertextual quotation such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* would be considered very 'effective' due to

the role of the audience in regard to unpacking and deciphering the references in relation to the narrative and/or humour. In this regard *South Park's* lack of laugh-tracks could also be argued to add to its effectiveness as it allows the audience to perceive things as humorous at their own leisure rather than being affectively prompted by 'canned laughter.' McLuhan considers humour to be a hot medium 'because it inclines us to laugh at something, rather than getting us emphatically involved in something.'[136], This thesis claims that postmodern humour such as *South Park* with its dedication to politico-cultural parody and quotation very much requires the emphatic mental involvement of the viewer, though it also confines the viewer for its duration, preventing emphatic involvement in anything else.

The very success of programmes such as *The Simpsons, Family Guy* and *South Park* which rely so heavily on intertextuality, quotation and references to popular culture indicates an audience base which is also well informed in these areas. Carl Matheson describes this particular aspect of the popular culture of postmodernity as the 'cult of knowingness'.[137] Matheson suggests that the loss of certainty in objective knowledge has created a fragmented space of plural (and partial) knowledge's. In turn this has led to the development of a 'cult of knowingness', which is reflected in the highly intertextual and 'hyper-ironic' nature of contemporary mass-produced humour such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park.*[138] As there is no single knowledge which can be called upon for total explanations, the 'cult-of-knowingness' celebrates and appreciates humour which uses intertextuality and self-referentiality, as it allows their knowingness to be

demonstrated in laughter. In a social sense this can be seen in the way that intertextual, or media based referencing has become incorporated into face to face joking: it seems that recitation of humorous movie/television quotes has become in most practical senses accepted as a form of joke telling. This infiltration of media referencing into interpersonal communication would in-fact be a very interesting area of further research into postmodern humour.

The speed in which televisual technologies allow information to be disseminated also needs to be addressed, if only briefly. The image of television journalists reporting directly from the place where the story occurred has become a standard convention of news broadcasting. In relation to this thesis this is interesting for two reasons, first of all it demonstrates Derrida's observation that we (arbitrarily) place more authority in speech from the source (such the direct address of a television news journalist reporting from the scene of a crime) than we do in more obviously mediated and editorialised forms such as written accounts. This observation links the speed of communication offered by contemporary communications technology with a sense of authority. Today there is the rather odd situation where people are given the vicarious experience of 'living history as it happens' through the daily televised accounts of current events, wars and epitomised in the notably American examples of the capture and court trial O. J. Simpson, and of course the fetishised images of airplanes penetrating buildings in Manhattan 2001. As much as speed has proved essential in the success of television news as the most current form of news dissemination, the speed in which the *South Park* creators parody

these events is also crucial to its success – speed and brevity are the soul of wit. It is the edgy 'of-the-moment-ness' which keeps viewers watching, and taken as a whole the combined episodes of *South Park* provide a veritable encyclopaedia of issues, events, fears, and personalities of our times. The dedication to currency also helps to frame the humour for the audience as the events, issues and/or personalities being referred to would presumably be fresh in their minds.

The key aspects of television as far as this thesis is concerned are: the centrality of television in contemporary social, cultural and political life; the reductive view of complex events and issues that television affords, especially important insofar as news programs are concerned; recognising that viewers experience a sense of participation when engaging with a television program; and finally, the point I would like to turn to now; its function as a tool of confinement. Television is a physically isolating medium. Engaging with humour in this essentially private manner can be considered as akin to other humour based practices that have been observed in private spaces.[139] Privately, humour is often directed at superiors such as teachers, parents, employers, executives and other people who due to manners and social convention cannot and would not be laughed at in a face to face encounter.[140] This is quite evident in *South Park* as most of the targets of their humour are people who their viewers would not laugh at in person but very much enjoy laughing at in the privacy of their own home, such as George W. Bush. Confinement in this situation is a good example of a boundary opening up a space (as suggested by Heidegger) as it allows a

liberation/freedom which would be impossible if the target of the humour and the person laughing where in actual contact with each other. As liberating as this may appear there are also serious political and cultural ramifications of this mass confinement, the following two sections begin to examine these as well as proposing a tentative explanation as to why academics have tended to marginalise humour and offering historical and contemporary examples of authorities attempting to suppress humour.

3.10 Taking humour seriously

> Humour is a more significant process in the human mind than is reason. In practice, reason may be more useful, but as a type of process humour is more significant.
>
> Edward de Bono [141]

Humour is one of those marginal aspects of human civilisation that until fairly recently has been overlooked as an area worthy of systematic academic research. Indeed, humour has even been likened to "deviancies" such as adultery and sexual perversion.[142] Adult novelty stores offer an interesting example of this linkage as they are invariably relegated to the margins of central business districts and exist alongside sex-toy shops, fetish-ware boutiques, and massage parlours. Although most of the products sold in Adult Novelty stores are indeed related to bodily functions, they are humorous and intended as novelties rather than for practical usage. The implications of perversion and frivolity that surround humour have also played a role in the lack of mainstream academic interest in the topic – academics, like politicians, are very much a part of the serious world, and as figures of authority they too want to be taken seriously.

It seems that the success of humour for passing socio-political comment is not only due to its bissociative form (which provides the socially acceptable veil for the comment) but also its inherently slippery nature. If a joke provokes a negative response the joke maker can always excuse it as 'just a joke' or disregard the negative response as the result of a misunderstanding or of 'taking it the wrong way.' This contrived ambiguity is why sovereign authorities attempted the total control of satirical humour. Before literacy became widespread, people gathered in crowds to hear the current events from troubadours, often in the form of satires, songs and skits. Recognising the potentially subversive mixture of crowds and social satire as a challenge to his authority, King Henry VIII banned all 'ballads and rimes [sic] and other lewd treatises in the English tongue' that might 'subtilly [sic] and craftily instruct the kings people.'[143] This official fear of humour 'craftily' affecting popular opinion is not just restricted to monarchies; democratically elected authorities have also exhibited marked efforts to control satirical humour.

In the U.S.A there have been many notable examples of censorship, two of these are pertinent to note here as they involve specific examples of political cartoons provoking official and even legislative action. The Governor of Philadelphia in 1902, Governor Pennypacker was depicted as a talking parrot in a newspaper political cartoon and was so offended that he orchestrated the introduction of a bill which prohibited the depiction of men as birds or animals.[144] Acquiescing and showing all due respect the cartoonist starting depicting Governor Pennypacker and other politicians as

vegetables.[145] There is another good example worth quoting in length cited in Christopher Wilson's book *Jokes: form, content, use and function*:

> In 1871, Thomas Nast began a series of cartoons pointing to the corruption of the Tammany ring" of New York politicians. "Boss" Tweed, leader of the ring was aware of the power of the cartoons and the need for a private and amicable settlement. "Stop them damn pictures", he demanded, "I don't care what the papers write about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures… In view of Nast's great talent, Tammany offered him a scholarship worth half-a-million dollars to study art abroad. Nast refused the offer, and his continued ridicule led, directly and indirectly, to the arrest of Tweed. The cartoons helped to expose the Tammany ring, and Tweed fled to Spain. There, he was arrested after the police had seen a Nast cartoon of him abducting children. The kidnapping theme was intended as a metaphor for Tweed's corruption, but the Spanish Police interpreted it literally and arrested him for child-stealing. On searching Tweeds belongings, the police failed to discover any children, but did find a complete set of Nast's Tammany cartoons. Tweed was extradited and prosecuted and imprisoned in America.'[146]

This example is interesting as an example of humour having very tangible ramifications in the serious world of politics, an attempt by a politician to silence humorous opposition using clandestine, or unofficial means and most notably how risky and ambiguous humour is as a form of communication. In fact some research into the audience reception of satirical political cartoons has shown results as low as fifteen percent of the subjects correctly interpreting the intended meaning of the cartoon's humour.[147]

Referring back to the Danish cartoon controversy as well as the debate in New Zealand surrounding the broadcast of the 'Bloody Mary' episode of *South Park* it is pertinent to note that modern authorities are equally as

distasteful of satirical humour as their historical counterparts, though their methods of suppression have changed in response to the changed relationship between the performer, performance and reception of humour (most notably the mediation of the humour rather than face to face communication).

Another recent example of an authority taking humour seriously can be seen in the indignation expressed by the Kazakhstan government over comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's character Borat who professes to be from Kazakhstan. In December 2005 Borats website www.borat.kz was shut down by the Ministry of Justice in Kazakhstan. Mr. Ashikbayev, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, stated "What we are concerned about is that the public that is interested in Mr. Cohen's jokes are youngsters, people from 12 to 30 years old. Cohen comes up with these ridiculous jokes that some people may take for truth."[148] He contended that as Cohen depicted Kazakh people as backward and prejudiced towards Jews he was damaging Kazakhstan's international reputation. Although Cohen denied official comment, before the website was shut down a video clip of Borat appeared in which he satirically replies to the complaints of the Kazakhstan government: "In response to Mr. Ashikbayev's comments, I like to state I have no connection with Mr. Cohen. I support my government's decision to sue this Jew."[149] Borat's website is back online with the new domain name, www.borat.tv, its reappearance (with the significant though slight change from .kz to .tv) testament to the political nature of naming and discourse, as well as the resilience of satiric humour as measured against the rigidity of authority.

This section has addressed three key ideas which are of fundamental importance to this thesis: first of all, as civilisation has developed and societies have become more complex, humour has been increasingly marginalised by officially established links to deviancies and frivolity [this particular point is developed more fully in the following section]; second of all, the methods that authorities employ to control humour have changed in response to the material conditions in which the humour arises and circulates; and finally that despite its "official" status as frivolous, humour is indeed still taken very seriously by those in authority.

3.11 Manners, madness, media, and confinement

> The more we laugh the more we see the point of things, the better we are, the cleverer we are at reconsidering what the world is like. [We use] the experience of humour as sabbatical leave from the binding categories that we use as rules of thumb to allow us to conduct our way around the world.
>
> Jonathon Miller [150]

In modern industrial society there are few visible restrictions in regard to access to humour. Though significantly, it is for the most part accessed through physically isolating media such as television or the Internet. Nevertheless, despite television's capacity for physical isolation, it still offers a certain sense of a shared cultural experience which in its more extreme forms can lead to new social formations such as fan groups. Though it must be noted that these fan groups are largely apolitical and as such do not pose any significant threat to authorities.

Whilst it could be reasonably argued that television humour is subversive in the sense that it allows the expression of dissent to circulate, it

simultaneously requires viewers to confine themselves to enclosures (typically private dwellings) which ensure that they do not have the opportunity to gather in numbers which could become politically challenging. The use of confinement in this manner, as a tool of social control, has been well documented in the writings of Foucault.[151]

Very broadly, Foucault suggests that Hegemonic power relations have been systematically reinforced since the early 16th century by eliminating the public spaces in which alternative community collectives can form. In *Madness and Civilisation: a history of madness in the age of reason,* Foucault shows how the fools and madmen who had enjoyed a certain expressive licence within society through the Middle Ages were forcibly expelled from society and confined in institutions. In this book, like his history of the prison system, *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of confinement as a tool of social control and his books offer irrefutable examples of authorities attempting to hide the madness, chaos, unreason, multiplicity of experience, and heteroglossia that is inherent in society.

Essentially, social deviants were categorised as mad, or criminal, and were taken out of society because their presence was a challenge to the notion of a reasonable society, they were considered the very personification of political dissent and mouthpieces for the expression of oppositional viewpoints. This process of confinement also helped to legitimise seriousness as the mode of discourse proper for society and marginalised

humour as not only a frivolous activity, but also potentially dangerous. Jerry Palmer describes the process as,

> the marginalisation of all linguistic forms in which the play of the signifier is foregrounded – puns, jokes, metaphors, etc. Of course none of these forms are… altogether excluded from normal language, but they are relegated to the margins of two norms of discursive organization which become increasingly dominant in civilised culture: the representation of truth and politeness.[152]

The process of marginalising humour and confining the unreasonable was part of a much wider 'policing of the body', that occurred parallel to the rise of Reason and was crucial to the later development of capitalist modes of production, which required a well disciplined and compliant work force.[153] Furthermore, from the sixteenth century onwards manners were increasingly important to society and previously everyday activities such as eating and excreting came to be strictly regulated.[154] The printing press had enabled the standardisation of language, which in turn facilitated the development of other standards and social guidelines such as the concept and practice of manners and the codification of appropriateness. Manners and politeness are not officially enforced as such, but they are powerful forces in the standardisation and stratification of society by prescribing 'what is appropriate and where', in regard to demeanour, gestures, language, dress, expressions, and personal hygiene. It has also been observed that as cultures become more "civilised" there is a marked public recession, marginalisation and masking of play activities such as humour.[155]

This process of marginalisation is also the origin story of the dominance of serious discourse in society. In order to ensure the least amount of

ambiguity and misunderstanding, seriousness became central to the social existence of humans in rapidly expanding urban environments.[156] Humour may often occur in face to face situations, but this is invariably to facilitate a pleasant interaction, any significant communications inevitably use serious discourse to avoid misinterpretation.[157] Given the reluctance of contemporary authorities to allow people to congregate in any significant numbers there is no true modern equivalent of the medieval carnival experience – there is no longer any official tolerance of free-for-all uninhibited public interaction, let alone one that is based on enthusiastic mockery of authority. In modern society it can only be encountered or, more precisely, consumed, in fragments, such as at music festivals or Mardis-Gras (which are specifically themed rather than politically charged) or in the media, exemplified in television programmes such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, *Clone High* and *Family Guy*. These mediated and scheduled fragments of the carnivalesque created specifically for mass consumption offer a vicarious and illusory sense of taking part in a subversive communal experience, whilst simultaneously working against the possibility of an actual physical gathering of people intent on participating in an actual subversive communal experience.[158]

It is important here to note the spatial element of contemporary culture. Contemporary life involves the movement from one closed site or bounded space to another.[159] Each of these spaces, is, as mentioned in previous sections, governed by its own rules pertaining to language, dress, manners, 'first of all the Family; then School ("you're not at home now you know"),

then the barracks (you're not at School now you know"), then the factory, hospital from time to time, maybe prison.'[160] The physical, behavioural and discursive boundaries of these spaces are dictated by authorities which are very unaccepting of things which transgress them.

To summarise our discussion so far, we have established humour as a form of bissociative discourse that is disliked by authority for its discursive duality which challenges the singularity of official or serious discourse and promotes thinking patterns which are accepting of multiple perspectives and transgress familiar boundaries and authorised systems of expectation. It has also been established that the relationship between the performance of humour, the performer, and the audience has changed in the sense that humour is now largely mediated (rather than face to face) and commodified. This section has also addressed the key assertion that contemporary life is comprised of spaces that are defined, delimited and regulated by ruling authorities.[161] This situation is fundamental to the emergence and success of postmodern humour.

3.12 Humour is What?

> What Humor is, not all the tribe of logick-mongers can describe.
>
> Jonathon Swift [162]

Coherency is imposed on the complexities of social life in modern industrial societies by using language in a manner that masks the ambiguities, incongruities and injustices that are inherent in the social world.[163] In this sense, coherency, uniformity and a general seriousness can be considered as organising principles of everyday discourse and fundamental to the

operation of complex societies. Anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that the link between humour and social structure is so intimate that jokes only occur as a result of a "joke" (in the sense of hidden assumptions, contradictions and arbitrary social norms) inherent in the society in which the joke is *permitted* and *perceived* as humorous.[164] This would explain why there are such marked differences between the sense of humour of people from different countries.[165] It takes a shared language and worldview for people to share a joke. Following Douglas's claim, this thesis proposes that in a very broad sense the humorous social commentary of *South Park* is a direct result of the "joke" of a coherent, rational and progressive society, and the seriousness of everyday and official discourse as represented in the media.

Furthermore, this thesis also proposes that whatever subversive potential the content of humour may have, any political resistance is effectively negated by social controls such as the physically confining nature of its primary technology of dissemination: television. Humour is still the language of subversion but it is a form of subversion that is a calculated factor in the total system of control and confinement in which we live.[166] The freedom and potency of the medieval carnival has been replaced by the more socially sedate and diluted practice of structured access to commodified carnivalesque media texts produced for mass consumption.

