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# South Park and Absurd Culture War Ideologies, The Art of Stealthy Conservatism

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## **Dedication**

To all who have been patient and kind, most of all Robert, Thalia, and Jesus, thank you for everything...

*South Park* and Absurd Culture War Ideologies. The Art of Stealthy Conservatism

by

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THESIS

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## **Abstract**

*South Park* serves as an example of satire and parody lampooning culture war issues in the popular media. Since it targets culture war issues, it is relevant to analyze its political and social stance on the issues as presented within. Both extremes in political and social ideology are targeted. Although the program notes an ideological absurdity in extremist points-of-view, the presentation of the issues attempts to create a sense of moderate ideology criticizing both the far left and far right, when in fact, closer analysis provides evidence that *South Park* serves a stealthy conservative perspective. Stealthy conservatism presents itself as moderate or even liberal, but essentially advocates a conservative position.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>	v
Table of Contents.....		vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....		1
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....		15
2.1 Media Culture .....		15
2.2 Cultivation Theory and Mainstreaming.....		19
2.3 Satire, Parody and Humor.....		20
2.4 Culture Wars .....		25
2.5 <i>South Park</i> .....		28
Chapter 3: Methodology .....		33
Chapter 4: Analysis.....		44
4.1 Gays, Gay Rights and Gay Marriage.....		45
4.2 Abortion and Stem Cell Research.....		52
4.3 War .....		56
4.4 Euthanasia.....		59
4.5 Immigration .....		62
4.6 Presidential Elections.....		65
4.7 Stealthy Conservatism .....		68
Chapter 5: Conclusion .....		71
References.....		79
Vita.....		83

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Within the modern-day political system are constantly competing ideologies from both extreme poles and ideologues. While political punditry consumes the world of news, popular entertainment cable television has provided mass access to political satire. Satire of current events, politics and politicians, policy and government is essential and booming in a democratic nation that touts the value of freedom of speech and it is nothing new to the entertainment industry. Increasing access to information through technology has also increased the ability to reach a mass audience in advocating for issues and expressing opinions.

Following the trends is a move toward absurd ideological humor in which the ideologies of both political spectrums have become increasingly polarized and extreme as to be seen as absurd. This absurdity of real world politics and social issues is fodder for comedic entertainment that satirizes and lampoons these subjects, thus bringing the ideology of absurdity to the forefront of a mass audience's mind. This paper looks to find the hallmarks of absurd ideology and satire within entertainment programs as well as the new approach of disguising stealthy conservatism within moderate political advocating and comedic lampooning of both extreme poles.

The trend over the past several years in politics appears to be toward extremism in both political parties, and on both sides of the coined "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991). There are representatives on the right, such as Bill O'Reilly and Ann Coulter, and representatives on the left, such as Keith Olbermann and Michael Moore. For every advocacy of gay rights, there is a call for propositions on ballots opposing gay marriage. Instead of a meeting of ideas and political discussion and compromise, the opposing sides are in an increasingly polarizing atmosphere causing tension. Hunter coined "culture wars" to describe the increasing prominence of passionate and divisive issues arising in society, including: abortion, gun politics, privacy, homosexuality, censorship and separation of church and state. The polarization these issues seem to cause place those who advocate on either side of the particular

issues into warring blocks. A back and forth of attack ads and political candidates as embodied representatives of the issues sprung forth. Since the invocation of the term “culture wars,” further issues have joined the ranks of “hot button” issues, such as: gay marriage, sexual education, the Iraq War, immigration, family values and political correctness. These wedge issues provide an “us” versus “them” mentality that pits the opposing sides against each other, and allows little mediating ground between them.

Hunter (1991) indicated a cultural gap in the nation. Although the variety of issues that came to be coined the culture war were seemingly unrelated, they had in effect a strong connection placing a wedge between those on opposing sides of the various issues. Supporters do not have to stand hand-in-hand on every conservative or liberal issue, but rather the issues themselves are divided between conservative and liberal lines. Hunter uses orthodox for conservative stances; and progressive for liberal stances. The realms of disagreement occur in five areas: family; education; the popular media; law; and electoral politics. These realms house the various culture war issues of dispute. The hot-button issues are discussed, argued and passionately fought within the five spheres of influence. It is these issues that place homosexuality at odds with the traditional family, the teaching of evolution at odds with religion, sex education at odds with abstinence, censorship at odds with freedom of speech, pro-life at odds with pro-choice and thusly republican conservatives at odds with democratic liberals. It is important to understand that these issues on opposing spectrums of the political debate are not merely abstract ideas to the people of the nation, but also are representative of the people who support either end of the debate. It is also essential to understand the role media play in creating culture war issues, the fabrication and intensification of these issues can largely be attributed to media representations of the issues.

The split in politics and social values lies in the opposing sides of a conservative desire for tradition, and a liberal need to progress further. It should be noted that the culture war issues are not a

solid absolute block, merely because one is conservative or liberal on one issue does not mean that they are necessarily conservative or liberal on all culture war issues. The culture war issues are broken into conservative and liberal sides. What is needed to bridge the gap in value placement is discussion and debate, which is healthy and necessary to settle the culture war disputes. A view of multiculturalism is needed, where opposing sides of any given issue are appreciated and celebrated as essentials to a thriving democracy. In understanding the culture wars, one must have humility, courage, charity, intersubjectivity and understanding of the issues. Those caught up in the culture war debate must understand and appreciate their opposition, not merely vilify and demonize them. A free expression of ideas and viewpoints must be embraced (Selbo, 2003). This call for analysis stands inherently liberal within the political and social realm.

