

South park: a social critique of the television show

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South Park as Social Critique

Trey Parker and Matt Stone's popular cartoon South Park has too often been lumped together with television shows widely deemed meaningless, excessively vulgar, and even culturally detrimental. Academics have long dismissed the show as childish or somehow beneath them, thereby ignoring the many surprisingly deep insights hidden in the cartoon. In fact, a close examination of South Park will reveal that the show embeds several valuable social, political, and moral messages in a unique format that individuals not only consume, but enjoy and reflect on. Parker and Stone's program is about more than just shallow humor; frequently, the animated episodes convey themes such as moderation and tolerance in the social and political spheres as opposed to extremism. The cartoon also offers a scathing exposition and criticism of immoral discrimination in society and in politics, especially racism and ableism. But perhaps most pertinently, the way that South Park conveys its messages is one that makes an impact on millions of viewers; rather than limiting itself to the margins of society, it utilizes humor and vulgarity as rhetorical devices that not only attract viewers but also encourage them to mull over what they have watched.

Although South Park is very clearly a comedy, it often contains messages and themes that are quite serious. This is visible at the end of each 22-minute episode of South Park, when one of the show's four main eight-year-old characters will almost invariably say, " You know, I've learned something today," followed by a moral message distinguished from the rest of the episode by its sincerity. Often, these messages direct criticism toward

current controversies and poke fun at the extremists on both sides of a given issue, thus encouraging the middle ground and discouraging extremism (Solomon 12).

The show has taken this approach to numerous issues – stem cell research, bans on smoking, the importance of voting, euthanasia, etc. Throughout any given episode, the boys will be confronted with complex situations that would in reality be better handled by adults. They will be exposed to both extremes of an issue, which the show often exaggerates for comedic value as well as for the purpose of highlighting the dangers of extremist positions. This is done in a manner that some have called Socratic, as it bounces the characters between the two poles of an issue so that they can gain a new understanding of the matter (Solomon 19). By exposing the extremes of current controversies, viewers are not only educated about current issues (though this is an additional benefit of watching the show, as episodes are made within 6 days of their release and frequently discuss recent events), but are taught a more moderate, centrist approach to said issues. At the end of each episode, one of the boys will summarize this new understanding and offer a vision of the world that Parker and Stone believe to be superior to the status quo.

For instance, in the episode “ Butt Out,” a centrist position on the issue of public smoking is shown to be preferable through the exposition of extremism on both sides of the political debate. On the rightist side are the tobacco companies, who believe that tobacco built America and that the use of slavery for tobacco production was acceptable. On the other side are the

anti-smoking extremists, who are portrayed as even worse than the tobacco proponents. While the latter behave relatively kindly toward the boys, the anti-smoking advocates photo-shop a photograph of the boys where they have been offered cigarettes by the smoking companies. They believe that “sometimes lying is OK, like when you know what’s good for people more than they do,” and eventually go so far as to try to kill one of the boys in an effort to forge proof that secondhand smoking is deadly. Almost formulaically, the episode ends with Kyle, one of the eight-year-old boys, telling the anti-smoking advocates that “I’ve learned something today ... you just hate smoking, so you use all your money and power to force others to think like you - and that’s called fascism” (“Butt Out”). In this manner, the episode argues for the more reasonable centrist position of allowing individuals to make their own decision to smoke while understanding the dangers involved in this decision.

In addition to advocating against political extremism, South Park often fights against societal discrimination. This fight usually has two parts: exposing discrimination and challenging it. This approach is best, as “subjects may question power and shift its effects”; but “first, power ... has to be made visible” (Nestler 2). South Park specifically applies this method to the deconstruction of racism. In episodes such as “With Apologies to Jess Jackson,” the show “makes implicit racism explicit” (Nestler 3), as its opening scene features Randy Marsh (one of the boys’ fathers) uttering the uncensored word “nigger” on a televised game show. This scene very clearly exposes racism, as it throws into the viewer’s face an offensive, derogatory term for black people. However, as philosophers such as Judith