A traditional point of dispute among humour researchers has been whether humour is subversive in the sense that it can be used to undermine authority,

or repressive in the sense of providing a safe release of energies which may otherwise have been expressed through radical action. However, these disputes have been largely focussed on the content of humour. The argument forwarded in this thesis is, irrespective of its content, humour is inherently subversive due to its bissociative form, which transgresses established discursive boundaries and therefore challenges the stability of the official discourses which shape and govern society. It is for the same reason that adolescents, deviants, schizophrenics, transients and transsexuals are considered problematic by authority – they transgress official boundaries established by institutional authority and therefore expose the limits and challenge the assumptions upon which the authority is based. Historically the isolation and confinement of these transgressors has proved to be effective in suppressing their subversive voices, although new media technologies are now offering these marginalised voices a platform for expression not usually afforded in the mainstream media. Nevertheless, it is the nature and form of the content of *South Park* (in particular its intertextuality, self-referentiality and its of-the-moment social critiques) which is suggested in this thesis to be crucial to its definition as a form of postmodern humour.

The postmodern view to a certain extent circumnavigates the question of whether humour is subversive or repressive and is also accepting of the transgression of official boundaries. This essentially brings me to the crux of what I am suggesting to be postmodern humour. As the socially subversive potential of humour has been eradicated through the process of

standardisation and confinement outlined earlier [see section 3.11 for discussion], contemporary humour is seen to have virtual freedom of satiric licence. Postmodern humour is an ostensible free for all satirical attack on the media imagery that comprises the popular consciousness of our times, as well as commenting on the centrality of media in contemporary society. However, the recent controversies concerning the publication of Danish cartoons of Muhammad and the *South Park* episode 'Bloody Mary' clearly expose the limits of this perceived freedom. *South Park's* humour is both lucid and ludic. It is lucid in the sense that every episode contains a very definite socio-political comment and ludic in the humorous and playful manner that it comments. This lucid yet ludic quality of *South Park's* humour is at the core of what this thesis is arguing to be its postmodern-ness.

This thesis is not suggesting that all contemporary humour is postmodern, far from it. What is being suggested is that due to the social, cultural, technological and economic changes that have occurred over the last fifty-years a new type of humour was made possible and has emerged: postmodern humour. Postmodern humour is a type of humour just like jokes, satire, farce and puns. However, as postmodern humour is a cultural product of postmodernity, postmodern theories can offer some insight lacking in traditional accounts of humour.

4.0 Introduction to Humour Scholarship

> No all embracing theory of humour and/or laughter has yet gained widespread acceptance and possibly no general theory will ever be successfully applied to the human race as a whole when its members exhibit such vast differences with respect to their humor responsiveness. The paradox associated with humour is almost certainly a function of its being incorrectly viewed as a unitary process. Humour plays a myriad of roles and serves a number of quite different functions.
>
> Anthony Chapman and Hugh Foote [167]

Most of the canonical references of humour scholarship have come from theorists who momentarily turned their focus to humour in the course of their wider research pursuits. Therefore it may be a case of stating the obvious, but, theories of humour are generally worked into congruence with the theorist's more wide-ranging views and theories. In this sense discussions of humour have been restricted to the particular clouds of discourse of the particular academic discipline within which the research was conducted - psychoanalysts describe humour with reference to societal repression, the unconscious and other concepts proper to psychoanalysis, just as anthropologists describe it in terms that highlight issues of anthropological interest such as kinship and social relations. Each of these academic discourses is governed by established rules that pertain to the goals of their particular discipline.[168] Understandably then, there are many diverging explanations for humour, just as there are many areas in which they overlap.

4.1 Superiority Theories:

According to superiority theories, all humour is fundamentally derisive and laughter originated as an act of aggression. Also known as the 'classical' view of humour, superiority theories trace a tradition beginning with Aristotle, through Quintillian and later Thomas Hobbes and Charles

Darwin.[169] Aristotle is generally considered as the "father" of superiority theories, due to his comments in the section of *Nichomachean Ethics* devoted to the virtues of social interaction in which he describes jokes as a form of verbal abuse and wit as a form of cultured insolence.[170] Nevertheless the philosopher most commonly cited by superiority theorists is Thomas Hobbes and his description of the feeling of 'sudden glory' that inspires laughter:

> Sudden Glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter; and it is caused either by some sudden act of their own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in a another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.[171]

Despite the antiquated language his basic premise is fairly clear: suddenness, or speed is essential to humour and people laugh down at others who are perceived to be inferior. This view is endorsed by modern research conducted in work-places, such as hospitals, universities, prisons and retail stores which found that joking was invariably 'directed laterally and downwards through the social hierarchies.'[172] Senior staff members were found to make the most jokes and these were most often intended as a reproach to a junior, whereas the joking of junior staff was predominantly self-depreciative, especially when in the presence of superiors.[173] It must be noted though that anthropological research has found cultures in which very complex 'joking relationships', based on ridicule and mockery of superiors, play an integral role in inter-tribal politics, kinship structures and day-to-day existence.[174]

The most forceful modern proponent of superiority theory is Charles R. Gruner, Professor of Speech Communications at Georgia University. Gruner is adamant that the origin of humour is in demonstrations of aggression on the prehistoric battlefield. His version of superiority theory is one of 'playful aggression' in which *without exception* every instance of humour can be reduced to a game scenario that concludes with a winner and loser.[175] He presents his theory of humour in the form of one major thesis and six sub-theses. His major thesis is: 'laughing equals winning' and the sub-theses are;

- For every humorous situation, there is a winner.

- For every humorous situation there is a loser.

- Finding the "winner" in every humorous situation, and what that "winner" *wins*, is often not easy.

- Finding the "loser" in every humorous situation and what that "loser" *loses*, is often even less easy.

- Humorous situations can best be understood by knowing *who* wins *what*, and *who* loses *what*.

- *Removal* from a humorous situation (joke, etc) of what is won or lost, or the suddenness with which it is won or lost, removes the essential elements of the situation and renders it humourless.[176]

Essentially Gruner's schema allows him the freedom to frame *any* humour into his theory no matter how tenuous the linkage may be. In fact his ambitiously titled 1997 book *The Game of Humor: a comprehensive theory of why we laugh* is little more than a brief elaboration on his rather bluntly stated superiority theory followed by a series of sometimes quite embarrassing attempts to skewer interpretations of humorous situations into his 'comprehensive theory.' Theories such as Gruner's are useful for

analysing specific instances of humour such as derisory joking and ethnic/out-group jokes, but its comprehensiveness is most definitely open to challenge. Most notably sub-theses, three, four and five are methodological comments which do little in regard to analysis apart from implying that if a researcher cannot explain an instance of humour using Gruner's theory then it is due to a lack of intelligence or diligence on the part of the analyst.

Superiority theories suggest that it is inevitable that people will make jokes at the expense of people who they view to be comparatively inferior, if only in a very particular sense. Certainly no one likes to be laughed at directly, or indirectly, through friends, class, job, hair-colour, culture, etc. But, it has been suggested that humans are 'propelled by a drive to evaluate our own opinions and attributes' and that 'social man is a relativist, who rather than referring to objective, immutable, standards, compares himself to [other] people'.[177] If we accept this then superiority based humour is indeed inevitable because when an advantaged, or skilled, or agile, or intelligent, or attractive person compares themselves (or is compared in a joke) to a deprived, or unskilled, or physically handicapped, or intellectually challenged, or deformed person they will experience relative superiority.[178]

Superiority theories then can also provide an insight into the enduring presence and success of comic-excess (especially visible in parody and caricature) in regard to deformities, grotesqueness, vice and folly – the more deformed and unattractive a comic character appears, the greater the number of people able to laugh at them. Although some research conducted into

audience response to political cartoons has indicated that the grotesqueness must be perceived to be justifiable and the general comment must express some form of 'retaliatory-equity' in order for people to accept the cartoon as humorous rather than merely unwarranted aggressive derision.[179] A further finding was that the more unrealistically people were represented the greater the levels of derision that could be levelled against them while still being accepted by the audience as humorous rather than unjustified ridicule.[180] This could go some way to explain how *South Park* remains so popular despite their no-holds-barred approach to ruthlessly deriding anyone in the public arena who is attracting current attention. The crudeness of the animation and the obvious unrealistic depictions of the people being mocked could be seen as offsetting the pointedness of their derision. This particular view has been officially endorsed by the Broadcasting Standards Authority of New Zealand. The 'Bloody Mary' episode of *South Park* mentioned earlier [see sections 1.0, 3.7, 3.10 and 3.12], had provoked thirty-five complaints to the Authority, the most ever received for a single programme. However, the Authority ruling was very clear that:

> The programme's animation is simple and crude and bears no resemblance to reality. In the Authority's view, this crude animation and lack of realism mitigated to a significant extent the shock value and offensiveness that a more realistic portrayal might have generated…the material was of such a farcical, absurd and unrealistic nature that it did not breach standards of good taste and decency in the context in which it was offered.[181]

Nevertheless, C4, the channel which aired the episode, succumbed to pressure and will not screen it again, despite the fact that it was viewed by nearly six-times as many viewers that *South Park* usually generates.[182]

South Park has many examples of humour which can be explained well by superiority theory, nearly everything that comes out of Cartman's mouth for instance. However, more often than not this superiority based humour is presented in a manner which exposes it as indicative of a mechanically rigid, prejudiced, divisive and ignorant worldview [see section 4.4 for a discussion of rigidity as it relates to humour]. The parodic mode of address makes it clear that the superiority based jokes are intended to be humorous in the sense of being laughable (as an index of a rigid and prejudiced worldview) rather than humorous in the first instance. Therefore when Cartman derides Kyle for being Jewish, it is not funny for being derogatory towards the Jewish people as superiority theories would have us think, it is funny in the Barthesian sense of a second order of meaning.[183] We laugh at the fact that Cartman seriously finds his derision funny, rather then laughing with him, at the Jewish people. Therefore, although *South Park* makes explicit use of superiority based humour it does not endorse it, it mocks it with the same playful irreverence as it mocks anything else which takes itself seriously. Nevertheless, superiority theorists such as Gruner would maintain that as we are still laughing *at* someone the basic tenets of superiority theory hold true.

Interestingly, some recent research into the difference between nationalities and the jokes that they consider to be funny, found that North Americans particularly appreciated humour and jokes 'where there was a sense of superiority – either because a person looked stupid, or was made to look stupid by another person, such as:

Texan: Where are you from?

Harvard grad: I come from a place where we do not end our sentences with prepositions.

Texan: Okay – where are you from, jackass?'[184]

Although the apparent dominant reading of this joke does appear to be classic superiority in the sense that the Texan is mocking the Harvard graduate, it could also be considered to be mocking the rigidity of the Texan and his stereotypically blunt vernacular and simple redneck worldview. This slightly more complicated and socio-culturally situated view is exactly the approach that French philosopher Henri Bergson suggests must be taken in order to understand humour [see section 4.4 for discussion of Bergson's concept of humour].

Superiority theories posit that the movement of humour is downwards through the social hierarchy (making the American preference for superiority based humour even more telling), obviously then superiority theories do not account for political satire, or other forms of humour which are directed upwards at authorities.[185] Therefore, superiority theories cannot be used for explaining postmodern humour such as *South Park*, which is renowned for mocking authorities, prominent people and institutions. The irony, performativity and self-referentiality of *South Park* negates the downward flow of humour identified by superiority theories by mocking the act of mocking "inferiors" as well as mocking the very act of creating an animated satirical television product. Also, whenever a "real-world" issue is being addressed *South Park* always presents two sides of the situation and

pointedly mocks them both. Superiority theories also fail to account for humour which is based on self-referentiality and intertextual quotation.

4.2 Incongruity Theories

> Laughter is an affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.
>
> Immanuel Kant [186]

Historically, incongruity based theories of humour were the second school of thought to emerge and have been traced back to Francis Hutcheson's 1750 work *Reflections Upon Laughter*.[187] If Aristotle is considered to be the founding father of superiority theory, then the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, who considered humour to be a form of playing with ideas, is the father of incongruity theory.[188] The central premise of these theories is that humour occurs when there is a sudden shift in perception and logical progression (in the sense of familiar expectations of the world based on past "real world" experiences) is denied in favour of a system of association in which things that don't conventionally go together are connected in an unexpected manner. As British philosopher Simon Critchley describes it,

> The comic world is not simply 'die verkehrte Welt', the inverted or upside-down world of philosophy, but rather the world with its causal chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and commonsense rationality left in tatters.[189]

Incongruity theories are commonly referred to as the most widely accepted school of thought concerning humour, though there is a marked variation between the theories which come under the rubric.[190] In general incongruity theories consider humour to be a set of cognitive functions rather than a feature of a text, (although an incongruity in a text is more likely to provoke these cognitive functions than a cohesive text), as what individual people

perceive as incongruous is a complex process of negotiation of subject-object relations.[191] First of all there is the recognition of incongruity, which also implicitly requires a priori knowledge of what would be congruous, then there is the resolution which occurs when the incongruity is given meaning. If the incongruity is not recognised, or given meaning, it cannot be perceived as humorous, it would stay merely incongruous. Therefore humour is a complex and structured display of congruity and incongruity at the same time. Even though jokes are often absurd, they still have to make sense. They also have to communicate an understandable link between the punch line and the rest of the text, and between the disparate but familiar frames of reference incongruously juxtaposed within the joke.[192] As these frames of reference are learned and culturally specific, incongruity theories consider humour to be culturally specific. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein perspicuously describes the situation using an analogy to play:

> What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other, it's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket.[193]

Joking is a form of play, a game with specified rules that must be adhered to for it to operate successfully as humour. Subsequently, a particular culture's humour can be considered as having an indexical relationship to their values, practices and principles, which is why anthropologists were amongst the first in the social sciences to recognise the importance of humour as an avenue of insight into culture.[194]

There are many instances of *South Park's* humour which can be usefully approached with incongruity theory. The very premise of a town in which the adults are perennially clueless and require the moral rectitude of four nine-year-old boys is incongruous with "real world" expectations. Another example of incongruity being used to comedic effect in *South Park* is episode 103 ('Volcano', first aired 27/08/97) in which the town is being terrorised by the creature known as Scuzzlebutt who weaves wicker baskets and has Patrick Duffy as a leg. No one would accuse Patrick Duffy of being funny! However, incongruity theories do explain why a wicker basket weaving monster called Scuzzlebutt who has Patrick Duffy as a leg *is* funny. The reference to Patrick Duffy could just as easily be any other almost forgotten television personality from the 1980s and the humour would in no way be affected.

It is also possible to have incongruity in regard to narrative and character expectations. There are some excellent examples of this form of incongruity based humour in Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction*. In this film a lot of humour is generated by the mismatching of violence and triviality. In his book *Film Comedy*, Geoff King offers the following description of *Pulp Fiction's* incongruity based humour using the segment when Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta) are driving to do a "job":

> The pair engage, avidly in a discussion of subjects such as the French name for a particular type of burger or the merits of a foot massage, mixed up with reference to one apparently brutal killing by their employer… Some of this material is continued, especially on the subject of fast food, once they are inside the apartment, occupied by a group of younger men… Jules, particularly, is voluble and excessively articulate on the subject. When he shoots dead

> one of the young men, however, he does so in a manner which is so casual and off-hand – he barely glances in his victims direction – as to be shocking, on one level, but also comic. The effect, both comic and shocking, is created by the sudden drop from a level of lively engagement, in something trivial, to a level of engagement that hardly registers, on a matter of life and death.[195]

It is the incongruity (or bissociation) between the expected actions of the characters and the actual actions as presented in the narrative that causes the murder to be humorous rather than horrific. A similar humour strategy is used in the *South Park* episode 'I'm a little bit country' (episode 701, first aired 09/04/03) when Cartman calmly, ruthlessly and efficiently kills a man with a baseball bat whilst innocently singing the theme song from *Dawson's Creek* [see chapter 8 for further analysis of this episode]. The funniness of this act is well explained by incongruity theory; in that it depicts a child swiftly killing an adult as if is the most normal thing to do. In addition there is a certain added nuance to the incongruity from the reference to *Dawson's Creek,* which is a well known and successful family oriented television show.

Incongruity theory is indeed useful for analysing particular forms of humour such as Black comedy or the more absurd comic style of the Monty Python troupe. Nevertheless, given the complex and multi-form nature of humour it still falls short of the universal theory it claims to be. This is most clearly evidenced by the fact that not all incongruities are humorous. For instance, opening the front door of your house and finding a giant statue of yourself made out of candyfloss may cause you to laugh, but finding a group of

angry homicidal midgets with swords would not, even though both are incongruous.