Driving the information to the public is increasingly a focus on anchor-driven news that presents the anchor as the increasingly polarized figure advocating on either side, including the current group of Keith Olbermann and Bill O'Reilly. The rise of newstalk provides access to culture war issues and opinion laced pieces of right or wrong, progressive and conservative polarization (Woodward, 2007). Interpretation and selection of facts is used to promote fantasies that allow the viewer to believe what they already want to believe regarding any number of culture war issues (Bormann, 2001).

The culture war continues to endure in the political and social sphere more than 15 years after the coining of the term. People continue to be given polar and opposing alternatives to a variety of issues, including: abortion, gay rights, gun control, the American Flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, Terri Schiavo's right to life vs. right to die case, stem cells, and the war in Iraq. The increase in social and political issues to the culture war at large represents an increase in the polarization of society and the electorate.

Humor is essential to the political process. What is politically and socially relevant, and thus what is due to be targeted for humor is the prerogative of the overall culture. Politics has come to be an

opposing force, holding seriousness and humor at contrasting ends. Politics plays the role of bringing seriousness and humor together in a realm of very real problems and issues, and absurdity at the same time (Dmitriev, 2008).

Satire has become engrained in the public sphere and a very real and necessary part of public discourse. Satire has been allowed to skewer those who place themselves in the public sphere to address the general public on moral concerns on various issues. Although public figures are routinely treated with less deference during the claimed satire boom, the “serious” media has created a tone of mockery and skepticism of political figures and the government at large. Satire has remained an important and official category of the overall media (Wagg, 2002).

The fracturing of news into entertainment, punditry and “happy talk” news has created a new climate in the news spectrum, allowing for satirical programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* to provide real access to news and entertainment at the same time (Baym, 2005; Baym, 2008).

Moyers’ (2007, p. 16) interviewed John Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*, who said:

that either speaks to the sad state of comedy or the sad state of news. I can’t figure out which one. I think, honestly, we’re practicing a new form of desperation where we just are so inundated with mixed messages from the media and from politicians that we’re [the writers and cast of the show] just trying to sort it out for ourselves... I think we don’t make things up. We just distill it to, hopefully, its most humorous nugget. And in that sense it seems faked and skewed just because we don’t have to...pretend to be objective. We can just put it out there.

This speaks to the need to inform, and the emphasis of informing in a humorous way.

The melding of news, comedy and entertainment has created a climate that portrays political figures in archetypal roles of hero, fool and villain (West & Orman, 2003). The public needs to be able to vilify parties and root for heroes, not only in their chosen entertainment, but in the news presented to them on the various political issues of the day, to include cultural war issues. Placing blame on

characters representing opposing issues creates a needed narrative (Woodward, 2007). Public discussion and discourse is thereby forced and framed as opposition of the characters in the public sphere, tangled in struggle against each other (Weaver, 1976).

At the forefront of lampooning hot topic issues and current events with a humorous stance over the past decade has been Comedy Central's groundbreaking animated series *South Park*. Since debuting in 1997, *South Park*, has become well-known for its pop-culture parody and scatological humor, but creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone have most importantly led a charge toward in criticizing both right and left ideologies in which neither a left nor right extreme is advocated, but both ridiculed through satirical representations. They note the absurdity that has become ideological warring.

Whittle (2003) notes that the culture wars can not be won by either the left or the right side of the political spectrum. *South Park*, through its children main characters, Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and the opposition of Cartman, offer a clear indication of the hypocrisy the adults of their town take part in on both ideological sides of any given issue. While the adults of *South Park* often find themselves in opposition and warring over the various culture war issues, the children are the ones who understand the absurdity of the issues which are never clear cut, black and white, but rather are able to read between the lines, to illustrate the deeper purpose and meaning of the issues. By noting the absurd ideologies, they then provide the comedy and satire to which the issues lend them.

The use of satire in political cartoons dates back to the skewering of King George III and remains a fixture in the newspaper and magazine industries. It can be mere amusement to the reader, a vital aspect of framing public opinion on leaders and important issues. It can be either scathing and unfair attacking, or expressive and a hybrid creation of art of political commentary, depending on one's opinion. It must contain five components: a subject of ridicule, negative perceptions of the subject, creativity mixed with artistic talent, a medium for distribution and an audience for the message. A decline in political cartoons has followed the decline in newspaper distribution itself. Matt Groening's

long lasting satirical cartoon *The Simpsons* sprang from a political cartoon strip (Lordan, 2006). The future of political cartoon satire appears to lie with both television programming and the internet. The decline of political cartoons appears to be linked with the FCC's sensitivity to obscenity which differentiates what obscenity is appropriate for viewers, and thus what is needed to be censored, or edited (Mello, 2007).

