

South Park: A Public Service Announcement by William Ackleson

In a nation that prides itself on valuing free speech, a large number of U.S. citizens would have a quick response if I were to ask them what the most offensive and off-the-wall television show is today. The majority of the respondents would, after a second's pause, with a knowing smile on their face, say Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park*. This seemingly tasteless show is synonymous with vulgar humor for most people. Parents cringe at the sexual depictions and children praise the generous helping of foul language, but underneath all of this cheap humor and offensive behavior, Parker and Stone convey a much more meaningful message. Each *South Park* episode leads viewers through a series of outrageous circumstances that culminate in an interesting and oftentimes profound conclusion. Whether Parker and Stone simply give Al Gore a little shove off of his high horse or make a bold statement about an important social issue such as whether or not we as humans should play God, they inevitably have something of consequence to say regarding a current social issue; and millions of viewers tune in every week to find out what it is. It is because of this that Stone and Parker hold influence over the beliefs of people all over the world.

The episode that aired October 14th, 2009, "Butters' Bottom Bitch," follows the model fairly closely. As with most of Parker and Stone's creations, the title goes a long way in describing the episode's content. "Butters' Bottom Bitch" begins with Butters, the resident dork at South Park Elementary, hanging by his tightly whiteys from the top of a tetherball pole while his classmates, Cartman and Clyde, take turns swinging the ball around until it reaches the top and smacks Butters in the face. Butters has landed himself here by having made it to the fourth grade without kissing a girl, and he quickly remedies the problem by paying a female fourth grader five dollars to give him a kiss. Soon after, Butters is inspired to create a "kissing company," catering to the rest of the elementary school. He starts by managing a few fourth grade girls, selling kisses and hugs for a few dollars, but as the episode progresses, one thing leads to another, and soon enough Butters is a genuine pimp. Meanwhile, Sergeant Yates, the South Park police chief, hears of a rising prostitution ring, and he--yes he--is determined to do literally anything to bring it down. Butters is unwittingly managing actual prostitutes and turning massive profits thanks to his "business," but after a series of plot twists that are equally ridiculous and hilarious lead him to see Sergeant Yates dressed as a prostitute and expressing his love for another local pimp, he rethinks the morality of his actions (Stone and Parker).

Based on what has occurred thus far in the episode, it is clear just how much time Parker and Stone spend trying to suck viewers in. They present no actual analysis until the final few minutes of the episode, but this is definitely not a bad thing. By feeding our guilty affinity for the violent and disgusting, Parker and Stone endear viewers to their work; only after doing so can they hit a willing audience with their viewpoint. After Butters witnesses the portly police chief getting physical with an even more overweight pimp, he recognizes that he shouldn't be earning money as a result of what his girls were doing, because, regardless of whether or not selling sex is ethical, he's just collecting on services other people are providing. This strategy of a noticeable change in tone near the end of the episode is effective because Parker and Stone slap viewers out of their Beevis-and-Butthead-like stupor and hit them with something of consequence in the world today. The music slows, the picture focuses in on one character, and that individual takes on a thoughtful tone completely separate from his typical demeanor. That character then delivers a profound observation applicable to American society today.

Just looking at *South Park* in this way is not nearly enough though. Sure, Parker and Stone make interesting points, but so what? Parker and Stone may make you think at the end of each episode, but is that their only agenda? For someone like me who has seen every episode in the series, it is apparent that they have a greater plan. Almost three million people tune in for every South Park episode (Anderson), so I am hardly the only one who follows the series religiously, and I am certainly not the only person to appreciate it for more than the toilet humor. Because of this, a political movement inspired by Trey Parker and Matt Stone has come about.

Perhaps attracted by the fact that there is a smart, cynical show without an obvious liberal slant, people around the country have come to identify themselves as "South Park Republicans." According to Brian Anderson in a 2005 *Dallas Morning News* article, the key demographic for South Park Republicans is definitely college students largely because of the overriding liberal culture that is the typical college campus. As Anderson observes, "incorrect comedy offers a liberating release for students whose left-wing profs seek to impose on them the 'right' thoughts about race and sex, making such topics all but undiscussable except in terms of the prescribed dogma." Parker and Stone consistently express classically conservative opinions as they condemn abortion or poke fun at global warming (humorously labeled "Manbearpig"), but they deliver them subversively, with a heavy dose of vulgarity, making the show highly attractive to educated conservatives fed up with their blue collar counterparts.