Butler and Michel Foucault have long argued, “ we have to expose what we intend to deconstruct” (Nestler 3); South Park’s exposition of this term thereby makes viewers think about Randy Marsh’s racism, as it is now unavoidably in their faces. By having Marsh repeat the word “ nigger” rather than censoring it with the now-infamous “ bleep” sound, South Park calls up in the viewer the subconscious racist assumptions he or she himself may have held – a process which forces the viewer to deal with these assumptions consciously. This exposition forces viewers to consider the ways that race relations play out in their own lives, and how they are often just as complicit with daily oppressive practices as Randy Marsh (Nestler 3). There are many other instances where South Park satirizes racism, especially through the use of counter-hegemony, whereby minorities are shown to be more talented than the white majority despite the arrogance of the latter (Weinstock 134). In numerous episodes, white individuals designate black characters as inferior people who must be educated by whites, only to be shown that their assumptions were wrong entirely, and that minorities often attain greater success than their white “ superiors” (Weinstock 135). Hence South Park also serves as a criticism of paternalism, which would have racial minorities happy and servile while remaining dependent on the supposedly worthier whites. This “ content provokes reflection on societal attitudes and interactions that may otherwise be taken for granted” (Reid-Hresko 4).

Another area of discrimination examined by South Park is ableism, or discrimination against the disabled. Specifically, through outrageous humor, the show’s “ creators expose inconsistencies and injustices typical of the public’s responses to disability by contrasting the humanity of disabled

persons with cultural assumptions and constructions about them” (Reid-Hresko 1). South Park specifically critiques political correctness, which necessitates censorship and insincerity that foreclose the possibility of true equality. For example, in the episode “ Conjoined Fetus Lady,” the boys’ school nurse has Conjoined Twin Myslexia, a fictional impairment where a dead fetus is attached to an individual’s head. The nurse’s disability does not impair her physical or mental abilities, and she appears to be perfectly comfortable with her body. However, the able-bodied characters are unable to grasp that she is happy with her life; they throw the nurse an honorary dinner and a parade to admire the “ courage” required to live her everyday life. This uncomfortable reaction to disability highlights how able-bodied individuals in the real world tend to feel in the presence of the disabled and how many non-disabled individuals champion celebrations of the disabled as a means of making themselves feel better, often at the expense of the disabled (Reid-Hresko 5). Finally, the nurse responds by stating that she never wanted to be singled out, but rather wished to be accepted like any other person; being treated gingerly can in fact be a mechanism of exclusion, as it separates the disabled from “ normal” people. Because the people were so concerned with political correctness, they never truly accepted the nurse; they demarcated her as different and handicapped rather than a normal citizen (Reid-Hresko 6). Thus, South Park exposes the implicit ableism inherent in society and seeks to overcome it.

There remains the question of why South Park is necessarily the best approach to the propagation of moral teachings or to the fight against discrimination. Many have argued that although the show may contain

positive messages at its core, these messages are overwhelmed or even papered over by its low-tech animation, vulgar humor, and seemingly poor taste (Bruna 2). However, “ mild critiques and polite suggestions do not get people’s attention”; “ you grab people by being obstreperous, exaggerating and shocking them” (Solomon 8). For numerous reasons, the very elements of South Park that so often lead to its dismissal by outraged parents and politically correct academics are some of its valuable assets.

Take, for instance, the show’s vulgarity. Although this aspect of Parker and Stone’s cartoon has frequently been criticized, it is in fact employed as a rhetorical device that makes viewers contemplate the show’s messages rather than just passively watching. Indeed, “ South Park’s direct assault on American sensibilities ... is less to offend than to prod a normally squeamish viewing public to confront its own taboos and preconceptions” (Reid-Hresko 3). Normative, politically correct language – such as that which most viewers might expect from an animated cartoon – is largely free of swear words and other foul language. However, South Park shocks these viewers because it is chock full of obscenities, from the “ f-word” to the “ n-word” and everything in between. In the case of more politically correct television shows, the viewer is able to watch passively; however, when viewers stumble upon South Park, they are thrown out of their realms of comfort by its vulgarity (Weinstock 175). Consequently, they are forced to deal with the subject matter of the particular episode, be that democracy or racism, rather than simply watching the show without thinking about its message (Weinstock 25). In short, the “ show’s antics are intended to rattle the viewer out of the intellectual stupor encouraged by passive television watching, often for the

purpose of communicating a particular and fairly consistent message” (Weinstock 175).