With the rising power of celebrity in American culture, so too has been a rise in celebrity involvement in the political process. Celebrities advocating both on the conservative and liberal ends of the political spectrum have entered the public sphere with monetary contributions for candidates, lobbying for causes, attracting public attention to various causes and presenting themselves as teacher and role model for a public to follow suit. The media attention drawn by celebrities has shaped the political arena around a variety of culture war issues (West & Orman, 2003).

Sullivan (2007) argues that *South Park* can effectively utilize humor to target the issues of the culture war. As a cartoon, *South Park* is allowed a separation from the inherent offensiveness that Stone and Parker use to drive home their political points. Simply put, cartoons can get away with offensive satirical comedy more easily than a live person. Secondly, Stone and Parker understand and appreciate the subcultures that they target; when they choose a group to satirize any given week, they have invested time to understanding that group, thusly providing more realistic satire by using specifics and stereotypes familiar to that group. Finally, the American public can understand that the show is not bigoted, but rather a reflection of attitudes that continue to prevail in American society. Mirroring real people's prejudices, ignorance, biases, stereotypical views and in some instances hatred, they are satirizing real world occurrences and providing a mirror for society to view itself in absurd satirical form.

Furthermore, satire is an important component for examination of current events and politics. Generally disaffected by politics, the general public becomes unaware of policies, politicians and

anything in the political realm, thereby allowing satirists and comedic programs to front politics, Wagg (2002). This fronting of politics allows for popular entertainment programs to provide the political dialogue that is most viewed by the public, thus the potential to shape attitudes and opinions on various culture war subjects. If entertainment programs are more highly accessible and digestible for consumption by a mass audience, then these entertainment programs which are increasingly melding politics and social issues, even through satire, are providing a clear advocacy for stances on issues, with the potentiality of influencing or shaping issues and opinions on them.

The inclusive nature of *South Park* in targeting everyone, and anyone, from handicapped people, all ethnicities, minorities, sexualities, religions, the good-looking, the ugly, the far left and the far right demonstrates a willingness to provide a looking glass to all groups in their natural ridiculousness and hypocrisy. By choosing to make the left and right both the joke and satirical target, *South Park* is taking a moderate approach to politics. Stone and Parker understand that politics and issues in pop culture cannot be written off easily as black or white, but rather many shades of grey. This uninhibited celebration of freedom of speech that is Comedy Central's *South Park* advocates making fun of all groups, in all situations and all ideologies, only seems to underscore the necessity of embracing a moderate political stance and ideology, one that is not far right, far left, but centered. But as was discovered by close analysis between the overt arguments the program makes regarding extremist ideology, a stealthy conservative approach is advocated.

A look at the surface moderate politics as demonstrated through the ridicule launched from *South Park*, and its interpretation of the far right and far left extremists was timely and essential to understanding the predominant political climate of today. The current political culture has been one of extremes, as demonstrated in popular satire. The award winning and popular *South Park* provides easy access. The fact that the show's episodes are created in the week immediately before the airing of that episode allowed creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker to be current and effective in the timing of their

satire. Thus, the most current in social discussion and examination of the day's cultural problems and issues was available to the program.

*South Park* has proved its staying power, despite constant controversy over themes and inappropriateness, entering its twelfth season in October of 2008. Since debuting in 1997 on Comedy Central, *South Park* has aired over 167 episodes, as well as one feature length film, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*. The show has been nominated for the Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program seven times, winning twice in 2005 and 2006. *South Park* has won a Peabody Award, as well as a CableAce Award. *Time* included *South Park* in its list of "100 Best TV Shows of All Time." A song "Blame Canada" from the feature length film was nominated for an Academy Award for "Best Music, Original Song." The show demonstrates its all inclusive take on comedy by poking fun at the absurdity of a show like *South Park* winning awards, but nevertheless solidifies its place in television history. It is unfair, and incorrect to merely label the show as a vehicle for irrelevant scatological "toilet" humor, when in fact, there is legitimate social criticism to be found within the episodes.

Satire is an essential part of examining politics in society thereby providing essential dialogue on what should be criticized and/or changed. Critical analysis through comedy provides a gateway to change with regards to politics. Comedy and satirical representations also have a grounding effect on the general public; in effect, bringing viewers down to earth at times when they lead with ideals and through ideologues. Comedy through the use of satire also allows a separation from threat that may be perceived by criticism that comes without a humorous stance. *South Park* provides unique access in examination of political satire that can push boundaries with regards to culture war and taboo issues in our society.

Although comedic satire is prominent in mass media, many programs tend to use their satire to advocate on one side of the cultural divide. *South Park*, on the other hand, takes aim at both conservatives and liberals on culture war issues with regularity. The show has been criticized as being inappropriate by conservatives such as the Catholic League, as well as by liberals from the Church of

Scientology. Comedy Central has been repeatedly issued calls for the programs removal over the years from both ideological sides. Using religion as a gauge for social values, the show's creators have included in their satire and critique of religion: Mormons, Atheists, Scientologists, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants and Jews. In an interview, co-creator Matt Stone said, "I hate conservatives, but I really f\*\*\*\*\* hate liberals" Trey Parker and Matt Stone have pointed out that their formula for any given show is placing an extremist on one side, an extremist on the opposite side, and the four main characters of reason: Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman somewhere in the middle (Reason, 2006). This placement of the children as voices of reason and within a moderate and middle-ground of ideologies is of interest in this research.