Parker and Stone also show great contempt for liberal celebrities who feel that it is their job to stick their noses up at the majority of the population. This is exemplified in the episode "More Crap," in which Parker and Stone insinuate that Bono wants to be number one at everything to compensate for the fact that he is actually number two (a piece of crap). Rosie O'Donnell is certainly not spared humiliation either. To mock her involvement in the 2000 presidential election recount, Parker and Stone depict O'Donnell coming down to South Park Elementary to intervene in a kindergarten election (Anderson). The teacher of the class, Mr. Garrison, lets loose on O'Donnell:

People like you preach tolerance and open-mindedness all the time, but when it comes to Middle America, you think we're all evil and stupid country yokels who need your political enlightenment. Just because you're on TV doesn't mean you know [expletive] about the government. (qtd. in Anderson)

Finally modern conservatives, the ones that aren't cornmeal-raised, have a show that isn't cut to pieces by the liberal pundits nightly. These South Park Republicans, however, make up only a portion of the South Park viewership.

Since it was first aired in 1997, parents have been steering their children clear of *South Park*, and rightfully so: the show is rated TV-MA, and is not intended for viewers under the age of 17 ("Comedy Central TV Show Schedule"). Parker and Stone have stressed that their show is in no way directed towards children, but regardless of their intent, *South Park* retains a steady child audience in America, and around the world. In a 1999 BBC poll, Erik Cartman was voted the most popular personality by eight- and nine-year-old children in the United Kingdom ("Cartman Top With Kids"). Phrases coined by the animated fourth graders such as "holy crap dude!" and "you killed Kenny, you bastards!" can be heard from children all over the UK as well as the USA (Nixon 12-16). Clearly, eight- and nine-year-old children don't have enough life experience to effectively analyze the messages that *South Park* sends and apply them to their own lives, but they do, however unwittingly, embrace one of *South Park's* most important concepts: Parker and Stone's rejection of political correctness. This is also reinforced by the creators' use of young children to communicate their views. Although the creators have publically stated that the show is not directed towards children, I am sure they relish the idea that they make parents

squirm all over the world, as well as planting the seeds of rebellion into countless eager youthful minds. Children may not fully understand what the show expresses, but regardless, Stone and Parker are still teaching these children to act outrageously and against the grain of this politically correct society that we live in.

On the surface, targeting children may just simply seem like *South Park's* creators' way of spitting in the face of the stuck-up politicians and pundits that lead our nation today. If they can't convert the government and society into what they want, then just go after their kids. But this tactic of converting the children seems to go much deeper than simply spiting their parents. Is it possible that Parker and Stone have shaped an entire generation into authority-questioning skeptics? First, consider the fact that *South Park* first aired in 1997. Today, all of the 8-13 year-olds who were not supposed to watch the show would range from 20-25, exactly the age of today's self-reliant college students. Next, consider the fact that we live in an exceptionally skeptical age. Shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* thrive on of the fact that Americans love to watch political personalities get dismantled on late night television.

Could those shows have *South Park* to thank? It seems to me that all of the young kids who were "discouraged" from watching in '97 when *South Park* first aired are today's South Park conservatives, *South Park* enthusiasts, Jon Stewart fanatics, and members of the Colbert nation. On, the surface, the promotion of followers for the likes of Stewart and Colbert would seem contrary to Stone and Parker's supposed conservative agenda, but it is important to take into account that the creators have also ridiculed a fair number of conservative ideals as well. They regularly depict Jesus, for instance, as killing, stealing, and committing a number of other vices defined in the Bible. To quote Matt Stone himself, "I hate conservatives, but I really [expletive] hate liberals" (qtd. in Anderson). In other words, that Stone hates liberals doesn't make him a conservative. Parker and Stone identify less with conservatives, and more with a duty to skewer absolutely anything possible. It is clear that Stone and Parker are less interested in indoctrinating people with their personal philosophies, and more eager to make them question what is going on in the world that we live in. However, in all of its thirteen seasons, *South Park*—a show that makes fun of almost everything—has refrained from poking and prodding *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. The skepticism that *The Daily Show* promotes is exactly what Parker and Stone were going for back in '97. Call me a nutty conspiracy theorist, but it seems apparent that Stone and Parker went against the grain and set off the first domino towards today's skeptical society with their premier episode "Cartman Gets an Anal Probe."

Works Cited

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