4.3 Relief Theories

> Humour is seen to have a nobility and real usefulness in saving the mind from intense suffering. In this regard, Freud placed humour alongside neuroses, intoxication, self-induced abstraction and delusions.
>
> Christopher Wilson [196]

The fundamental reference for this category of theories is Sigmund Freud's 1905 book *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconsciousness.* Freud decided to write this book after noticing structural similarities between dreams and jokes as well as many dream associations based on word plays and humour. Subsequently Freud suggests that like dreams and slips of the tongue, jokes are related to the unconscious and express repressed or unconscious wishes. For Freud, the pleasure of humour is derived through its capacity to subvert the repressive rules of adult rational thought. Freud claims that humour allows adults to recreate the sense of childhood free-play that they lose once they mature and accept 'adult rational criticism'.[197] Rational criticism is a form of inhibition that is subverted by humour.[198] Humour allows people to escape the pressures and repressions of living in a hierarchical society, as Freud says, jokes are:

> especially favoured in order to make aggressiveness or criticism possible against persons in exalted positions who claim to exercise authority. The joke then represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.[199]

Humour affords relief from the restraint of conforming to the requirements of living according to social norms and other people's rules. Freud regards humour as a socially acceptable means of sidestepping the inhibitions that

prevent humans from indulging their natural impulses. This aspect of Freud's writing also shows some congruity with Darwin's briefly expressed thoughts on humour in *On the Expression of Emotion in Men and Animals* where he describes humour as an avenue for the civilised expression of 'darker more bellicose feelings.'[200] Some superiority theorists have drawn on Freud's writings, especially his description of 'tendentious' jokes as serving 'to provide an outlet for aggressive tendencies.'[201] However, in general Freud's book is generally considered as the founding text of an entirely new theory of humour, most often referred to as relief theory but also sometimes known as liberation theory.

Freud suggests that the only intensely funny humour is hostile or sexual in nature, 'The pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearer.'[202] It would stand to reason then, that successful humour created for mass consumption would exhibit an obvious dominance of aggressive and sexually themed humour. This can most definitely be seen in *South Park* which as it has four nine-year old boys as main characters is often centred around violence, aggression and sexual naivety/awakening [see section 8.2 for further discussion of *South Park's* use of children as main characters].

In addition to his 1905 book on jokes Freud also published a short and comparatively little known article on humour in 1928 which offered a concise summary of his earlier work as well as extending it into congruence with his thinking at that later time. In *Jokes and their Relation to the*

Unconscious Freud was concerned solely with the economy of joking and the pleasure it afforded. In his 1928 article *Humour* he describes a process of redistribution of mental energy within the psychic economy which inflates the superego and diminishes the ego. In this new situation Freud suggests that the super-ego offers the ego some words of consolation and says: 'Look here! This is all that this seemingly dangerous world amounts to. Childs play – the very thing to jest about!'[203] He then offers what he describes as a 'dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude':

> If we conclude that it [humour] consists in the subjects removing the accent from his own ego and transferring it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all of its interests trivial, and with this fresh distribution of energy it may be an easier matter for it to suppress the potential reactions of the ego.[204]

In this sense the super-ego is shifting roles (for reasons Freud did not directly state but presumably for the yield of pleasure) from the prohibitive and reprimanding parent, to the comforting, supportive and protective parent. Freud notes that the idea of the super-ego comforting the ego does not seem to fit well with its usual role, but he does tentatively propose that it could be considered as yet another aspect of the super-ego's 'derivation from the parental function.'[205]

Freud's assessment of the super-ego's function in humour has been adapted with some success by the philosopher Simon Critchley. Critchley describes a particular perspective afforded by humour in which humans are framed as 'abject objects'.[206] With the ego diminished and its concerns trivialised, humour exposes human actions in a manner which highlights the ridiculous and provides 'a sense of emancipation, consolation and childlike elevation'

from the repression and seriousness of everyday life.[207] Critchley combines insights from Mary Douglas (jokes exposing the arbitrary nature of social norms) and Henri Bergson (who suggests we laugh every time a person gives the impression of being a thing) with his reading of Freud's article on humour and has come up with a very specific, sophisticated and philosophically nuanced version of a relief theory. His 2002 book *On Humour* is an insightful, entertaining and scholarly introduction to the study of humour.

Unfortunately Critchley's work is somewhat of an exception as most humour research refers solely to Freud's 1905 work on jokes and tends to avoid his later work on humour; subsequently the process of redistribution of energy between the ego and the super-ego that he observes in humour has been largely overlooked. One notable exception comes from Deleuze who uses Freud's idea to advance the novel claim that masochists have a relationship to law, prohibitions and regulations which is essentially humorous.

In *Sacher-Masoch* Deleuze describes masochism as a subtle and complex process that far surpasses the general view of experiencing pleasure from pain. In masochism Deleuze observes the same fundamental process of mental energy redistribution as Freud observes in humour, but disagrees on the roles assigned to the ego and superego. Deleuze does not envision a diminished ego being consoled by a maternal superego; instead he describes a situation where the repressive control of an inherently sadistic superego is

negated by a masochistic ego. He bases this on the insight that as masochists derive pleasure from the strict application of rules they receive the same payout of pleasure that is afforded by humour. In a social sense the masochist negates the act of enforcing the rules and therefore the authority behind the rules themselves, by deriving pleasure from their application.

As acceptable as these explanations for humour appear, they all rely on the common (unprovable) assumption of the existence and influence of a Freudian unconscious and the distribution of mental energies through a psychic economy. Nevertheless, relief theories do offer a useful vocabulary for discussing aspects of humour such as the child-like joy and elevation that can be experienced when appreciating something humorous. Accordingly, relief theories can be related to *South Park* in the sense that the explicit use of the children's perspective of the adult world directly subverts 'adult rational criticism' in the same manner that Freud suggested humour does. However, *South Park* goes a step further by actually targeting 'adult rational criticism' and openly mocking it and the adult world which perpetuates it. Nevertheless, postmodern elements of *South Park* such as intertextual referencing and self-referentiality cannot be accounted for by relief theories.

4.4 Henri Bergson

> The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.
>
> Henri Bergson [208]

Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was a French philosopher and one of the most important and widely read philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century.[209] He was appointed as chairman of the League of Nations Committee on International Co-operation and was awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928. Although largely neglected in comparison to his other works, Bergson's essay *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* is, next to Freud's book on jokes (also comparatively overlooked in comparison to his other works), one of the most commonly cited works in the area of humour research. His central idea is that humorous situations arise when a person exhibits the characteristics of 'something mechanical encrusted on something living.'[210] Bergson's ideas have been associated with both superiority theories (Gruner) and incongruity theories (Koestler). His theory is based on the assumption that people laugh at others who display a mechanical rigidity and therefore shares with superiority theory the notion of humour being a downward movement. However, it also reflects incongruity theory in the way that his concept relies on the bissociation of human and machine.

Bergson considers the ideal state for humans both individually and as a social animal, to be one of agility and adaptability. The typical comic character, he says, is someone who demonstrates inflexibility and shows themselves to be incapable of adapting to the complex and changing demands of the social world. Bergson proposes that individually humans

need to maintain a certain degree of flexibility in order for society as a whole to be able to successfully adapt to the unpredictability of historical change. He claims that laughter is society's defence against deviants and eccentrics who are incapable of change, or refuse to adjust themselves to changing requirements. Bergson, like superiority theorists, suggests that humans reproach people who cannot meet accepted norms by laughing at them.

It is interesting to note that Bergson also includes a warning to other researchers intent on analysing humour suggesting that 'Perhaps we had better not investigate… [humour] too closely, for we should not find anything very flattering to ourselves.'[211] However, he also goes on to accord humour a very powerful position in the human experience of the social world,

> The comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness. It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up, in its dreams, visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group. Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination? Begotten of real life and akin to art, should it not also have something of its own to tell us about art and life?[212]

Incongruity theorists have drawn on this aspect of Bergson's writing as it refers to an alternative logic that is understood by an entire social group. Bergson pre-empts Koestler's concept of bissociation by at least 50 years, but he used the rather more verbose phrase 'reciprocal interference of series', a phrase very much in keeping with his wider ideas concerning time,

movement, image, memory and duration.[213] Bergson succinctly defines 'reciprocal interference of series' in the following:

> a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.[214]

This reveals further similarities to bissociation by describing humour as recognition of the simultaneous presence of two equally applicable interpretations.[215] Here Bergson and Koestler are in complete agreement; humour is derived from its formal affiliations to two mutually exclusive frames of reference, rather than content. This could presumably be taken further as meaning that anything and everything can be presented as humorous as long there is a bissociation, or simultaneous presence of a second frame of reference, or 'independent series of events'.[216] Though the issue of whether or not others find the humour funny still remains.

Despite the many similarities with incongruity theories Bergson takes a much broader sociological view in his approach to humour, stating categorically that in order to understand it 'we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one.'[217] The function he observes is one of admonition and ridicule towards humans incapable or unwilling to adapt to new situations. This social function of laughter that Bergson observes also shares some common ground with superiority theories as his most concise description of the function of humour is one of an 'unavowed intention to humiliate.'[218] Obviously, Bergson considers that the unpleasantness of being laughed at is so disconcerting that people will

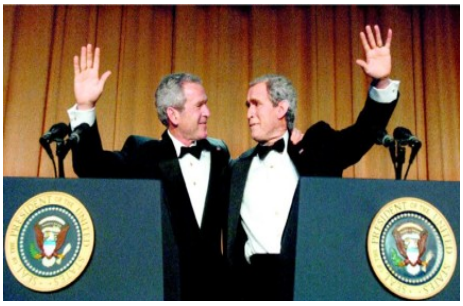
attempt to re-align their behaviours in order to avoid it. Subsequently he endorses the view that humour is a conservative force in society rather than a subversive one.

Bergson's theory can be read as suggesting that imitation is inherently humorous. When someone is imitated they become laughable as their mechanical rigidity is exposed and exaggerated in the act of mocking their characteristic mannerisms. This could explain why the very image of a *South Park* character with its two dimensional and basic imitation of the human form is humorous. The simplified forms, movements and restricted dimensional space of *South Park* is continued by the one dimensional nature of the characters. Here Bergsonian thought suggests that these characters are funny because of the monomaniacal rigidity of their characteristic traits. The following joke offers an excellent example of a character being mocked because of a rigidity of character:

1.2

> A man is at his club and notices an elderly gentleman who seems ill at ease. The man decides to see whether he can be of assistance. "Would you be interested in playing a game of cards?" he asks the old man. "No," says the old man. "Tried it once and didn't like it." The man then says, "Would you like to play some billiards?" "No," says the old man. "Tried it once and didn't like it!" The man decides to make one last try. "Can I get you a drink?" he asks. "No," says the old man. "Tried it once and didn't like it! Besides, my son will be coming to get me soon." "Your only son, I imagine!" replies the man.[219]

In this joke the rigid and repetitious actions of the old man are mocked and derided. Another excellent and topical example of rigidity being used to comic effect was the 2006 annual awards dinner for White House correspondents. George Bush appeared as a speaker alongside a comedy impersonator (Steve Bridges) of himself. The act worked by having Bush talk politely to the press and Bridges telling them what he was really thinking. Between the two of them they also humorously referred to the Bushisms and other language/public speaking quirks that are often used in satires at the expense of the American President. This is in fact a very interesting incident and one that deserves to be explored a little further.



1.3

In appearing on stage with a comedy double (who was already well known for his comic impersonation of Bush) and incorporating the humour that is ordinarily directed at him, Bush is attempting to gain control over the 'unruly' humorous narratives that are routinely used to undermine his authority.[220] With this in mind, the schizophrenic image of Bush and his comedy doppelganger appearing together on a single stage can be thought of as indicative of a joining, or subsuming, rather than a schizoid split. In this highly orchestrated event Bush is attempting to incorporate the derisive and humorous little-narratives which undermine his authority into the more official and serious meta-narrative (of his public profile) that he needs to preserve in order to maintain his authority. Throughout history

incorporating heresies back into the fold of orthodoxy, if only superficially, has proved to be a very effective way of removing its apparent challenge and silencing its apparent dissent.[221] It remains to be seen whether or not this will be an effective technique for Bush.

Another example of rigidity based humour appeared later on in the evening when the feature entertainer Stephen Colbert briefly roasted the President by observing that Bush has the conviction 'to believe on Wednesday what he believed on Monday, despite what happened on Tuesday.' Given his particular idiom of dogmatic adherence to his own stupidity and global American dominance, President Bush is an ideal candidate for rigidity based humour. However, the paragraph above demonstrates how the postmodern view can enhance this explanation of humour and explain its resonance within the wider contemporary socio-political context.

It would appear that Bergson's theory, which emphasises the necessity of constant change, could also be usefully discussed in relation to consumerism. It could be argued for instance that the constant change that Bergson suggests individual people need to exhibit for the good of society as a whole, has been appropriated by the capitalist system. Social change in contemporary capitalist societies is dictated largely by consumer trends and technological innovation. Accepting the innate presence of a certain degree of uncertainty (such as acts of terrorism or acts of nature) the general appearance of capitalist society at any one time is governed by fashions, foods, technologies, architecture and transport – in short, commodities.

Capitalist society is governed by a need to sell products and Bergson proposes that humans are driven by a need to acquire change. It is an observable quality of contemporary consumer society that people acquire and indicate change in their lives through the products they buy. Here Bergson's notion that people laugh at those who refuse, or are incapable of change is very much similar to the notion of 'keeping up with the Jones's in order to avoid being laughed at for being 'out of fashion', 'behind the times' or 'so last year'.

There is a fantastic parody of this in the *South Park* episode 'Chinpokemon' (episode 310, first aired 03/11/99) in which Kyle, despite his greatest efforts, is constantly behind in regard to purchasing or even knowing about the latest product associated with the 'chinpokemon' craze, which was a parody of the pokemon craze, a children's cartoon made in Japan, heavily geared towards promoting their merchandise and which was also generating a lot of media debate at the time.

Although Bergson is adamant that humour must be considered in its social context, his discussion remains focussed on instances of humour and what makes them funny. He does not make any mention of the role of ideology and authority in society or the social construction of reality. In fact his description of society and its innate drive for progress remains so general and abstract as to verge on the Hegelian metaphysical. Nevertheless, Bergson's contribution to humour scholarship cannot be overstated and his work remains as relevant today as it was when it was written, probably due

in large to its abstractedness. That is not to say that Bergson's theory can account for all humorous situations/instances. His ideas are very relevant to some forms of humour such as parody and physical comedy (no doubt because he devised his theory in the age of silent cinema), but ignore others, such as puns and word plays, as well as the more postmodern elements of *South Park* such as its use of textual quotation.

4.5 Mikhail Bakhtin: Popular Culture and the Carnivalesque

> It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person in the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives: one was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both of these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries.
>
> Mikhail Bakhtin [222]

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian literary theorist whose ideas have also had a marked influence on cultural studies and the study of humour. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin examines the writings of François Rabelais and suggests that they contain evidence of a medieval folk-culture based on laughter and exemplified in the excesses, inversions, references to bodily functions and generally oppositional practices of the carnivals. Medieval carnivals, Bakhtin argues, involved a temporary suspension of all hierarchies coupled with joyous uninhibited celebration of the breaking of social norms. In relating Rabelais' work to the context of the medieval carnival Bakhtin attempts to establish the existence of a popular tradition of mocking authority and parodying official ideas, practices and standards. In his prologue to *Rabelais and His World* Michael Holquist suggests that the book should be read as both an exposition of

Rabelais' work and a satirical comment on the repressive Stalinist regime under which Bakhtin lived and was exiled. This is a fitting observation as recognition of social context as a determining factor in the creation and interpretation of texts is also an essential aspect of Bakhtin's thought. For Bakhtin meaning is always contested and negotiated, there is no unitary or fixed meaning that can be ascribed to any text. Bakhtin suggests that all texts remain open to multiple interpretations due to what he describes as the 'dialogic' nature of language.[223]

Although Bakhtin's work has been very influential, *Rabelais and his World* has also been accused of providing a monolithic and homogeneous vision of medieval carnivals that does not hold up under historical enquiry.[224] These criticisms are based on historical research which has indicated a marked difference in carnivals from year-to-year and place-to-place. However, Bakhtin states quite clearly that the carnival exists in direct opposition to the official culture and with the specifics of officialdom changing from year-to-year and place-to-place it would necessarily follow that the specifics of its opposition would differ accordingly.