Parker and Stone have written episodes on nearly all culture war issues in the United States' recent history, including: gun control; immigration; racism; sexism; gay marriage; sexuality; abortion; stem cell research; religion; global warming; vulgarity; hate crimes; censorship; euthanasia; patriotism; the war on terror; the war in Iraq; and the war in Afghanistan. The show has targeted presidential elections and lack of choice in both political parties. The show has survived and become a critique throughout both the Clinton Presidency and the Bush Presidency, while continuing to serve as social dialogue well into the post-Bush administration years. *South Park* can be viewed as equal-opportunity in presenting extremists on both sides. There is an apparent disdain for political extremism on either pole of any given issue. That said, *South Park*, has had a stealthy conservative approach when read between the lines of the overt culture war argument given on many issues. Since the conservative slant is camouflaged within the program, it is not clearly understood or appreciated by a mass audience. Often *South Park* uses the satirizing and caricature of celebrity advocates of issues as the target for their social satire and thus the embodiment of any given issue to be targeted as absurd and ridiculous.

*South Park* is unique with regard to cartoon episodic television in that it is produced in the week immediately preceding the airing of the episode. This provided the show the power of immediacy to be

topical in its choice of narratives. Writing the show within days of its airing allows current events that are often subjected to political biases on both sides of the culture wars to be examined in a relevant and timely manner. The timeliness of the creation of the show placed it in direct competition in remaining current and providing an immediate discussion of issues with network nightly news programs, 24 hour cable news channels and late-night comedy programs and political satirists.

*South Park* has clearly proved itself as a sound vehicle for social satirical criticism. The show was a clear choice to provide a strong text for analysis regarding politics in society. The show became decidedly more topical regarding current events in its seventh season, with episode 100 “I’m a Little Bit Country,” in which the town citizens debate patriotism in the context of the invasion of Iraq. For the purposes of this analysis, the text will be chosen from the first twelve seasons. These most recent seasons provided access to the most current satirical criticism. The need for currency is clear in that the culture wars have been increasingly prominent in mass media and society and increasingly polarizing, thereby requiring immediate criticism through popular satirical entertainment programs.

Topical issues within *South Parks’* twelve seasons run were considered in focusing the analysis for this research. Utilizing the entire available run of episodes for *South Park* demonstrated the variety of culture war topics and issues that the show discusses. I accessed the episodes via the Comedy Central website which maintains postings of all *South Park* episodes. The episodes chosen were those that included the culture war issues previously listed in this paper. The relevance to culture wars and the increasingly polarizing political climate were essential in determining and gauging the advocacy of a moderate political stance by *South Park* as an example of the overall media support of moderate political advocacy through satirizing an absurd ideological stance. Parker and Stone’s *South Park* provided immediacy, a vast inventory of topical insight, satire, comedy in a non-threatening medium as a cartoon and a respected show with longevity and relevance to current culture war issues. For the purposes of this

project, *South Park* was used to establish a strong example of absurd ideologies being skewered in favor of limiting the polarization in politics and social issues.

I further analyzed and engaged this project by examining media stories on *South Park* as well as interviews given by creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Intentions by the creators in their eventual social and political criticism are relevant and important. I accessed interviews given with both television media sources and print sources, as well as interviews given as “extras” to the *South Park* DVDs. Of extended interest for the purposes of this project are published advocates in both liberal and conservative camps that argue *South Park* to be a vehicle for either the liberal or conservative agendas. The opposing viewpoints not only mimic the culture wars at large, but allow opposing viewpoints as to the intentions of the creators of the show and the show’s actual stance with regard to culture war issues.

A rubric to analyze the political and social satirical comedy was created. For the purposes of this paper, absurdity was noted as being an obvious extrapolation from reality, in which the satirical representation becomes humorously or wittily foolish. Topical episodes focused on those that presented a culture war issue for debate. Culture war issues provided justification for viewing the opposing sides in extreme terms, both conservative and liberal. By definition, the culture war is the extreme political and social view points and advocacy of the issues.

Language played an important role in examining the creation of absurd ideologies by *South Park*. How the characters explain the absurdity, most often from the voices of the children main characters, was of interest. The rhetoric utilized in the advocacy of a culture war stance, or adversely, the rhetoric used to explain the flaws in logic of the opposing polarized viewpoints in the culture war debates was important to understand.

Since satire and comedy, as previously mentioned, are taken from real-world events and experiences, the extrapolation of the real-world implications and problems within the culture war issues to the absurd comedic stance was extremely important to note. To analyze the chosen episodes, the

problem and solution toward the culture war issue will be recorded and examined. The problems examined in the show were taken from real-world situations that the United States is currently debating throughout society and political discussions and therefore provided the mirror-placement that entertainment takes up in forcing an audience to examine itself. A sense of timeliness and immediacy to an issue at the original airing date of the program was taken into consideration when choosing episodes to present. The solutions provided to various culture war issues within *South Park* are of concern as they will be an indicator of the satirical stance in noting absurd ideologies in contrast to the sound decisions advocated within the episode. The solutions also allow the audience to delve into the minds of the show's creators in seeing their world view toward conservative and liberal ideologies. The ending justification for the political solution to the issue was looked at.