Additionally, South Park’s vulgarity can itself be seen as a form of social criticism, as it provides resistance to censorship. As Trey Parker and Matt Stone have expressed on more than one occasion, “ everything must be up for discussion or we make it okay for nothing to be” (Solomon 14). Therefore, rather than limit themselves to the politically correct, Parker and Stone utilize their right to free speech to its full extent by exploring any issue they want in any way they want using any language they want. In this way, South Park is a fight for and celebration of free speech (Solomon 16).

Some, mostly concerned parents, have argued that the show’s vulgarity is unacceptable because it is inappropriate for young children. While the show certainly contains adult language and themes inappropriate for children, two flaws exist in this argument. First, the responsibility lies with the parents, not with the networks, to control what their children see on television (Weinstock 4). It is clear from the content of South Park that the show is aimed at adults and young adults rather than children. Free speech dictates that networks and television shows may say what they like; therefore, South Park should not be censored according to parents’ concerns. If parents deem its content inappropriate, it is up to them to forbid their children from watching it; there is no reason to prevent the millions of older viewers who enjoy the show from viewing it as well (Weinstock 5). The second hole in this argument is that children will inevitably be exposed to vulgar language in one form or another (Bruna 2). Classmates, movies, and even parents all swear

sometimes, which makes it inevitable that sooner or later cuss words will be introduced to children's vocabularies. It is better that children hear this foul language from a source like South Park, which couples the swearing with a powerful moral message, rather than one that simply swears for the purpose of swearing (Weinstock 10).

As for the question of animation, it is the perfect format for a show like South Park, as it enables Parker and Stone to throw at their characters some of the most outrageous events conceivable. Through animation, the show's message can be made as explicit as possible through any means necessary: in an episode about religion, God can be a main character; in an episode about Christmas, Santa can be real and can fly his sleigh around the world; and so on and so forth (Solomon 9). Additionally, the show's combination of animation and children "allows the audience to distance themselves and react with laughter rather than negative emotion to the scornful appraisals" (Reid-Hresko 3). Whereas viewers might be saddened or even upset if a live actor were violently killed, in a cartoon they can appreciate this as part of the plot and can laugh about the death rather than feeling sadness; consequently, they stay tuned in to the program and can consider the meaning of the character's death independent of any emotional attachment.

South Park is distinct from other animated programs such as Family Guy or The Simpsons, however. While all three shows are animated and employ some degree of vulgarity, only South Park appropriates this vulgarity toward the end of conveying a social message. Additionally, whereas other cartoons are focused on families - be they the Griffins or the Simpsons - South Park

puts the spotlight on children themselves, and more specifically how children react when confronted with issues that should actually be dealt with by adults. However, due to the fact that all the adults in their lives are impotent – a fact that is frequently used to criticize modern Americans – the children are left to handle the issues; this provides the show with much of its comedic and educational value (Solomon 18).

Most importantly, South Park's humor, combined with its animation, gets the message out. While the same moral and social commentary could likely have been provided by a philosophy book, such a work would have had an entirely different audience than South Park. While South Park is hardly the only medium through which to express democratic or anti-racist messages, it is one of the few media to which millions of people pay attention; as a result, insightful messages are delivered to the masses in an outrageous, entertaining fashion that they can enjoy (Solomon 20).

Close textual analysis of South Park thus proves it to be a powerful social commentary. Not only does South Park provide powerful arguments for centrism in political and societal controversies, but it also exposes racism and ableism as well as other discrimination in society at large. Moreover, it does so in a medium that millions watch, and one whose vulgarity forces critical reflection. Though there are many more episodes of South Park that demonstrate its moral value, it should be clear by now that although Parker and Stone's creation certainly has a unique sense of humor, it also harbors deep insights. Many have even gone so far as to compare South Park to a modern secular prophecy: " Just like the prophets, South Park speaks about

being a good, moral person, about treating others with respect, and about bettering ourselves in order to create a better future” (Solomon 8).

Consequently, South Park is in fact a force for societal betterment rather than a force for societal degradation, despite this seemingly common misconception.