Although Rabelais' works are full of very explicit references to bodily functions, Bakhtin shows that they were far more than just medieval scatology; they were in fact quite studious social commentaries. He describes the fixation on bodily functions characteristic of the carnivalesque as 'the concept of grotesque realism', which is inherently related to the popular consciousness of the masses who had a much closer relationship to

the land and the cycles of nature than authorities and officials who relied on the work of the masses.[225] Within this view bodily functions such as eating, excreting, and procreating come to the fore as they are the essentials of life and are humorously accorded all of the pomp and pageantry usually attributed to official culture. In its celebration of universals such as the life cycle and bodily functions over and above the specifics of official life, the grotesque realism of the carnival 'affirmed, renewed and revitalised the old, bringing forth new birth, life, hope and laughter… by means of deconstruction and then reconstruction, carnival laughter simultaneously derided and delighted in the social and cultural apparatus of its era.'[226] Bakhtin describes the 'essential principle' of grotesque realism to be degradation, 'that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.'[227] It is important to note the difference here between Bakhtin's thought and superiority theories. Superiority theories posit that humour is directed downwards and that we deride others that we consider inferior to ourselves, whereas for Bakhtin derisive humour is associated with the bottom-line equality of humanity expressed in the grotesque realism of the carnival. In this sense the direction that Bakhtin observes in carnivalesque humour is devastatingly horizontal.

Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque is a useful one for this thesis as it offers a perspective on laughing at authority which is lacking in superiority theories, a perspective of incongruity which is firmly situated in the social/material world, and it describes a social manifestation of the

unconscious drives suggested by relief theories. Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as 'the social consciousness of the people, the exuberant expression of unofficial truths which belongs specifically to popular culture and stands outside of the seriousness and violence of official culture.'[228]

Medieval carnivals celebrated the diversity of the social world with the same vigour as the singularity the official culture was imposed during the rest of the year. Language plays a central part of Bakhtin's thought and in his opinion it is the inclusion of multiple voices, or heteroglossia of the carnival that gives it its subversive potential against the monoglossia (single voice) of official discourse. In a very broad sense, but one that very much shows how Bakhtin's ideas anticipated postmodern thought, Bakhtin suggests that all language activities are essentially intertextual quotations. However, Bakhtin seems far from pessimistic about this; instead he sees it as an essential factor of the creative and subversive power of language. The appropriation and inversion of official language forms is one of the fundamental aspects of carnivals and the carnivalesque. This is very important to recognise and it has particular relevance to this study, as carnivals celebrated the multi-various nature of language and the diversity of experiences which made up social life, as compared to everyday life which was governed by the hermetic singularities of serious discourses. The notion of the carnivalesque can be extended to include practically any instance where the authority of an official language is questioned.

In a short essay titled *Towards a post-modern animated discourse: Bakhtin, intertextuality and the cartoon carnival,* T. Lindvall and J. Matthew propose that self-reflexive cartoons (such as *South Park*) are exemplars of the spirit of the carnivalesque. Contemporary animated cartoons, like medieval carnivals, reduce 'the mysteries of social and religious existence by playing with their forms without denying them.'[229] They describe animated cartoons as a form of postmodern play and claim that 'Post-modern sensibilities are stylistically realised in this art-form with the fusion of high and low art, the tinkering with hybrid forms, the tones of irony and parody, the incredulity towards meta-narratives and the principle of double coding, all of which frolic merrily in the realm of the intertextual.'[230] They also propose that it is the technological conditions of postmodernity (although they always use the hyphenated forms of post-modern, post-modernism and post-modernity) which have enabled animated cartoons to emerge as exemplary forms of the contemporary carnivalesque.

To summarise, Bakhtin's ideas concerning the relativity of authority, the social construction of meaning, intertextuality, the multiplicity of experiences of the social world, and the carnivalesque impulses of popular culture, all prefigure postmodern thought in a striking manner. It is a fundamental premise of this thesis that postmodern humour is a contemporary manifestation of the carnivalesque. However, it is the contention of this thesis that the temporal boundaries and 'free and familiar contact' of the medieval carnival have been replaced by the physical/spatial boundaries and alienated populations of postmodernity.[231] Essentially the

temporal boundaries and freedom of social contact that Bakhtin identified as so crucial to the carnival experience have been negated by technological developments such as the internet, DVD, video, and pay-per-view television, through which postmodern carnivalesque humour can be accessed with relative immediacy at any time. The effectiveness of carnivalesque humour to incite a popular revolt against authority has been all but removed by replacing the temporal specificity and fundamentally social nature of the carnival with twenty-four hours a day private access to carnivalesque media texts.

4.6 Postmodern Thought and humour: parallels and intersections

> Descartes is sitting in a bar, the waiter approaches him and asks him if he would like a drink, to which Descartes replies "I think not" then disappears.
>
> Anon [232]

The famous creator of inductive logic, Francis Bacon succinctly described the impetus behind the enlightenment project when he said, 'If something exists, it deserves to be known'.[233] Around five-hundred years later Matt Stone, co-creator of *South Park* unknowingly reframed Bacons sentiment for today's postmodern society when he said 'If something exists then you should be able to laugh at it.'[234] If we accept that one of the defining characteristics of postmodernism is an urge to disrupt and discredit the Enlightenment project (exemplified in the concepts of reason and progress), the juxtaposition of the two quotes above provides an excellent insight into postmodernity. The postmodern age is one of humorous distraction, parody, historical quotation, irony and play; all fuelled by a general sense of uncertainty concerning the nature of truth and reality, it is Vico's 'age of

dissolution and *ricorso* or recycling'[235] [see section 2.1]. This uncertainty is associated with the recognition that institutional authorities rather than universal standards establish truths, and institutions cannot be trusted as they operate in accordance with a prescribed agenda, usually the pursuit of profit.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson linked a discussion of parody to developments in the arts, philosophy, economy, and society that have come to be known as postmodern. However, Jameson suggests that the fragmentation of language (into multiple clouds of discourse) and society has led to the 'well-nigh universal practice' of a form of apolitical parody, which he characterises with his use of the term pastiche,

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter...[236]

Whilst other writers have challenged the distinction that Jameson draws between parody and pastiche, it is a useful one for this study, though it must be recognised that although pastiche may not be innately humorous it can still be used to comedic effect. Parody explicitly references in order to 'laugh at', whereas pastiche is more of an appropriation of style, content, or form without parody's intention of degradation. In this regard pastiche can be seen to function as a playful allusion to, rather than derision of the text, style or genre referred to; referencing for the sake of referencing, i.e 'speech in a dead language... devoid of laughter'.[237] The play of referencing for the

sake of referencing can very much be associated with the 'cult of knowingness' which Carl Matheson suggests lies at the heart of postmodern popular culture and its humour.[238] Matheson suggests that the contemporary crisis of authority is what fuels postmodernism's use of historical quotation and intertextual referencing in both the arts and science, as well as in television comedy programs such as *The Simpsons, South Park* and *Family Guy*.[239]

Notions such as irony, parody, relativity, speed, intertextuality, play, excess, and the carnivalesque, link postmodernism and humour on many levels. That is not to say that postmodernism is inherently humorous or that humour is inherently postmodern, rather, postmodernism and postmodern thought allows us to appreciate the role of popular cultural forms such as humour 'in a way that the high-cultural commitments of modernism did not.'[240] Postmodernism allows both humour and popular culture to be considered positively and worthy of official attention and academic debate. The limits, margins and frivolities of modernism have become the fascinations and fetishes of postmodernity.

The writings of postmodern thinkers such as: Barthes, Eco, Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, all exhibit a predilection for analysing traditionally marginal aspects of human civilisation (or in the case of Derrida the margins themselves), as well as embodying a certain playful and performative nature, very much akin to the conventions and strategies of humour.[241] These writers use humour to promote a certain extra-textual dimension to

their writings, in an attempt to escape the stricture of the margins of the page and using the bissociative properties of humour to formally reference the ambiguity and uncertainty that they expose and express in the content of their writing. These writers embrace uncertainty and consider frivolity as a fundamental aspect of human social existence, which is why Derrida proposes philosophical frivolity to be a device used specifically to reference the importance of the frivolous in human existence.[242] Derrida also states that he has intentionally attempted to make his philosophical discourse bissociative, he describes himself as:

> a philosopher who has made duplicity his theme and a norm of his own discourse, who relentlessly sets the structure of the double root and of *homo duplex* over and against every "alchemy" of the unique principle.[243] [original italics]

Indeed humour and frivolity not only provides form and subject matter for these writers, but also inspiration. Foucault describes the impetus and inspiration to write his fascinating book *The Order of Things* as coming from an outburst of laughter he had when reading a passage written by the postmodern fiction writer Jorge Borges.[244] He explains in the preface:

> This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – *our* thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things.[245] [original italics]

The passage concerned a fictitious Chinese encyclopaedia that categorised animals using a variety of groupings which appear quite unconventional to western thought such as 'belonging to the emperor' and 'embalmed.'[246] The humour that Foucault perceived in this ostensibly absurd and foreign system

of categorisation is that western societies are equally as reliant on arbitrary groupings and hierarchical conceptions of things, people and ideas, only the absurdities are concealed (from us) by centuries of accumulated culture and social conventions.

It is interesting that Foucault associated laughter with the shattering of the traditional logics, which he clarifies elsewhere as Reason, and trust in scientific methods. With Reason shattered, the humorous view of the situation afforded Foucault a meta-view of human activity as described by Critchley [see section 4.3], and the essential folly of order and its function in human social existence came to the fore. Philosophers like Foucault have a common goal with comedians; both seek to expose latent cultural assumptions and the inherently irrational underpinnings of our ostensibly rational societies.

Richard Ellis has very usefully applied aspects of Lyotard's thought to his own analyses of a sub-category of satirical humour that he describes as 'sick disaster jokes', discussed earlier [see section 3.8].[247] Ellis contends that sick disaster jokes operate in the same manner as Lyotard's little-narratives by challenging the officially popularised explanations of contemporary events and their historical, political and social antecedents. He suggests that humour which reinterprets or otherwise engages with contemporary events, issues and personalities is part of a 'postmodern narrative impulse' which aims towards the discrediting of the official narratives of authority – and in particular an expression of incredulity towards the media endorsed, or

engendered explanations of the events, issues or personalities to which it relates.[248] In fact Ellis explicitly positions the media industry as a fundamental element of the construction of social reality(s) in postmodernity. He formulates this in Lyotardian terms suggesting that the media consistently demonstrates a 'meta-narrative impulse' in the way that there is an inherent drive towards providing 'a species of proof' which can render the complexity of events and issues comprehensible and communicable to the wider public.[249] Ellis accepts that this is not strictly what Lyotard had in mind when he coined the terms, however he suggests that the prevalence and pervasiveness of media coverage of current world events 'are not wholly discrete from this mode of totalising explanation, since they… always seek to render [complex and disorderly events and issues] comprehensible.'[250]

The infiltration of postmodern thought in the area of humour research is perhaps most clearly evidenced by the difference between 1988 publication *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control* and its 1996 follow up *The Social Faces of Humour: Practices and Issues.* In the 12 essays contained in the former there is a marked focus on issues concerning humorous representations of politics, gender and ethnicity and not a single reference to postmodernism. In the latter, the editors noticed such a pronounced influence of postmodern themes and thought in the writings that they created a postscript to the Introduction to address the topic. The broad areas of interest shown by the collected writings involve the political economy of the media and representation, the central position that the mass media plays in

constructing social realities, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and the changing roles between the people who produce humour, the humorous performance, and the audience. There is implicit agreement among all these writers in that humour is now a commodity (both cultural and economic) and its creators are accorded a cultural positioning as 'truth tellers', which makes them very attractive for advertising and marketing campaigns. In this sense the social role of humorists has changed very little since ancient times but the relationship between the people who create humour and those who appreciate the humour has changed drastically.

5.0 Postmodern Humour: Concept and flow

Very generally this thesis argues that there is a form of humour which can be usefully described as postmodern humour, and that postmodern humour exhibits many of the same characteristics as postmodern art and postmodern thought. It is also argued that this is due to postmodern humour being a cultural construct of the popular culture of postmodernity. One of the characteristic features of postmodernity and its products is recycling, this manifests in postmodern humour's use of historical quotation, self-reflexivity, intertextuality and irreverent combinations that have been established as conventionally separate.

Previous sections have identified that established theories of humour can only explain specific examples and instances of humour. Postmodern humour, in keeping with other postmodern cultural products appropriates, recycles and re-articulates instances and forms of humour from the past; using them, mocking them and drawing attention to their limits. Further to this postmodern humour as a media based phenomenon also recycles and comments on the media conventions and imagery that are increasingly shaping the popular consciousness of humanity.

Concept:

In the context of this thesis postmodern humour is, in the first instance, a form of carnivalesque social comment created for mass-consumption via the popular media. Postmodern humour is intertextual, irreverent and it expresses an explicit and critical awareness of the socio-cultural, political and

commercial environment in which it is produced and circulated. Therefore a broad definition of postmodern humour could be; produced-for-mass-consumption humour with emphatic links to contemporary events and an ironic self-awareness of the history and processes of its own production, circulation, and consumption both as a media-text and a cultural commodity. Postmodern humour is the playfully self-reflexive humour of contemporary popular culture; it is both dependent on, and oppositional to, the "adult" world of politics, hierarchy and seriousness.

Postmodern humour provides the confined and alienated populations characteristic of postmodernity the opportunity of accessing a vicarious cultural experience of social and political resistance/subversion, whilst simultaneously maintaining their revolutionary impotence. This thesis maintains that if postmodern humour did pose an actual threat to authority, it would not be allowed to circulate through the popular mass-media with the ease and prevalence that it does. This is very clearly evidenced by the lack of television programming devoted to supporting terrorism or lessons on how to make bombs and overthrow governments. From this it can be reasonably deduced that authorities endorse the audio-visual attack that postmodern humour undertakes on their privileged position. And from this it can be further deduced that authorities consider that media based attacks from postmodern humour serve a purpose which furthers their interests of maintaining their position of authority. It is the contention of this thesis that postmodern humour is officially sanctioned and circulated as a deterrent to the truly revolutionary force of the carnival (as described by Bakhtin) with its

public gathering and unrestrained social interaction centred on the mocking of all authority and social distinction. Although this thesis has positioned postmodern humour as fundamentally carnivalesque, it has however also been shown to lack the freedom of social interaction of the carnival experience and as a result it lacks the revolutionary potency of the carnival. Postmodern humour has, despite its politically oppositional underpinnings been imbricated into the very systems of politics and control that it derides.

Flow

The recycling of images, personalities, narratives and forms of humour from the past that occurs in postmodern humour is also mirrored in its 'flow'. The idea of the flow of humour has been dealt with in passing in previous sections but deserves some reiteration here. The most common direction that humour is seen to flow is downwards through the social hierarchy, and this flow is evidenced by the prevalence of laughing at others. This is the most basic premise of superiority theories of humour and Henri Bergson's theory of the comic, and has also been corroborated by research conducted in the workplace [see section 4.1]. The second direction in which humour is seen to flow is upwards, as in political humour and satire. The fact that these forms of humour are, in general, mediated (via newspapers and television) and do not occur in the presence of the person being laughed at must be noted. In private it is commonplace to laugh at superiors and other people who (for whatever multitude of reasons) could not be laughed at in person. This is an interesting point to consider in relation to media circulated humour which is predominantly consumed privately. Laughing at people in private allows a

'token expression of rebelliousness' from the weaker party whilst at the same time maintaining 'the terms of the relationship.'[251] This also fits in with the observation above that the consumption of mass-media humour acts as a deterrent to radical activity. A third and less common direction of humour can be identified in the writings of Bakhtin, who using the concept of grotesque realism suggests a form of humour which operates in a horizontal direction as it levels all social and political hierarchies using the principle that everyone eats, defecates and procreates. It is my contention that in the act of appropriating, recycling and inverting these historical forms and flows of humour, the flow of postmodern humour has become unavoidably cyclical, following the lines of a moebius strip, turning on itself and inverting; pursuing no definitive progress or end aside from celebrating itself through reference, quotation and allusion. Postmodern humour is in this sense very much the humour of the 'cult of knowingness' observed by Matheson[see section 4.6]. This practical 'lack' of direction also accounts for the reduced revolutionary potential of postmodern humour: A downward flow can be used to dominate inferiors; an upwards flow can be used to make authorities accountable for their actions; a horizontal flow can ease the burden of living under an authority; but a cyclical flow unavoidably becomes a parody of itself. Therefore, it also would stand to reason that if humour has lost its revolutionary potency, the only avenue for future social change is through seriousness. This could be argued to be evidenced by the seriousness of the greatest challenge to contemporary authorities, terrorism. That is not to say that postmodern humour has entirely lost its subversive potential – but with

everybody accessing it privately at different times its subversive potential cannot be realised.