Character, in addition, provided insight as to the intention of the show and its culture war stances. I kept in mind the varying characters that have been clearly defined with each new season: Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman, as well as supplemental side characters which sometimes illustrated a specific culture war debate: Butters, Mr. Garrison, the boys' parents etc. Since the characters have carved out specific character traits over the seasons, these traits, and who they've become as characters was helpful to note in any examination of the program, as they serve different narrative functions, as well as varying functions in advocacy.

Finally, whether or not *South Park* takes a slant toward one pole or the other of the given culture war issues, or rather advocates for a middle-ground political position was essential to note. The overt lampooning of both extremes was important to note, but the ending solution and the effects of the solution and lampooning of the program's own solutions provided a stealthy conservative approach. Emphasis was given to the humor and satirical quality in noting the possible absurdity toward ideological stances on culture war issues. Image was included while considering the absurdity in

question. Often satirical humor is derived equally from the spoken word as to the images that accompany them.

This thesis examines *South Park*, specifically, as an instance and example of a greater realm of infotainment and political satirizing of absurd ideologies, in order to examine the idea of absurd ideology within satire, comedy and entertainment. I hope to add this work with others that have looked at varying issues with satire, comedy, caricature, popular culture, culture war, politics and programs such as *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Saturday Night Live*, as well as others. Considering the polarizing political and social climate and framing of the culture war debate as it continues to remain a prominent role in American politics, and the importance of satire in the entertainment realm, as well as the melding of entertainment, comedy and news in framing the political debate, I posed research questions to guide and extrapolate what the effect of satirizing extremes in a political debate over a culture war issue is really advocating? What is the effect of a program that notes and presents absurdity in culture war extremes? Can *South Park* be viewed as advocating a moderate approach merely based on the fact that it lampoons the extreme left and right in the political spectrum?

Chapter 2 compiles a literature review background on the topic of extreme absurd ideologies in the media and culture war representations. The Literature Review is divided into the following categories: Media Culture; Cultivation Theory and Mainstreaming; Satire, Parody and Humor; Culture Wars; and *South Park*. In framing my argument, the importance of media must be understood as well as the effects of cultivation and mainstreaming to an audience. We must understand satire, parody and humor as they relate to controversial and taboo political and social elements in society. The background on the culture wars will be set up and the polarization effects of the issues. Finally, the importance of *South Park* as a text for analysis in the creation of a stealthy conservative approach is reviewed.

In Chapter 3, a methodological rubric was designed to examine culture war issues in the context of a satirical program. Emphasis is given on components that explain and moderate the political and social divide as well as those which will note the appearance of a stealthy conservative approach.

The analysis of Chapter 4 is divided between categories: Gays, Gay Rights and Gay Marriage; Abortion and Stem Cell Research; War; Euthanasia; Immigration; Politics and Elections; and an overarching section, Stealthy Conservatism. The sections are divided as related to *South Park's* presentation of culture war issues and relatable themes throughout episodes. The Stealthy Conservatism section provided the argument and justification for the overall approach to the culture war issues in a satirical program.

Chapter 5, conclusion, notes the relevance of the stealthy conservative approach in satirical programs and the danger in creating a conservative approach masked as moderate. The conclusion also explains the limitations of the project and suggestions for applications of the project in the field of Communication.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Media Culture

Kellner noted the shift toward a sound-bite media driven politics that influenced the electorate and voting habits:

In the political sphere, media images have produced a new sort of sound-bite politics which places the media at the center of political life. In our social interactions, mass-produced images guide our presentation of the self in everyday life, our ways of relating to others, and the creation of our social values and goals. (Kellner, 1995, p. 18).

Media is a broad and overarching vehicle that frames political and social issues for the population. Framing the debate guides and influences public perceptions, ideas and values proving vast overarching powers wielded by the media.

Media culture is a means to create a sense of self, belonging, identity and a commonality; it provides an opportunity to connect an “us” and “them.” Viewing a specific artifact in the context of media culture allows one to analyze the audience and artifact, as well as possible relations and effects (Kellner, 1995). “Media culture is also the site where battles are fought for the control of society. Feminists and antifeminists, liberals and conservatives, radicals and defenders of the status quo, struggle for cultural power not only in the medium of news information, but also in the domain of entertainment” (Kellner, 1995, p. 35). Kellner argues that focusing only on text/audience ignores possible impacts of mediations in cultural studies, and analyses of how texts are produced and presents “media cultural studies” in which we analyze complex relations between texts, audiences, media industries, politics and socio-historical contexts (p. 37). Media culture serves to articulate “social experiences, figures, events, and practices, as well as discourses... for media culture to work for its audiences, it has to resonate to social experience, to “fit in” with the social horizon of audiences, and so popular culture taps into existing fears, hopes fantasies, and other concerns of the day” (p. 105). This necessity to remain current

and of concern to the audience underscores why culture war issues are such popular fodder for satirical programs and remain at the forefront of popular culture.

“Criticizing hegemonic ideologies thus requires showing how certain positions in media cultural texts reproduce existing political ideologies in current political struggles... doing ideology critique involves analyzing images, symbols, myths, and narrative, as well as propositions and systems of belief” (Kellner, 1982). Without a strong and in-depth analysis of ideologies presented in the media, one cannot understand the potential implications and effects of those media oriented ideological stances. The reproduction and representation of ideologies by the media both tells us about what ideological stances are prominent in society, and what the media thinks of them.