5.1 South Park as Postmodern Humour

> With its potentially heuristic and pragmatic values, the animated film serves as a site for exploring certain aspects of post-modernism, particularly the realms of double coding, intertextuality and carnival comedy. Its use of pastiche and parody, of extended quotation and of multiple perspectives – or heteroglossia within one small discourse – situate it as prime property for post-modern analysis.
>
> T. Lindvall and J. Melton [252]

South Park is a product of the popular culture of postmodernity and as such it exhibits many of the characteristics that are ascribed to postmodernism in other areas such as the visual arts, literature, music and architecture. *South Park* revels in a carnivalesque spirit 'which incorporates intertextual games of allusion, imitation, quotation and playing with ironic self-reflexive references to all levels of the media industry.'[253] Within this orchestrated maelstrom of reference and quotation the creators of *South Park* engage in a Rabelaisian critique of current events, personalities, issues, trends, technologies and fads. This could in fact be considered as one of the defining characteristics (insofar as audience expectation in concerned) of *South Park* - the *almost* unflinching dedication to noting *any* popular events, people, features, technologies, groups, ideologies, or texts and mocking them as quickly after the initial media reaction as possible.[254] This thesis proposes that in addition to its penchant for self-reflexivity and intertextuality, *South Park* demonstrates a 'postmodern narrative impulse' by virtue of its dedication to offering its audience carnivalesque subversions of popular of-the-moment news media fixations and events.[255] Furthermore, this thesis also contends that the manner in which *South Park* mocks the

popular media is part of a wider technologically based culture of (communication) speed and a 'world weary' satiric sensibility that is distrustful of all institutions and institutional knowledge, including the explanations of current events offered in the news media.[256] This is in fact essential to what this thesis considers to be *South Park's* 'carnivalesque postmodern narrative impulse' in that it serves to disrupt the media-engendered and traditional, or inherited meta-narrative explanations of the world [see sections 3.8 and 4.6].[257] *South Park* enthusiastically embodies this resistant impulse and its creators purposefully leave the production of their episodes to the last possible minute in order to ensure that the content of the show is as current as possible.[258] Parker and Stone have both commented on the fact that speed is an essential factor of their creative process, in order to be funny they feel that they have to leave things till the last possible moment.[259] In keeping with *South Park's* propensity for extremes Parker and Stone often leave things so last minute that they have to send Comedy Central episodes by satellite feed (which reduces the overall quality) to get them there in time for broadcast and use a courier the next day to deliver a copy in the proper high-quality format.[260]

Recognising this 'postmodern narrative impulse', or drive for currency in the prized commodity of 'newness', is a useful starting point for analysing *South Park's* humour and it is necessary from there to unpack and consider the nature of the subject-episode's referencing. References do not just appear they are allusions drawn from a particular body of cultural knowledge that the programs assumed viewers are expected to possess. In

the case of *South Park*, it is not just the references that appear in a particular episode, there is the entire history and continuing controversies over the content of the show that help to shape the viewer's expectations of the referencing that takes place. These are the paratextual elements of a text. The paratext is the information and imagery of all of the marketing campaigns, posters, billboards, trailers, interviews, reviews, the cumulative history of the episodes, merchandising, even the fonts used on the posters and in the title and credits. All of these elements add to and shape the audience's expectations and interpretation of the text itself, as it is essentially the text's way of being introduced to and anchored for its audience. In a sense the paratext occupies the very threshold of the text itself and this threshold can even be extended to include other creative works by the creators of the show, as well as publicised biographical details or tabloid scandals.[261] These have no direct associations with the individual episodes as texts in their own right, but become part of the wider understanding that the audience uses when interpreting the show. This thesis also contends that Parker and Stone, through *South Park*, are able to comment on real world events so quickly that *South Park* has the unique ability to enter into the paratext of the serious events which they satirise in the show.

Recognising the paratext and its influence on the interpretation of a text is more than just an academic observation; there are very real ramifications to recognising the potential of television humour in influencing the audience's consumer behaviours. These paratextual

affiliations not only affect the viewer's expectations and engagement with the text they also alter their economic relationship to it in a number of ways:

> It makes us as consumers, more willing to buy an opportunity to watch the comedy (…this may be in the manner of a cinema ticket, video rental, or tuning into satellite/terrestrial TV). It makes us more willing to allow our spending to be guided… it helps us to choose to buy products we would not otherwise invest in as in the case of associated merchandising such as t-shirts, sticker albums, soft toys, etc.[262]

This signals more than just a new multi-media approach to selling humour, it recognises the potential of humour created for mass consumption to manipulate consumer habits in a much wider sphere than just viewing habits. When consuming products such as *South Park* merchandise:

> the decision to buy is linked with the potential satisfaction that the ownership of the object may provide. The individual no longer buys items as functional objects (such as bread to eat, or a car to drive) but as signifiers for mythical properties (a croissant for sophistication, a Porsche for sex appeal). The object is subsumed in the fantasies of owning it. Shopping becomes inescapably linked up with an immersion in ideologies.[263]

This can be seen in the way that wearing a *South Park* tee-shirt imbues its owner with a very different set of cultural connotations and perceived personality traits than wearing a Three Tenors concert tee-shirt would. The fact that *South Park* is a television product, owned by MTV, a simple animation, scatological, fixated with combining the traditionally sacred with the traditionally profane, and a comedy, imbues it with a very specific type of cultural capital, situated more properly within the realm of popular youth culture rather than the

high-cultural sphere of the Three Tenors. Interestingly, with the improved quality of the animation software that the creators of *South Park* now use, they actually have to go to extra effort to maintain the crude construction paper stop-motion animation look which helped to make them famous.

To state the position of this thesis in a broad but succinct manner *South Park's* humour is postmodern for the following reasons:

- It draws attention to its own construction.

- It draws attention to its economic and cultural position and functions.

- It transgresses its textual boundaries, most notably by parodic, satiric and ironic reference to contemporary events and popular culture.

- It exhibits a 'postmodern narrative impulse' in the way it re-interprets and challenges the media engendered explanations of contemporary events and culture.[264]

- It comments on contemporary events so quickly that the comments and images used in the show enter into the paratext of the serious events that they parody/satirise/mock.

- It explicitly attacks and challenges traditionally venerated concepts, traditions, knowledge(s) and institutions, and their meta-narrative accounts of the world, the self, society and civilisation.

- It includes itself in its humour and ironic worldview, *South Park* satirises itself as a media product as well as the media industry in general, exposing its codes, conventions and influence in contemporary western democratic society.

- It exhibits many of the aesthetic characteristics associated with postmodernism and postmodern art, such as parody, irony, self-reflexivity and hybridisation of style, form and genre. It also expresses an acute and ironic awareness of the context(s) of its reception. Often to the point of pre-emptively replying to (predicted) adverse public reactions within the offending episode itself.[265] An explicit example of this is the manner in which Parker and Stone use the reactions of *South Park's* adults to the diegetic

animated cartoon Terrance and Phillip, to comment on the reactions that *South Park* generates in the adult world.

- It parodies specific media personalities (including specific politicians, sportspeople and celebrities) as well the more general and abstract televisual character (stereo)-types.

At the most fundamental level of the argument presented in this thesis it is claimed that because *South Park* emerged in the historical era of postmodernity it is a cultural product of postmodernity and therefore it is by birthright postmodern. Taking this position slightly further *South Park* represents a form of humour that was entirely impossible in previous historical eras – for more than just the obvious reason of the absence of television at the time. *South Park* could not have existed in any previous historical epoch. The technological advances which enable the practically instantaneous world wide communication of current events as well as the technology which allows Parker and Stone to rearticulate these events into *South Park's* carnivalesque and satirical world so quickly are very much specific to postmodernity. Therefore the very speed with which *South Park* is able to respond to and pass humorous comment on current events could also be used as a basis to describe it as postmodern humour.

The knowledge base the creators rely on their audience having is also an element of *South Park's* humour which could be considered as specific to postmodernity as it includes references to such a wide variety of sources (including history, classic literature, popular literature, film, television, and politics). In fact this body of knowledge could only have come into existence (as a body rather than an array of separate and unrelated

knowledge[s]/texts) in the media saturated global village environment of postmodernity.

Rather than imposing a meta-narrative style, total, serious and singular explanation on a text based on intertextual movement, allusion and reference, postmodern humour invites a more fluid approach, one that is accepting of historical change, intertextual relationships and the influence of context, analyst, and interpretation on the findings. Therefore, in response to the conditions of a postmodern humour text, an analysis of *South Park* should not only address the text, but also the web of intertextual and paratextual elements which contribute to the meanings which are ascertained from the text at any one time in order to establish its own hermeneutic, a hermeneutic which would necessarily also be specific to the individual researcher and the specific time that the text is analysed. This is very much in keeping with Eco's argument for a way of reading texts which acknowledges their limitations.[266] In contrast to the general postmodern position that all texts are open to an inestimable number of interpretations, or at least that there is no single reading of a text which is "right", Eco suggests that although every text has a vast array of interpretive possibilities, meaning is nonetheless still contained within the limits of the text. For example, *South Park* could not be read as a cookbook, instruction manual or travel guide. Further to this it must also be noted that the paratext and intertextual relationships between texts remain fluid and will constantly change in response to historical developments and between individual analysts. Accordingly the methodology chapter [chapter 7] includes a short

section outlining elements of my personal approach to this study which may have influenced both the view of humour endorsed in this thesis and the analysis of *South Park*.

6.0 Aims of Research

The first aim of this research is to examine and interrogate the concept of humour, then to summarise relevant humour scholarship to date, and from there to propose a tentative framework for understanding some of the characteristics and socio-political functions of postmodern humour, using the animated television comedy series *South Park* as a case study. This thesis also explores some of the implications of postmodern humour with particular reference to the nature of its subject matter as well as the technologies involved in its production and dissemination. Accordingly, this thesis will argue that *South Park* demonstrates a 'postmodern narrative impulse' by virtue of its dedication to offering carnivalesque subversions of popular of-the-moment news media fixations. These news-media fixations can be wars, elections, celebrities, religions, court cases, fashion, films, music, sport, politics, natural and man-made disasters, in short, anything receiving attention in the media around the time that Parker and Stone sit down to create an episode of *South Park* can reappear in their animated carnivalesque world. In this regard *South Park* truly is unique for an animated comedy show, as episodes are often created from scratch just days before broadcast in direct response to current events.

Essentially this thesis aims to answer these very broad research questions:

- What is humour and how is contemporary humour different from the humour of the past?
- What is postmodern about *South Park's* humour?
- Does postmodern social theory add to an understanding of contemporary humour? If so, how? And if not, why not?

7.0 Methodology

As this is essentially a form of critical discourse analysis I will be engaging with the text along three broad levels of investigation, as suggested by Norman Fairclough in his influential book *Language and Power*: description, interpretation and explanation.[267] Description is the analysis of content and form on the textual level. Interpretation draws conclusions about the discursive practices in the text: how the characters relate to the ideas in the text, how the text refers to other texts, how it makes use of multiple discourses. Explanation engages with ideas from the text in relation to wider social practices, and in particular investigates the relationship between the episode's humour and the social structures, institutions and ideologies referred to in the text. Fairclough also emphasises the role of the analyst when undertaking critical discourse analysis, so accordingly I have included a short reflexive statement which outlines some of the personal bias which has inescapably shaped aspects of this thesis.

Traditionally analyses of parody have involved the comparison of the parodic text with the text being parodied. *South Park* is a parody, but it is a parody in the widest sense of the word. The target of *South Park's* parody is the seriousness of everyday life as represented in the media engendered understandings of contemporary events, rather than the more traditional style of parodying a specific text or genre. Understandably, and given the focus on contemporary events, a more general analytic approach is required as more often than not, there is no single text, genre, or style which is being

parodied. It is for this reason that the first section of the analysis is a paratextual introduction to the episode. Essentially this section contains the relevant aspects of the wider socio-political context in which the episode was created, the relevant media fixations, current events, images and personalities that provided the source material for the creators to parody as well as the immediate frame of reference for the viewer to interpret the satiric and intertextual references. Therefore, in the context of this thesis the paratext summary grounds the analysis (for you the reader) in the same manner that the paratext itself anchors the text for the viewer.

The analysis itself will be approached first by addressing the widest comic narratives of the episode. These essentially provide the driving force behind the rest of the humour and action. After establishing links between the humour which underlies the episode and postmodern thought, particular instances of humour will be addressed and considered in their relation to the wider comic narratives, the paratext and the socio-political context in which the episode was created.

7.1 Reflexive statement: Bias in my approach

At this stage it would appear necessary for me as a researcher/writer to outline to you, the reader/marker how I have come to be undertaking this particular study. In this section I will attempt to answer questions such as: Why the focus on humour rather than comedy? Why *South Park*? Why this particular episode? Why take such a broad and interdisciplinary view of humour rather than directly applying specific theories to a text?

All of the questions above relate directly to how I have engaged with this topic. The original impetus behind researching humour was that all throughout my undergraduate and graduate study whenever I was required to give a presentation I found myself using humorous audio-visual clips from *Monty Python*, *Blackadder*, *The Young Ones*, *The Simpsons* and (most often of all due to its continuing contemporary relevance) *South Park*, as a brief and humorous means of introducing the topic to be addressed. Ultimately, I always felt that the humour in the clips was far more successful in communicating and critiquing the topic than any of my rather more verbose serious academic expositions ever were. Furthermore, humour achieved this in a fraction of the time whilst simultaneously entertaining and enlivening the audience, encouraging them to interact with each other and engage with serious and potentially divisive topics in a manner which in some peculiar way reduced the chance of heated conflict arising.

Once I began investigating humour as a potential area for research I was immediately struck by the lack of mainstream academic interest in the topic. I was also fascinated by the debate over whether humour is a subversive agency within society, by promoting social change, or whether it helps to maintain the status-quo by acting as a safety-valve releasing repressed energies, which if not expressed in the relatively harmless form of humour, might result in more radical and destructive oppositional activity.

The decision to look at *humour* rather than *comedy* was essentially because of the primacy of humour: you need a sense of humour in order to 'get' comedy, but you do not need a sense of comedy to 'get' humour. Furthermore, humour is a much more interesting, fluid and socio-culturally situated concept than comedy, which carries connotations of fixed formal characteristics and established guidelines for engagement and analysis founded in the strong academic tradition of literary and dramatic criticism.

The decision to use *South Park* as a text for analysis and discussion was based on two factors. First of all, I have been a fan of the show since 1998 and have knowledge of all of the episodes that have been broadcast as well as other creative works by Parker and Stone. And second of all, over the nine complete series which have aired to date, *South Park's* particular brand of carnivalesque humour has created a veritable encyclopaedic compilation of the issues, events, politicians, personalities, media products, consumer products, trends, technologies and fixations of the last ten years.

The choice to link postmodernism with humour was initially a result of the generic and flippant way in which the moniker 'postmodern' was attached to *South Park* in the popular press. I was interested in what it actually meant for humour to be postmodern. The selection of the one-hundredth episode 'I'm a little bit Country' as the sole subject-text for analysis was the result of space restriction (I originally intended to analyse multiple episodes) and the fact that it seemed like such a clear example of Mary Douglas's conception of humour exposing the hidden joke which underpins the

practices and perceptions of every society. The episode exposes the underlying joke of the United States of America. It is also interesting for the way in which it exemplifies the postmodern predilection for using imagery and narratives from the past and rearticulating them in a contemporary context. The central claim put forward in this episode is that the United States of America are far from united and that the political spectrum of contemporary U.S.A. is divided along the very same ideological and socio-political lines as it was in 1776 when the USA was founded.

8.0 100th Episode: I'm a little bit Country

Key quote:

> Cartman — You people who are for the war, you need the protesters because they make the country look like it is made of sane caring individuals. And you people who are anti-war, you need these flag wavers. Because if our whole country was made up of nothing but soft pussy protesters, we'd get taken down in a second. That's why the Founding Fathers decided we should have both. It's called 'having your cake and eating it too.'

Synopsis:

Against the backdrop of the town of South Park's adults being violently divided over America's illegal invasion of Iraq, the kids are given an assignment to find out what the Founding Fathers of America would have thought about such pre-emptive action. Deciding that there is far too much information for a nine-year-old to deal with Cartman devises a series of attempts to force a flashback to the year 1776 for his research, in which he is finally successful. While Cartman is near dead in hospital, having his flashback, Kenny, Stan, and Kyle are left to do the assignment themselves. The episode climaxes with an all out brawl between right-wing, pro-war, country music fans, and left-wing, anti-war, rock music fans, which is resolved by Cartman who after his successful flashback journey to 1776 clarifies for the townsfolk what the Founding Fathers intended for America as a warring nation. With equilibrium restored the characters start directly addressing the television audience and self-reflexively celebrating 100 episodes of *South Park* in mock variety-show fashion.

8.1 The Paratext

This episode first aired in America on 9 April 2003, almost three weeks after American armed forces began their pre-emptive offensive attack on Iraq and the very day that President Bush announced the end of major combat operations. This was a very contentious invasion as it was not sanctioned by the U.N. and opinion in America was split along the traditional political divide of left/right. Both sides of the dispute were attempting through the media to publicly legitimise their opinions in a national sense by making an appeal to history and the tenets of the Founding Fathers. Pro-war supporters cited America's war of independence as evidence that the Founding Fathers would have endorsed the invasion of Iraq and anti-war protesters claimed that it was the intention of the Founding Fathers for Americans to have the right to dissent. Celebrities (and in particular actors) were very visible in this media based conflict with the political left being slightly more dominant with this type of campaigning.[268] Ultimately it appeared that because people who we are accustomed to seeing acting (in other words, lying) were speaking as themselves their point of view was supposed to be imbued with a certain sense of authority or truth. In this sense the use of celebrities to promote a political idea is exactly the same as using celebrities to sell consumer products. However, the issue became more complicated as the issue of the war became inextricably associated with American patriotism with both sides of the dispute attempting to impose their own meta-narrative explanation on the issue. Unfortunately, it seemed to just strengthen the divide as both sides accused the other of being anti-American.

This episode was originally intended to be aired as the first episode of *South Park's* seventh series, which is why it has the production code 701 even though it actually aired as the fourth episode of the series. Parker and Stone were under quite a bit of pressure to come up with something sensational for their one-hundredth episode, and it appears that they spent a fairly unusual amount of time and effort on producing 'I'm a Little Bit Country'. There had been a lot of promotion on Comedy Central in anticipation of the new series as well as the one-hundredth episode. In addition to the promotional advertising the show's creators were going on late night talk shows such as *The Late Show with David Letterman*, promoting the upcoming series and in particular the one-hundredth episode.

One of the key paratextual elements emphasized in these interviews and the marketing campaign of this episode was the fact that it was co-written with Norman Lear, one of the most influential and well known people associated with American sitcoms; he also provided the voice of Benjamin Franklin. Although not such a familiar name outside of North America, Lear has been responsible for over twenty of the most memorable, internationally successful and long running American sitcoms including *All in the Family* (1971–1979), *Good Times* (1974–1979), *Diff'rent Strokes* (1978–1986), *One Day at a Time* (1975–1984), *The Facts of Life* (1979–1988), *Who's the Boss?* (1984–1992) and *Married... with Children* (1987–1997). Like *South Park*, Lear's sitcoms exhibit a marked interest in the social and political issues of the day. Furthermore, Lear's work has also been considered as

somewhat autobiographical just as *South Park* is generally considered to be at least partially autobiographical of Stone and Parker. Although it could easily be argued that as postmodern artists Parker and Stone draw upon narratives and experiences from their own lives in the same irreverent manner that they draw on popular culture, celebrity and current events, rather than attempting to 'represent themselves' in any specific sense. In addition to Lear's success as a TV producer and businessman, he is also an outspoken supporter of First Amendment rights and other issues concerning personal freedoms. In 2000 he founded the *Norman Lear Center* at the *USC Annenberg School for Communication*, a multidisciplinary research and public policy center dedicated to exploring the convergences of entertainment, commerce and society.

In 2001, Lear purchased a rare, original copy of the Declaration of Independence, for 8.1 million American dollars. Lear stated in a press release the following day that his intent was to tour the document around the United States so that the country could experience its "birth certificate" first-hand.[269] His interest in the founding of the United States of America also clearly resonates in this episode of *South Park*.

8.2 *South Park's* use of Children and Humour: intersections and insights

> Our world is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood.
> Phillipe Aries [270]

As has been mentioned previously, the diegesis of *South Park* is presented to the viewer from the perspective of the four nine-year old boys. This should not just be left as a passing observation as it is such a central aspect of the show and exposes some interesting intersections with the theories of humour outlined in chapter four. As the show is presented from the perspective of children the viewers are also afforded this children's view of the world. It is important to consider how this youth perspective intersects with *South Park's* humour. The children's view is, as Freud suggests very similar to the view offered by humour and its avoidance of adult rational criticism.[271] In this sense the very premise of the show can be considered humorous as the child's view avoids the 'rationality' of the adult world and in doing so exposes the seriousness, hierarchies and actions of the adults and authorities as pure folly. From this child-centric view, adults and authorities will always appear to be illogical and unfair as they are shown to be locked into mechanically rigid and repetitious behaviours. The children have not yet become subordinate to the social constraints imposed by a developed super-ego and are still driven by more base instincts fuelled by naively constructed arrangements of knowledge derived from school, parents and the media. However, *South Park's* child-centric humour not only targets parents, authorities and other adult institutions but also the institutions of childhood such as best-friends, play groups, make-believe role-playing games, fan clubs and the hierarchies and politics of the school play-ground.[272] Although the main target of child-centric humour such as *South Park* is the adult world, the social comment is directed at human civilisation itself, its conventional rules, wisdoms and logics.[273] The similarity here to

the theories put forward by Deleuze, Critchley and Freud in section 4.3 should be noted. All three emphasise a relationship between the super-ego and ego which differs markedly from the 'normal' relationship and allows 'a sense of emancipation, consolation and child-like elevation' which is the result of a more mature super-ego, 'a positive super-ego that liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous.'[274] All three stress the complexity of humour, and the fact that it affords a view in which the adult (serious) world is viewed through the eyes of a child but with the benefit of an adult perspective.[275] They also note that this complex dual perspective inherently challenges the authority of authority.

The ideas presented above provide some insight into Parker and Stone's use of children as main characters to expose the irrationality of the 'rational' the adult (serious) world. In further implicit agreement with these psychoanalytically informed ideas Parker and Stone have themselves said that they believe 'that all people are born bad and are made good by society, rather than the opposite', here, society can be considered as very much associated with the super-ego.[276] They continue, and elaborate on this idea:

> There's this whole thing out there about how kids are so innocent and pure. That's bullshit, man. Kids are malicious little fuckers. They totally jump on any bandwagon and rip on the weak guy at any chance. They say whatever bad word they can think of. They are total fucking bastards.[277]

In proposing that society imposes the structures which make children act in a socially acceptable and functional manner Parker and Stone are in layman's terms expressing an implicit agreement with Freud's wider

concepts of id, ego and superego as well as his concept of humour as expressed in his 1928 article on the subject [see section 4.3 for discussion of Freud's article].

8.3 Analysis

In a broad ideological sense this episode posits that it is necessary for right-wing and and left-wing politics to disagree about issues, especially in regard to percieved threats from other nations. This insight is central to the humour of this episode as it provides the resolution to the basic comic narrative which drives the episode, and therefore the general backdrop against which much of the rest of the humour is set. Among the complex web of individual jokes, humorous references, and wider comic narratives there are two important elements in this episode that deserve attention: Cartman's attempts to appropriate televisual conventions and experience a flashback, and the representations of the political factions and their demonstrated interdependence within the overall power relations of contemporary North American politics and society.

As well as being integral to the development of the plot, Cartman's attempts to appropriate televisual conventions in order to experience a flashback to 1776 provide a platform for an escalation of jokes, all of which generically parody the familiar conventions of television narrative flashbacks. His first attempt is set in the school classroom. After finding it impossible to engage with the assigned history book Cartman gazes off into the distance and says '1776 when our Founding Fathers created America I wonder what it used to

be like in those days, in those days, in those days, in those days.' When Kyle asks him what he is doing he replies:

> Cartman: I'm trying to have a flashback.
>
> Kenny: A what?
>
> Cartman: You know, if I have a flashback then I can see what 1776 was like firsthand.
>
> Stan: No! You just have to study.
>
> Cartman: No no no, I've seen this work before just gimme a second… Oh ok ok, how bout this. Say guys 1776 was so long ago I wonder what life would have been like back then, back then, back then…… [Pause: no result] oh wait wait I know I know. You know guys I don't even care about 1776 it was so long ago that I don't think it has anything to do with me, with me, anything to do with me, with me.

During his attempts Cartman also begins to incorporate mimicry of the visual signifiers of a narrative flashback by looking off into the distance and waving his arms around in imitation of the conventional special effect of a waving dissolve transition from the narrative proper to the flashback scene. He also uses an increasingly disinterested tone to his voice, distancing himself from the relevance of the past in order to provoke the flashback to 'teach him better' which is a common feature of flashback in comedy. Undeterred by his initial failure and convinced that he can recreate all of the elements needed to experience a flashback because he has seen it 'work before' (albeit on television), Cartman has the confidence to attempt a near-death-accident flashback experience, which is also a familiar television narrative convention. Here it is the excessive nature and (Bergsonian) mechanical rigidity of Cartman's attempts which provide the comic element of his otherwise foolhardy actions. There is also humour generated by the

failure of Cartman's (as a TV character) attempts to gain control of the televisual conventions which govern his televisual world.

Cartman's first attempt at a near death accident style flashback involves hoisting up a large boulder above a doorway and setting up a trip rope. Cartman then walks through the doorway causing the rock to fall on his head whilst saying "Oh gee I wonder what it used to be like in the year 1776." Finding this approach also unsuccessful and lacking a certain contemporary technological nuance, Cartman makes another and ultimately successful attempt at initiating a near-death flashback sequence. This time Kenny, Stan and Kyle find Cartman in his lounge hanging upside-down above a small pool, he explains himself in this short piece of dialogue:

1.4

> Cartman : I have programmed Tivo [a digital television recording device] to record over fifty hours of the history channel. When Tivo is full, both Tivo and I will be dropped into the water combining our electro-whatever fields and sending me into a flashback of history.

The attempt is successful and while his body is in the intensive care unit of the hospital his consciousness is experiencing a flashback to 1776 in which Cartman gets to be a firsthand witness to the events and also plays an active role in the foundation of the USA as a nation.

Ostensibly, Cartman's attempts at flashbacks are an example of postmodern pastiche as outlined by Jameson, as it appears that he merely appropriates familiar televisual conventions without any obvious critical distance from the source material. However, in the context of this episode the irony of an animated and obviously fictive cartoon character knowingly, purposefully, and unsuccessfully attempting to force a flashback situation does provide a certain level of critical distance as well as challenging traditional notions of the authority of history. It is this challenge to authority that we will now focus on. The authority of history books is lost on Cartman, he is more comfortable engaging with the past through the more familiar medium of television, or at least through his understanding of televisual conventions. This challenge to official history is complimented by the fact that Kenny, Stan and Kyle did not finish the assignment because of the absence of any material on the history of Iraq in their (official) history books and the abundance of information about American history, finding it far too much for a nine-year-old child to distil, comprehend, and re-articulate.

This is a very interesting point and one that deserves attention. History is an essential factor in the shaping of collective experiences in the present. It may appear banal to state, but the historical sources that provide the fundamental material upon which we frame the truths of social reality are generally interpreted using the serious voice of official discourse. Furthermore, official knowledge(s) circulate through society with a force and pervasiveness linked directly to its stature as official, rather than any specific qualities or essential truths contained in the knowledge itself.

History provides the material and ideological conditions from which the present emerges and in which it operates. The past shapes the values and judgements of individuals as well as societies and creates an anchor with which everyday events and identities are linked, interpreted and engaged with. The fact that Kenny, Stan and Kyle could not find any information concerning the history of Iraq in their history books coupled with the huge amounts of historical information concerning America is illustrative of the political nature of official histories as well as the singular and repressive nature of official (serious) discourse.

Even though *South Park* occupies an obviously artificial and fictive diegetic space, its creators go to great effort to ensure that the show references and remains relevant to the complexities and currencies of contemporary social life. In this sense *South Park* provides a critical intersection of images, phrases, knowledge(s) and identities culled from popular culture and the news media and re-articulates them as a carnivalesque hybrid of popular and official narratives. *South Park* dislodges current events, celebrities, politics, politicians and other media engendered meta-narratives from their original contexts and re-territorialises them in the dislocated animated diegesis of the show. This fictive space, which is assembled around the world-view of nine-year-old boys, is a combination of popular culture, playground politics, references to bodily functions and images from the media, all the while conveying very pointed and barbed observations of 'real world' events. *South Park's* distinctly oppositional view of official knowledge(s), officialdom in general, and the popular media can also, in the context of this

particular episode, be considered as an attempt to annotate and enhance the collective experience of the present. As mentioned in previous sections, *South Park's* rapid production process allows it to enter into the paratext of the serious issues which it parodies. Cartman's engagement with American political history via flashback proves to be far more successful that Stan and Kyle's attempts using official history books. Cartman gains an understanding of the past that is entirely relevant to his contemporary situation and his insight then becomes the viewers' insight into the situation in contemporary America. This insight relies on Cartman's ambivalent position as an animated character who, although he appears to be unaware that he is a television character is consciously attempting to force an experience which could only occur within a televisual/diegetic environment.

The interrogation of official knowledge within the artificial, playfully intertextual and officially marginal framework of an animated television sitcom is simultaneously, a pastiche of official and unofficial historical sources, a parody of the preferential cultural value placed on official histories (as typified by printed book form), and a carnivalesque celebration of heteroglossia and popular culture as compared to the singularity, serious rigidity and monoglossia of official culture. It is important to note that in today's world television has surpassed print media in regard to influence in the interactions of social, political and economic life. In other words the 'balance of power between words and images which after the invention of the printing press, shifted in favour of the word, seems now', with the prevalence of audio-visual technologies such as television 'to be shifting

back in favour of the image.'[278] There will always be debate over the exact level of influence that television exerts over popular opinion, but it is undeniable that much of what we know of the world is informed by our television viewing. Even so, in a manner similar to the western tradition of privileging speech over writing as identified by Jacques Derrida, in contemporary society print is in general considered a more privileged and official form than television, which carries connotations of frivolity as a medium of trivia, sex, violence, bad language and the corruption of youth.

This episode of *South Park* seeks to problematise and displace official sources of information (and in particular, historical truths) in order to destabilise the perceived timelessness of authority and normality of contemporary power structures. In this sense this episode is an excellent example of Mary Douglas's observations of humour in the way that it makes visible the hidden 'joke' contained in the official view of the American political system and its mythological story of origin. In this case the 'joke' is the internal contradiction that grounds the American constitution. Cartman's flashback, as an unofficial historical narrative gives him access to unofficial information through its use of unofficial language, as demonstrated in this section of dialogue from Cartman's flashback:

Congressman 1	Yes, yes of course. We go to war and protest going to war at the same time.
Congressman 2	Right, if the people of our new country are allowed to do whatever they wish then some will support the war and some will protest it.

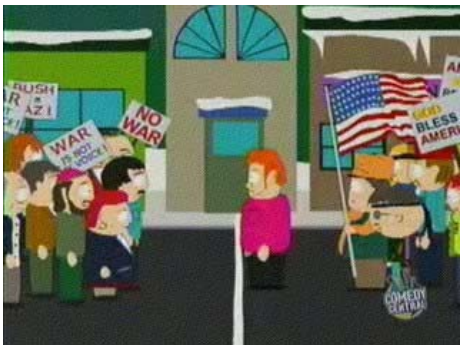
Benjamin Franklin	And that means that as a nation, we can go to war with whomever we wish, but at the same time act like we didn't want to. If we allow the people to protest what the government does then the country will be forever blameless.
Congressman 3	It's like having your cake and eating it too.
Congressman 4	Think of it, an entire nation founded on saying one thing and doing another.
John Hancock	And we shall call that country America.