Popular culture refers to culture of “ordinary people as opposed to the culture of elites” (Rossides, 2003: 200). Popular culture requires no direct training or orientation, but is a product of media socialization. Despite having been created through a variety of technologies and the variety of character’s individual personalities, behaviors and situations, popular culture centers around a limited number of themes. American liberalism and “technocratic liberalism,” stress individuality as ideal, with a clear emphasis on the ordinary individual and the exceptional, good or bad, which enables the audience to focus on the ordinary and the exceptional at the same time. Television as a vehicle of popular culture utilizes stereotypes and generalizations of groups to connect and identify with an audience’s preconceived notions on the various groups. Popular culture both skewers and supports the status quo by focusing on commonalities of the broad culture, and attacking those commonalities (Rossides, 2003). Following the understanding that a popular culture exists in which commonalities can be recognized and skewered allows the creation of satirical programs that lampoon shared understandings of the American public. Satirical programming is based on the assumption that the audience will be able to share in the meaning of the joke and find the common and intended humor that is coded within the message.

Due to the extensive technologic advances in communication and media, there is a broad usage of media carriers and a clear influence mass media has. All institutions are directly connected to media: religion, politics, family, government, criminal justice and education. Media culture is used to label the production of language and perspectives by mass media. Television has become more relatable and tolerable to mass audiences. It presents commonly held values and norms (Snow, 1983). Snow notes that media influence does occur but, “audiences must willingly participate and accept perspectives and content presented” (p 30). This active participation requires an audience to read between the lines in the presentation of issues, the mere presence of an issue and the absurdity noted within an issue are not enough to argue a program’s political and social values.

“Whereas previously the landscape of collective nostalgia was inhabited mainly by persons, places, and events of a political or civic character, today it is inhabited increasingly and perhaps even predominantly by media creations, personalities, and allusions” (Davis, 1979, p. 125). We are increasingly living in a culture that celebrates the creation of media characters and figures, and is presented to audiences.

The media culture that is created with the sheer overwhelming saturation is blamed for declining values, religion, trust in politics, increases in crime and in general a depraved and corrupt society. The majority of television is comprised of fiction, which has the ability to have more influence over the general public. Because audiences expect fiction to have less influence, and believe entertainment and persuasion to be separate processes, they watch in a more relaxed situation. Media culture’s influence and potential power cannot be denied because of the volume of programming swamping viewers at all times and universality of television (McCullagh, 2002).

Woodward (2007) provides three levels of political meaning that exist in media culture: content as preference for a political position; content as reconstructing an event from the political past with a particular emphasis or perspective; and content as indirectly endorsing or devaluing certain groups

(women, racial minorities, religions, homosexuals, corporations etc). *South Park* clearly falls into all three levels as it advocates political positioning, reconstructs events providing emphasis, and endorses *and* devalues various groups, often the same groups at different times. Though it should be noted that it is contradictory in some terms, for example, one week the program could seemingly be advocating for gay rights, whereas repeatedly other weeks it will utilize gay stereotypes to garner entertainment.

It is argued that “the average American spends more than four hours a day watching television. Four hours a day, 28 hours a week, 1456 hours a year” (Hazen & Winokur, quoted in Giroux, 1999, p. 3). It is obvious that the sheer volume of consumption of television affects identities and beliefs. “When politics is cloaked in the image of innocence, there is more at stake than simple deception. There is the issue of cultural power and how it influences public understandings of the past, national coherence, and popular memory in ways that often conceal injustice, criticism, and the possibility of democratic renewal” (Giroux, 1999, p. 124) Children as representative of innocence provides unique opportunities to exert cultural power and influence.

Media culture redefined childhood and what it is to be a child in America (Otto, 2005). From *Dennis the Menace* and *The Brady Bunch* to *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, childhood as presented and viewed in media culture has transformed alongside a transformation of real-life children and what it is to actually be a child in America. *South Park* specifically is changing the use of childhood cartoon to present political and social issues to a mainstream adult audience.

According to Hollander (2008) news audiences have grown increasingly partisan and migrated to sources perceived as friendly and away from those perceived as less friendly. The increase in partisanship and polarization of audiences has opened the niche markets of cable programming and fragmented the audience into a variety of interest groups. An emphasis in self-confirmatory news sources has increased the popularity of punditry and entertainment news. This media migration and its increasing in polarization raises the potential importance for a program like *South Park* as it skewers

both sides, therefore the audience will not only agree in part, regardless of a stance on a political issue, but also be the subject of the joke, as the show skewers the opposing side of the same issue. “The remaining audience, more interested and more partisan, now has the opportunity to seek out news sources that confirm beliefs or to avoid sources that challenge those beliefs, which can lead to even more extreme positions on social and political issues” (p. 34).

Mittell (2001) argued that *The Simpsons* redefined traditional generic codes and discourses, and that rather than being fixed, genres mix and evolve. *The Simpsons* cannot merely be viewed through the genre of “cartoon” or “sitcom” but rather a combination and distinct grouping of genres. It is no longer possible to assume that animated programming and “cartoons” are targeted to children because of the sole fact that they are animated. Instead, we must consider the plot, satirical and parody quality of the programming, which can be targeted to adults. Mixed and parodic programs cannot be judged utilizing a traditional postmodern rubric.