Back in South Park, Cartman returns from his flashback and still dressed in a hospital gown, gives his report to the battling townsfolk. Ironically and uncritically Cartman is accorded the status of an authority based on his flashback, which gives him comparative proximity to the original site of power/knowledge, in this case, the Continental Congress in 1776.[279] Cartman's disclosure to the townsfolk resolves the conflict by revealing that the Founding Fathers would not have wanted either side of the issue to have complete dominance as it was the ensured continuance of ideological dialogue and debate that assured the success of America as a nation-state. The need for fluidity and political dialogue which lies at the heart of the episodes humour is very much the same as the fluidity Bergson suggests to be crucial for the development of society and the progress of humankind.

In fact Bergson's ideas offer some interesting insights into the humour of parts of this episode. Bergson's view suggests that the audience would laugh at Cartman's multiple attempts to have a flashback, as it shows a repetitive and mechanical rigidity. Furthermore, his successful attempt involved his cyborg-like amalgamation with the Tivo device, a very clear

example of the mechanical encrusted on the human.[280] Also, as mentioned above, the comic narrative which drives the episode is resolved by the two political factions accepting the presence, difference and necessity of the other, a very Bergsonian and postmodern concept. During the episode the audience is constantly directed towards laughing at the rigidity of both sides of the dispute (left-wing supporters are typified as liberal, anti-war rock music fans and right-wing supporters are represented as redneck, pro-war country music fans) and narrative resolution occurs with the consensual recognition that a successful society needs a certain degree of fluidity and adaptability between the two sides rather than segregation and confinement. The humour of this recognition arises from the incongruity of peace being achieved (equilibrium restored) through continued conflict rather than a single side winning dominance.

In this episode the division of the political spectrum is drawn across many lines, however, the pointed statement concerns the division of opinion concerning the United States of America's invasion of Iraq. Although there are many points in the episode that the two sides are shown to come into direct contact with each other, there are two main occurrences that articulate the divide in very clear terms. The first involves a violent brawl between both sides that is temporarily resolved by mutually agreed segregation and separation maintained by the painting of a line down the middle of the town. The second occurs in a song contest in front of the townspeople, near the end of the episode.



1.5

After the initial violent clash between groups the townspeople decide to stop the violence by dividing the town between the two factions with a painted line in the middle [see image 1.5]. The following section of dialogue in which the absurdity of segregating in such a manner is exposed, is very telling indeed, and clearly demonstrates the relationship between authority, discourse, and society:

Pro-war Character 1	There all finished. From now on this is the pro-war side of town and that is the unpatriotic side.
Pro-war Crowd	Rabble rabble rabble.
Anti-war Character 1	How about we call this the rational side of town, and that, the redneck side.
Anti-war Crowd	Hahahaha.
Pro-war Character 2	You just keep all your flag burning and your hippy rock protest songs on you side of the town.
Anti-war character 2	Hey wait a minute, your side of town has the post office…
Pro-war Character 3	Well your side has the grocery store.
Pro-war Character 2	Well you can come to our side of town to use to the post office, and we can go to your side to use the grocery store.

Anti-war
Character 3 Uhh. Can we cross the line to take our kids to school?

Pro-war
Character 2 Well naturally you can cross the line for that, just like we can cross the line for hardware supplies, gas and pharmaceutical needs.

Both Crowds Yeah ok uh-huh alright.

Pro-war
Character 1 Hey everybody this is never gona work, don't you see. All of this dividing up the town its just ridiculous. What we really should be doing is just beating the hell out of each other like we were.

Anti-war
Character 1 He's right. Boy do I feel like a fool.

[Fighting resumes]

Although it is very interesting that the townspeople found the binary division of the town to be incompatible with the complexities of social existence and resort back to conflict, we will first address the verbal interaction. In the first half of this section of dialogue the political nature of naming (which here should be considered synonymous with legitimising discourse as official) is well demonstrated by both sides of the political spectrum attempting to name the other as an inferior-Other. In this situation both sides are creating a laughable and inferior-Other in order to both cohere their own sense of group identity and to establish a social hierarchy in which their group is superior and therefore right. This kind of in-group/out-group humour is very much the type of humour described by superiority theories, as the aim of the humour is to denigrate [see section 4.1]. However, as no side is strong enough to defeat the other in battle the interaction instead draws attention to the process of naming and the process of legitimising

official truths, the discursive underpinnings of social groups and their consensual views, and in a wider sense the social and discursive nature of reality itself. In this episode it is the absence of a definitive ruling authority that allows the situation (and the humour) to arise, and it is the continued absence of a sufficient authority which allows it to escalate into an animated bloodbath.

Within this particular episode the absence of a ruling authority to legitimise either side of the dispute is both mockery of the stereotypical impotence of local government and an important element of the story, crucial to the humour and allowing the narrative to unfold. Faced with having to make a decision which would immediately alienate the Mayor of South Park to a large proportion of voters, she avoids providing an authorial decision at all. Instead, the children's assignment on 1776 is intended to be read to the town as a means of providing a historically (and patriotically) informed authorial decision as to which side was to be legitimised. When they are unable to finish the report because of the lack of information concerning Iraq and too much information concerning the history of America in their reference books, the town is again denied an official decision on who is "right" and again plunges into violent confrontation. Ultimately Cartman provides the authorial information that the town craves after coming back from his flashback to 1776. However, in an ironic twist the information which clarifies the situation and stops the fighting is the Founding Father's decision to create a society which essentially derives its success from the coexistence and potential fluidity of the perennial clash of ideologies from

the political left and right. This positioning introduces elements of the carnivalesque, in the sense of recognising the validity and presence of multiple voices, or discourses (political left, political right, official and unofficial), which quickly escalates into a full on carnivalesque celebration, complete with fireworks, variety show style rising stage and unified singing reminiscent of Jim Hensen's *The Muppet Show.*

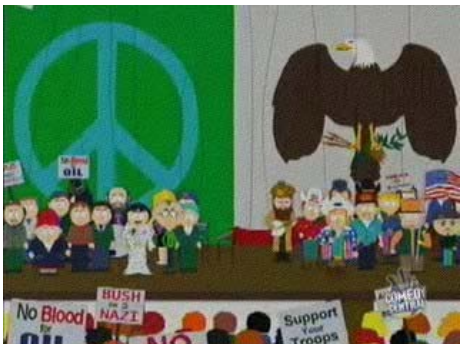
The characters also start to directly address the television audience, thanking them for their support over *South Park's* one hundred episodes. Direct address even when from an animated character, collapses the distance between the creators, the text, and the audience, and also has the effect of drawing attention to the texts construction:

> Direct address to camera (in the form of a look and/or comment) and references to the fiction are just two of the most obvious – and obviously transgressive – devices used very frequently in comedies to draw attention to their artifice, to highlight the rules by which it is governed and to raise a laugh.[281]

In this quote Neal and Krutnik tie together insights from traditional humour theory with notions of self-reflexivity as developed in literary theory, and propose that the transgression of established codes and conventions is in fact a televisual comic technique designed to amuse the audience. The collapsing of distance and freedom of social contact is also one of the fundamental characteristics of the carnival as described by Bakhtin.

Another point of interest in regard to the carnivalesque is the singing in unison that occurs after Cartman has resolved the situation in comparison to

the line-by-line, segregated singing from earlier in the episode. The first bout of singing occurs in the context of a public rally in which pro-war people and anti-war people are performing to the townsfolk in order to sway enough public opinion to produce a definitive winner. The comedic and stereotypical characteristic of the political left and right are explored well in this section of the episode. Pro-war people are characterised as being from the lower end of the socio-economic scale, country music fans, poorly educated and Republican, and anti-war people are represented as Democrats, "politically correct", well educated, rock music fans. In fact most of the emphasis shifts from the War issue itself, to a battle of left and right played out as a song contest between anti-war rock songs and pro-war country songs - two very visible and marketable sub-genres of music since America began its 'War on Terror'. The mutually exclusive, competitive and conflicting nature of these two particular political discourses is clearly articulated visually [see image 1.6] and in the lyrics of a song in which each faction sings a line, which is countered and rebutted by their opponent. This division of lyric serves to further enhance the already established differences between the two groups, firmly establishing the divide and therefore establishing the context for the narrative resolution and carnivalesque acceptance of each other, and celebration of heteroglossia at the conclusion of the episode:



1.6

Pro-war

singer	I'm a little bit country.
Anti-war singer	Well I'm a little bit rock-n-roll.
Pro-war singer	I'm a little for supporting our troops.
Anti-war singer	And I'm a little for bringing them home.
Pro-war singer	I believe freedom isn't free.
Anti-war singer	No but war shouldn't be our goal.
Pro-war singer	We must defend our country.
Anti-war singer	If it means war then we say no.
Pro-war singer	Did you forget them towers in New York. Did you forget how it made you feel, to see them towers come down were you like me, did you think that it weren't real.
Anti-war singer	I wanna rock but I don't wanna rock Iraq. The only kind of rocking America should do is the kind that we can all dance to.
Pro-war singer	We've got GPS, ICBM's and good old fashioned lead. We're gona show Saddam what America means, that son of a bitch will be dead.
Anti-war singer	Why are we fighting this war there's a man in the office we didn't vote for. He didn't give us a choice war is not my voice.

After the children fail to produce their report to present to the town the two sides again resort back to a bloody physical battle which only stops when Cartman delivers his speech and provides the authorial information that the

town craves. After accepting that America is founded on principles which require the presence, dialogue and conflict between left and right wing politics the singing resumes, this time in heteroglossic unison.

Cartman	The Founding Fathers want you to know that we can disagree all we want as long as we agree that America kicks ass.
Pro-war singer	Hey, I'm a little bit country.
Anti-war singer	And I'm a little bit rock and roll.
Pro-war singer	I'll be the muscle of America.
Anti-war singer	And me I'll be the caring soul.
Both	When you put us together you get a country with one goal to thrive and prosper with a little country and rock and roll.
Anti-war singer	Come on up here everybody!
	[all of the townspeople go onto the stage]
Everybody	We're a little bit country we're a little bit rock and roll.
Pro-war singer	We can be nation that believes in war.
Anti-war singer	And still tells the world that we don't.
Everybody	Let the flag for hypocrisy fly high from every pole coz we're a little bit country and we're a little bit rock and roll.

At both crucial points in the episode when the stability of their binary political world views become challenged, the two sides decide to go back to a state of chaos. In the first instance the fighting resumes when the

townspeople become aware of the instability of the hermetic binary division of their social world using the physical demarcation of a painted line in the middle of the town. The second occurs when all of the townspeople (both sides of the dispute) gather together to get an official decision on which side of the dispute was correct, but do not receive it. The narrative is resolved with the ideological suggestion that the greatest common good is achieved by a happy acceptance of diversity and debate rather than a struggle for individual supremacy, or singularity. In this final scene it is the introduction of an explicitly carnivalesque atmosphere which allows difference to be accepted and this becomes the new basis of a happy and functional society.

In a further act of carnivalesque narrative transgression the townsfolk (excluding Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman) start to celebrate the fact that it is *South Park's* 100th episode and directly address the television audience.

Anti-war singer	Well goodnight everybody it sure has been great bringing you one-hundred episodes.
Pro-war singer	We want to thank our guests the pro-war people, [crowd applauds] and the anti-war people [crowd applauds].
Stan	[Watching from a distance with Kyle and Kenny] What the hell are they doing now?
Kyle	[Holding the bridge of his nose and wincing with a pained expression] I don't know.
Everybody	For the war. Against the war. WHO CARES! One-hundred episodes.
Kyle	I hate this town. I really really do.

This final and complete disregard of the topic which drove the episodes narrative is another attack on the idea of authority in the way that it attacks the unity of the text by breaking with the expected mode of address. The absurdity of the entire town fitting onto the stage at one time is very much emblematic of the eradication of distance between people that Bakhtin suggests to be at the very core of the carnival experience. The direct address of the audience also reduces some of the perceived distance between the shows creators and the audience as they are speaking directly through the characters rather than indirectly through the dialogue of the shows narrative. The scene also visually maintains the theme of heteroglossia and the carnivalesque with all of the townspeople participating in synchronised dancing and singing within the bounded space of the stage. This carnivalesque narrative resolution also very much fits in with literary theorist Northrop Frye's description of comic narratives sharing the theme of an internal drive towards representing the integration of society for a happy ending.[282] In this episode it is integration in its precise sense, rather than a homogenisation, as the narrative is resolved by accepting the integration rather than the assimilation, or segregation of the two politicised factions.

At this stage it may be useful to discuss the division of the townspeople as this is an important intersection point with the wider socio-political comment that Parker and Stone are making. The pro-war group [see image 1.7] is comprised of characters which the previous ninety-nine episodes have established as parochial, patriotic and for the most part uneducated. In

1.7

keeping with their comedic functions as secondary characters they remain for the most part fairly one-dimensional and stereotypical representations of familiar character types. The most familiar are Stan's Uncle Jimbo and his sidekick Ned, both are Vietnam veterans and well known for drinking, gambling and over-enthusiastically hunting anything that moves, the more endangered the better. Another fairly well known degenerate pro-war character is Kenny's dad; an unemployed alcoholic. Other characters which have had cameo appearances are the owner/bartender of the local redneck public bar, Hat a quiet pasty looking infanticidal psychopath, and Skeeter the farmer.

The anti-war group is comprised of Stan's parents: Randy Marsh and Sharon

1.8

Marsh, a government employed geologist and a housewife; Kyle's parents, Gerald Broflovski a courtroom lawyer and Sheila Broflovski, who in *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* worked as Secretary of Offence for Bill Clinton; Principle Victoria; and Mr Mackay the school counsellor. As the paragraphs above show, anti-war protestors are generally represented as typically well educated political Democrats and pro-war supporters are represented as poorly educated and unemployed but

fiercely patriotic, especially if it involves shooting something. This form of excessive stereotyping has been suggested in earlier sections [sections 3.7 and 4.1] to be a useful strategy for increasing the potential for the humour to be accepted as funny because the sheer excessiveness of the representation combined with the crude appearance of the animation reinforces notions of fiction even if based on actuality.[283]

Cartman's flashback experiences and the townspeople's conflict over the war are the two widest comic narratives (jokes) whose eventual bissociation in Cartman's speech to the townsfolk provides the episodes narrative resolution, or the punch-line to the joke which has driven the entire episode. This joke in which the events in *South Park* refer to events in contemporary America is resolved by exposing the joke which underpins the entire situation. As arriving at this punch-line/realisation is essentially the driving impetus behind the episodes narrative, the individual jokes and other humorous occurrences are arranged in order to achieve the humorous narrative resolution.

The ending of this episode is somewhat different to most other *South Park* endings. Usually episodes finish with either Stan or Kyle delivering 'the moral of the story' in an ironically performed set piece in which they step forward and say 'You know, I have learned something today…'. These set pieces are parodic references to one of the most well known conventions of American sitcoms, and in their ironically rearticulated and *performed* form have also become a familiar convention of *South Park*. This episode

however, has Cartman delivering the 'moral of the story' speech which saves the day, when it is more usual for Cartman to be the cause of South Park's problems rather than providing a solution. Stan and Kyle both seem somewhat perplexed by this and by the actions of the adults, who after hearing Cartman speak had begin singing and dancing together as well as directly addressing the television audience. In fact there is a lot of humour in *South Park* which is generated from the characters ambivalent knowledge of themselves as television/animated characters. This has a long tradition in animated comedies and many early cartoons (such as Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny) have been shown engaging in arguments with their animators, often with the animator's pencil entering the frame and erasing/replacing elements from the shot. *South Park* though, can be much more subtle and complex in the way that this technique is utilised as the creators can rely on the audience being familiar with its history and development.

It is now necessary to turn our attention to addressing some of the individual occurrences of humour within the wider comic situations. In some instances these are entirely verbal, others visual, others from an interplay between the two, and still others from an inversion, diversion or digression of narrative expectation. It must be noted however that *South Park* rarely uses jokes or gags, so isolating instances of humour is in fact quite problematic.

The episode opens with the fourth grade teacher Mr Garrison and his submissive sex slave teacher assistant Mr Slave giving the children the option of having a maths test or attending an anti-war protest. There are two

instances of humour in this opening scene, first of all the presence of Mr Slave and second of all Mr Garrison's proposition to the children. The presence of Mr Slave is humorous because of the incongruity of his presence in the classroom setting, as well as bissociating with a certain lament for the corporal punishment which Mr Garrison cannot administer to the kids. However, humorous by formal definition or not, in order for Mr Slave's presence to be perceived as funny the audience must accept it, and it is not hard to envision what lobby groups such as The Moral Majority would have to say about the presence of a homosexual sex-slave dressed in bondage apparel reading a pornographic magazine depicting naked men, in a class full of nine-year old children.