Parody requires background knowledge of what is being presented, this knowledge of intertextuality from other programs being satirized in order to understand the humor in the parody. Parody benefits from teaching media literacy without feeling like a lesson. Although it lacks the depth of a book, television media allows an interest and draw that is rarely competed with (Gray, 2005).

## **2.2 Cultivation Theory and Mainstreaming**

Gerbner & Gross (1976) said that viewing of media programming, specifically concerned with violence will have an effect on the attitudes and beliefs of the viewer. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli (1986) argued that while religion or education had previously been greater influences on social trends and mores, now "television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history...Television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources ... The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment" (pp. 17 - 18). This exposure to

television then subtly influences and creates ideas and perceptions within society. This is of importance as *South Park* along with other satirical programs that deal with political and social values and ideas place importance, or in other cases devalue the importance of various positions.

Miller (2005) said that television viewing may absorb or override differences in perspective and behavior that stem from other social, cultural, and demographic influences. It represents the homogenization of divergent views and a convergence of disparate viewers. This mainstreaming effect and homogenization of beliefs and attitudes is important when considering culture war issues as presented in popular media. Specifically when ridiculing through satire and parody, the mainstreaming view of extremism as an absurd ideology, and furthermore, providing a reasonable stealthy conservative viewpoint positioned as moderate and apolitical allows viewers to see the perceived “normalcy” in the view point.

Milkie’s (1999) and Gunther and Storey’s (2003) argue that one’s own media exposure can be linked to one’s perceptions of other people’s attitudes, beliefs, and or behaviors regarding the media content in question.

### **2.3 Satire, Parody and Humor**

Satire is a combination of two messages, the direct (explicit) message, and the indirect (implicit) message. A direct message lies with what the satire is actually saying with language, while the indirect message is implied (Gruner, 1965). When Jonathan Swift famously advocated poor children to be used to feed the rich, his direct message was that poor children be used to feed the rich, while his indirect and implicit message is noting the absurdity and the discrepancy between rich and poor (Swift, 1729/1969).

Expressions of satire will combine in various ways: aggression, play, laughter and judgment. To combine them effectively a person’s culture must be taken into account to understand what is acceptable. Combined views of appropriateness gauge what is allowed satirically. When aggression appears in comedy, typically in limited characters, comedy becomes satiric comedy and must balance

aggression and judgment (Test, 1991). Test argues that satirists generally deal with caricatures, as they are simple rather than complex characters. Caricature is inherent in satire and dependent within it for humor. Reliance on caricature in satire allows for presentation of absurd situations and ideologies presented as a means of lampooning.

Any and all political authority can expect satirical attacks as they are tangible representations of political and social issues. Satirists work to both entertain and criticize. The aesthetic and intellectual components must both be taken into account. Political satire engages groups in debate, juxtaposing one side of an issue with the opposing side of the same issue (Bloom & Bloom, 1979). Culture war issues are divided by oppositional viewpoints and polarities. When satire tackles a culture war issue, it is inherently divided, and easily presented as opposing group debate. The political and social institutions and people that represent the varying issues become satirical fodder.

Chela Sandoval explains that parody, “is an art form that requires the coexistence of inherited and dominant cultural norms and traditions, which it mimics, ridicules, and transforms” (2000, p. 25). The mimic, ridicule and transformation of the original underscore the importance of understanding the original. The transformation also places importance on the altered parody as being different, unique and special.

Parody utilizes imitation of an original work sometimes at the expense of the original (Hutcheon, 2000). This imitation must have an appreciation and understanding of the original in order to properly imitate and be understood as a parody. Dentith (2000) notes that parody consists of any cultural practice that provides polemical imitation of a different cultural text. Parody is a demonstration of understanding the original while placing in a new context that alters the original understanding.

Parody can be used to facilitate dialogue, debate and conversation between cultures as utilized from the original text to the parodied version of the original. Parody is an area of contact between groups (Pratt, 1996). This contact and conversation between texts emphasizes the importance in the

creation of the secondary or parodied text as legitimate social critique and an addition rather than merely a satire.

“Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing” (Kant, 1987). Absurdity is essential in the comedic sphere. A clear absurdity is required in order to illicit the satire or parody and laughter.

Comic narratives are semiotically ambiguous, although the structure of the joke can be incongruous, or both plausible and implausible. Working with a realist narrative framework, and characters as objects of emotional investment by the audience in which events unfold, there are vast possible ways of achieving humorous ends. Cues and markers are utilized in semiotic mechanisms to interact with an incongruity, achieving humorous irony. *South Park* is an example of realist narrative utilizing established characters with known and expected personalities that are confronted with unfolding events. The comic narrative is intended to be funny, but funniness is subordinated to other meaning and serious statement about our world (Palmer, 1994: 111-121).

Comic identity is a discursive construct in which themes of jokes are taken from external sources rather than derived from the joke’s semiotic structure alone. Considering the argument Palmer makes in which differences between comedic programs is the construct of the joke, places programs into comic genres. Ideologically, incongruous situations in absurd ways are used to achieve propositions that a comedic program is intending to establish (Palmer, 1987). *South Park* exemplifies a new genre of satirical programming that presents current culture war issues in absurd situations as social commentary.