1.9

The next scene begins with a brief instance of self-referential historical quotation by using a shot that was used in the very first episode of *South Park*, showing the kids dancing their way out of the school grounds singing "We got out of school. No more school today." This is essentially the punch-line to the set up offered by Mr Garrison's proposal of staying in class for a maths test or going to protest against the invasion of Iraq, as well as an example of postmodern nostalgia, though only avid *South Park* fans would get the reference. Once outside Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman are shown to come to an abrupt halt and stare utterly bewildered at the sight in

front of them; an angry mob of (adult) anti-war protesters marching around mechanically chanting “No war No war”, burning American flags and committing smash and grab crimes (a humorous comment on mob-mentality). The school counsellor then approaches the boys and says “Here boys these will help you protest”, giving them protest signs with protest slogans pre-painted on them (which they without hesitation accept in the same manner that they would any other school-handout) and before returning to protesting he congratulates them and says “it’s good to see you care about peace boys.” A reporter then approaches the boys and asks them why they are protesting the war:

1.10

TV reporter	…Can you tell me why you kids marched out of school today?
Stan	Uh. [hesitantly and unsure] War?
TV reporter	Right. What about the war?
Kyle	It…. Its gay? [very unsure sounding]
TV reporter	Uh huh and what aspect of it do you think is most gay.
Kyle	Uh… [completely at a loss as to what to say he looks around and reads the slogan on the sign he was just given and thinking that this must be what the reporter expects repeats it] No blood for oil.
Stan	Yeah, war is not my…[pause] *voice*. [with voice articulated in a notably different voice].
Cartman	Bush is a Nayzee [a mispronunciation of Nazi]

They are then asked what they think the Founding Fathers of America would have to say about the invasion of Iraq, to which Cartman replies "the foggy who?" This scene is quite subtle in regard to humour and its function in the narrative is to establish the children's position as not so much concerned with the issue of the war itself as with having to deal with the irrationality of the adults who are so violently divided. This division of rational children and irrational adults is reinforced by the fact that it took the sage words of nine-year old Cartman to subdue the unruly adult masses. The importance of this child-centric view of the world to *South Park's* humour has already been addressed [see section 8.2] as it is such an integral part of their social critique and humour. It may also be pertinent to note that Stan and Kyle (ostensibly representing Parker and Stone), remain apart from the townspeople when they come together at the end of the show. They observe and comment amongst themselves but do not participate in the adult-centric action. In fact they have to remain outside of the collective experience in order for the viewers to maintain the humorous children's view and avoid the adult point of view and its rational criticism.

The intertextual referencing in this episode is far less dense than most. The primary reference is to the mythological origin story of America's independence. The title of the episode and the song from the end of the episode is a parody of a song from the Donny and Marie Osmond variety show from the 1970's. There are also minor references to *Dawsons Creek* and *Independence Day,* but these are quite obvious examples of pastiche as they are clearly references for the sake of referencing 'speech in a dead

language' and they are not included to develop plot or character in any significant sense, though they are still funny. When Cartman calls the Declaration of Independence, the Declaration of Independence Day, it is funny and admittedly also demonstrates his ignorance of the subject, but this has already been established in the very early scenes of the episode so the reference does little to elaborate and is therefore redundant.

9.0 Concluding Remarks

South Park's carnivalesque humour constitutes a complex critique on a society in which television is a primary instrument of communication, a centre-piece to many peoples lives, and a barometer of contemporary culture while at the same time drawing attention to the fact that the very medium they satirise is used to perform this critique.[284] Humour in general references the human struggles of living in the world, or as Heidegger describes it 'human "thrownness" in the world.'[285] Therefore if you accept that we are living in the postmodern world, you must also accept that our humour, as well as our art and thought in general, would reflect the conditions of being thrown into postmodernity and the fears, fixations, frameworks and technologies which underpin our postmodern existence. In this sense postmodern humour demonstrates a continuance rather than a break with humours of the past, as it still reflects the material conditions of the culture in which it emerges, is appreciated and circulates. The infiltration of the economic into the cultural which characterises postmodernity has added an economic element to what has historically been a socio-cultural phenomenon. Technological advances have also changed our relationship to humour as well as enabling new forms of humour to emerge (such as forwarded emails, txt wit, etcetera) in response to new systems of communication and engagement. Humour is now more than just an agreeable basis for social interaction and communication, it is a commodity, a pervasive force in the media and an effective strategy for consumer targeting and the mass manipulation of public opinion. Humour shapes consumer habits and is a highly prized commodity in the competitive

mass-media marketplace [see section 3.9]. As culture has become commodified people have begun to consume in order to create and possess an identity. Nevertheless, humour is still officially marginalised as a frivolous activity, this can be verified by the marked difference between the cultural credibility assigned to *South Park* as compared to the works of Mozart.

This thesis has traced the shift of the carnival impulse, from the officially sanctioned and anarchic public celebration of otherness, bodily functions, and inversion of medieval hierarchies, through the policing of the body and marginalisation of humour initiated by the socio-political, technological and epistemological changes of the Enlightenment period, to the produced-for-mass-consumption in a competitive marketplace humour of *South Park*. However, it has also been demonstrated that although *South Park* embodies the essential oppositional spirit of the carnival, it has also been shown to lack the fundamentally social nature of the carnival, and therefore lacks its socially disruptive and politically resistant potency.

Essentially this thesis argues that the nature of society has changed and through technologies such as television, video/DVD, and the internet, we can now access humour at practically any *time* we wish, however, this temporal freedom is contrasted by the extreme and pervasive, though well masked, spatial constraints inherent in these communication/media technologies. Rather than having specific officially sanctioned times and places for carnivalesque social gatherings, individuals have been given the

‘liberty’ of free (private) access to the irreverent humour of the carnival, but they are not allowed the freedom of expression and social contact that the carnival used to afford.

Further to this, the fact that postmodern humour such as *South Park* with its explicit derision of authorities, institutions, and notions of social acceptability, is allowed to circulate through mainstream media at all implies a certain degree of official acceptance and suggests a form of asymmetric conservative action on the part of officialdom, or as Baudrillard describes it ‘deterrence, the baleful form which presides over the nullity of our age.’[286] From Baudrillard’s perspective allowing humour to circulate is of an official act of deterrence. He writes, ‘deterrence is a very peculiar form of [official] action: it is what causes something to not take place.’[287] Therefore, if we accept that postmodern humour such as *South Park*, provides its audience with a vicarious experience of subverting social norms and authorities [as suggested in section 3.9] and that the mere presence of *South Park* on broadcast television implies a certain level of official acceptance, then it would appear that the act of allowing *South Park’s* humour to circulate through the mass media is very much an act of deterrence as described by Baudrillard. In the highly mediated societies of postmodernity, allowing the masses to laugh at authority acts as a deterrent to them acting against authority in actuality.

In conclusion postmodern humour, as a combination term which links two of the most notoriously slippery words in the English language, has the

freedom to exist in many guises. This thesis has examined just one, *South Park*, but there are many other films, television programmes, websites, books, magazines and comedians which could be described and discussed as postmodern humour. In this sense, this thesis is intended as a Lyotardian little-narrative in its own right, posited against the traditional grand-theories of humour which attempt to account for humour in its totality. In the final sentence of *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard recommended waging war against totality, this thesis suggests that one of the most effective weapons we can take into this war is humour. The revolutionary potential of humour may have been negated through its imbrication into contemporary power structures, but the personal sense of liberation that we experience through laughter remains intact, and as long as humour exists, its potential to rise again as a truly revolutionary force also remains: *Vive l'humour*!

10.0 Endnotes

[1] Lonnie Harris, *Is South Park Right?* http://flakmag.com/tv/southpark.html accessed 02.02.06

[2] Trey Parker, co-creator of *South Park*, accessed online http://www.movieweb/news/news.php?id=5406 accessed 25.05.06

[3] see Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, (eds.) *A Cultural History of Humour*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1997)

[4] Rick Frieson CEO of New Zealand television channel C4 in interview on *Campbell Live*, TV3, 22/02/06

[5] James Poniewozik '10 Questions for Matt Stone and Trey Parker', in *Time* March 13 2006. accessed online http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1169882,00.html accessed 04.04.06

[6] In the Season 4 DVD audio commentary, Parker and Stone remark that beginning with episode 408, 'Chef Goes Nanners', (first aired 05/07/00) they deliberately began to make episodes centering on a single issue, rather than using multiple sub-plots as they had been.

[7] www.southparkstudios.com/behind/how.php?tab=20&sid=sid=67cc9d9e980eee8a83fa0d10c0bc22ed accessed 06.07.05

[8] **TV-MA:** Mature Audience Only.
This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain mature themes, profane language, graphic violence and explicit sexual content. It may contain graphic violence. http://www.ridgenet.org/wrhs/about/rating.htm accessed 01.02.06

[9] http://www.the-trades.com/column.php?columnid=474 accessed 18.06.06

[10] http://tv.tribune.com/showfinder/search/1,1001,southpark,00.html accessed 04.01.06

[11] Although in a two-part episode; 'Cartman's Mom is a Dirty Slut', (episode 113, first aired 25/02/98), and 'Cartman's Mom is still a Dirty Slut' (episode 202, first aired 22/04/98) it is revealed that Cartman's mother is actually his father because she is a hermaphrodite.

[12] *Team America*: *World Police*, Trey Parker, Paramount Pictures, 2004, 94 mins.

[13] www.southparkstudios.com/behind/production.php?tab=20&sid=sid=67cc9d9e980eee8a83fa0d10c0bc22ed accessed 13.05.06

[14] *Time* 13 March 2006 accessed online http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1169882,00.html accessed 04.04.06

[15] In this sense I am referring to these celebrities as texts, as it is the media representations of these people that *South Park* mocks.

[16] John Alberti (ed.), *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* (U.S.A.: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p. xii

[17] Valerie Chow, 'Homer Erectus: Homer Simpson as Everyman… and Every Woman in Alberti (ed.), p. 109

[18] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.188

[19] Richard Ellis, 'The sick disaster joke as carnivalesque postmodern narrative impulse in Paton, G., Powell, C., and Waggs, S., (eds.) *The Social Faces of Humour: practices and issues* (England: Ashgate Publishing, 1996) p. 229

[20] Chow, p.113

[21] Jason Rutter, 'Stepping into Wayne's World: Exploring postmodern comedy' in Paton, Powell and Waggs (eds.), p.297

[22] Dick Hebdidge, *Hiding in the Light*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p.181-182

[23] Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, cited in Franz Mehring, *On Historical Materialism*, (London: New Park Publications, 1975), p. 7

[24] Michel Foucault, cited in G., Raulet, 'Structuralism and Poststructuralism: an interview with Michel Foucault', in *Telos*, 1983, 53, p. 205 as cited in M. Peters, W. Hope, J. Marshall, S. Webster (eds.), *Critical Theory, Poststructuralism and the Social Context*, (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1996), p. 53

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[26] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 79

[27] Terrance Lindvall, and J. Melton, 'Towards a post-modern animated discourse: Bakhtin, intertextuality and the cartoon carnival', in Jayne Pilling (ed.), *A Reader in Animation Studies*, (Sydney: John Libbey & Co., 1997), p. 203

[28] Richard Appiginanesi, Ziauddin Sardar, and Patrick Curry, *Introducing Postmodernism*, (Royston: Icon Books, 2004), p. 115

[29] Thomas Carmichael and Alison Lee (eds.), *Postmodern Times: A critical guide to the contemporary*, (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), p.3

[30] Frederick Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p. 68

[31] Jameson, p. 68

[32] Jameson, p. 68

[33] Giambattista Vico, in S. Bonnycastle, *In Search of Authority: An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory*, (Ontario: Broadview Press, 1996), p. 131

[34] Bonnycastle, p. 131

[35] Richard Rorty, 'Ironists and Metaphysicians', in Walter Truett-Anderson (ed.), *The Fontana post-modernism reader*, (London: Fontana Press, 1996), p. 97

[36] Rorty, p. 96

[37] Pat Brereton, *The Continuum Guide to Media Education*, (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 136

[38] Jameson, p. 48

[39] John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: an introduction*, (Great Britain: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 152

[40] Storey, p. 161

[41] Lyotard, (1984), p. 79

[42] Steiner Kvale, 'Themes of Postmodernity', in Truett-Anderson (ed.), p. 19

[43] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 112

[44] Bauman, pp. 112-113

[45] Kvale, p. 19

[46] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusion of Postmodernism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. vii

[47] Lyotard, p. 79

[48] Sarup, p. 132

[49] Martin Heidegger, in Tony Sutton, Humour as a Catalyst for Religious Experience http://sof.wellington.net.nz/humoursutton.htm accessed 06.09.04

[50] Paul Valery, cited in Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, (Routledge, London, 2002), p. 67

[51] Anthony Chapman and Hugh Foote (eds.), *It's a Funny Thing Humour* (England: Pergamon Press, 1977), p. xiii

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[64] *Dictionaire de l'Academie Française*, (Hachette: Paris, 1935) p.29 in Critchley, p. 72

[65] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: a study of the play element in culture*, (Great

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[66] Murray Davis, *What's so Funny? The comic conception of culture and society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 34-35

[67] *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*, p. 690

[68] Koestler, p. 130

[69] This distinction is used well by Michael Mulkay in his book *On Humour: its nature and its place in modern society*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988)

[70] Koestler, p. 130

[71] Koestler, p. 113

[72] Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 84

[73] Lyotard, p. xxiv

[74] Lyotard describes a shared term of this nature as a *differend*, which is essentially a term which he coined to refer to words/phrases whose definition, or use, is disputed. Jean-Francios Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)

[75] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (Great Britain: Athlone Press, 1990), p. 155-59

[76] Admittedly the writings of poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida are often self-consciously bissociative. A good example is his term différrance, which simultaneously refers to the fact that meaning is both differed and deferred. Metaphor is also a bissociative form.

[77] The fact that speed is an essential factor of humour can easily be verified by the near universal un-funniness of joke explanations.

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[83] William Hazlitt, in Davis, p.12

[84] Christopher Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*, (London: Academic Press, 1979), p. 22

[85] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, (Great Britain: Book Club Associates, 1984), p. 132

[86] Eco, p. 448

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[254] I say *almost* unflinching because in one episode the characters Stan and Kyle (commonly known as the alter-ego's of Parker and Stone respectively) keep on attempting to distance themselves from the topic and action, leaving the storyline to be largely centred on characters which are usually secondary.

[255] Ellis, p. 219

[256] Ellis, p. 225

[257] Ellis, p. 219

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[261] Allen, pp. 103-104

[262] Rutter, p. 306

[263] Rutter, pp. 306-307

[264] In this sense *South Park* can be seen as a technologically advanced continuance of the perennially oppositional art-form of political cartooning and the tradition of humour as an ostensibly acceptable avenue for expressing dissent and questioning authority, which can be traced right back to humanity's most ancients myths and their stories of Trickster gods. It is unfortunate that space restriction has meant that this particular aspect of the origin of oppositional humour could not be dealt with in any significant detail.

[265] This was particularly evident in the 1999 *South Park* feature film *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* in which the narrative is centred on the (over)-reaction of South Park's parents to the scatological profanities that the children learned from watching an animated cartoon film. This was a clear parody of the public reaction that Parker and Stone received for their television show and foresaw for after the release of their film.

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[269] www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2002/08/09/News/Rare-Copy.Of.Declaration.Of.Independence.To.Be.Displayed.At.Am-500771.shtml accessed 06.06.06

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[287] Baudrillard, p. 17

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All episodes directed by Trey Parker

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Episode 103, ‘Volcano’, first aired 27/08/97

Episode 113, ‘Cartman’s Mom is a Dirty Slut’, first aired 25/02/98

Episode 202, ‘Cartman’s Mom is still a Dirty Slut’, first aired 22/04/98

Episode 302, ‘Spontaneous Combustion’, first aired 14/04/99

Episode 310, ‘Chinpokemon’, first aired 03/11/99

Episode 407, ‘Cherokee Hair Tampons’, first aired 28/06/00

Episode 408, ‘Chef Goes Nanners’, first aired 05/07/00

Episode 413, ‘Trapper Keeper’, first aired 15/11/00

Episode 502, ‘It Hits the Fan’, first aired 20/06/01

Episode 504, ‘Super Best Friends’, first aired 04/07/01

Episode 702, ‘Krazy Kripples’, first aired 26/03/03

Episode 715, ‘It’s Christmas in Canada’, first aired 17/12/03

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