In *Political Humor*, Charles E. Schutz maintains that coupled with political satire, is comic invective as the most predominant form of political humor. Invective is verbal abuse and ridicule. Comic invective is basically negative but serves a very real function in the electorate, that by providing a release of tensions through humor, comic invective sublimates warfare. Negative political humor serves

as a positive by maintaining anti-political and anti-partisan attacks. Comic invective skewers both sides of the political spectrum. By utilizing wordplay and wit, a diffusion of aggression through comedy becomes essential political and social commentary. Comic invective allows an outlet toward a person that may be targeted, when an issue or ideology may be much more difficult to extract humor from. The key to political humor is dispassion, and critical neutrality. Political humor serves to acknowledge the flaws we all have and seems to revel in disillusionment with status quo, whatever that may be (Schutz, 1977).

“Parody works in great part by exceeding tacit limits on expression- the appropriate, the rational- but it does so to reveal limitations that others would want to keep hidden” (Hariman, 2008: p. 251). Humor allows a pushing of limits that would otherwise be left unexposed and discussion of issues sometimes viewed as taboo to be discussed openly in public. *South Park* has notably tackled taboo issues unapologetically. Hariman furthers the work of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on the novel by expanding to the public sphere the articulation of public identity via four operations: doubling and imitation, carnivalesque spectatorship, leveling and transforming the world of speech into an agnostic field of proliferating voices (Hariman, 2008). Hariman argues that in order to understand parody, one must understand the subject that is to be parodied. To be in on the joke, one must be familiar with the subject of the joke. *South Park* viewers must have some awareness of the culture war issues and familiarity with the subjects of satire in order to fully appreciate the humor that is being presented. “The parodied object is held up to be seen, exposed, and ridiculed, rather than discussed, amended, and enacted” (Hariman, 2008: p. 255).

Preconditions to successful reception of comedic endeavors exist in commonality between the culture out of which jokes are produced and the culture and ‘frame of mind’ of the receiver. Incomprehension by the receiver kills a joke, while incomprehension by the butt of the joke is irrelevant, and in some instances part of the joke itself (Palmer, 1994). Popular satirical programs not only are

examples and representatives of their genre and political and social comedy, but also of the culture of the audience that supports and views them. Comprehension of the social and political satire by the audience is evidenced by continued popularity and ratings. Representation of the audience; raises the significance of social impact that a program carries for that audience.

Young people are increasingly drawn to late-night and comedy programs as a source for information on political and social matters. They seek out entertainment-based programs as sources for news and have recognition of political news, but lack any in-depth recall of the specific information (Hollander, 2005). This increasing draw of entertainment-based programs that satirize political and social issues, increases the potential impact on young viewers who are turning away from traditional sources of news and social commentary and toward entertainment-based programs.

The melding of news, comedy and entertainment has created a climate that portrays political figures in archetypal roles of hero, fool and villain (West & Orman, 2003). The public must be able to vilify parties and root for heroes, not only in their chosen entertainment, but in the news presented to them on the various political issues of the day, to include cultural war issues. Placing blame on characters representing opposing issues creates a needed narrative (Woodward, 2007). Public discussion and discourse is thereby forced and framed as opposition of the characters in the public sphere, tangled in struggle against each other (Weaver, 1976). The characters on satirical programs represent and embody particular issues.

A principle of political satire lies in pitting the “presumptions and pretensions of the politicians against the intuitions and instincts of the commonplace” (Street, 2001, p. 69). Political satire plays upon expectations of the audience to achieve laughter when confronted with the unexpected or the opposite of what was expected with regard to politics and social issues.

Baym (2001) points out that entertainment can also engage and cause consideration of issues. Entertainment does not have to be merely a diversion or distraction from important culture war issues,

but rather place them in context. Entertainment also has the ability to present such issues in a manner that is non-threatening.

Political correctness requires social sensitivity in language and manners toward gender, race, religion, sexual orientation and nationality, which has unyieldingly sprung forward over the past few decades. The basic orientation of political correctness assumes that there are two sides to any given issue, for or against. Despite a clear need for tolerance, the extreme has resulted in overly mechanical and restrictive social requirements that impede an open expression of speech and thought. Comedic programs, such as *Seinfeld*, began satirizing the new liberal political correctness wave in being as constrictive as conservative ideologies (Pierson, 2001).

Henry (2007) notes that a similar animated satirical program, *The Simpsons*, which in many ways paved the way for *South Park*, parodies and satirizes American political and social realms, but from a mostly leftist political position where it exposes hypocrisies in society. Although the two shows share large similarities, I argue that *South Park* lambastes both the left and the right, and cannot be held as a media darling wholly from either side.

## **2.4 Culture Wars**

Hunter (1991) indicated a cultural gap in the nation. Although the variety of issues that came to be coined the culture war, were seemingly unrelated, they had in effect a strong connection placing a wedge between those on opposing sides of the various issues. Supporters do not have to stand hand-in-hand on every conservative or liberal issue, but rather the issues themselves are divided between conservative and liberal lines. Hunter uses orthodox for conservative stances; and progressive or modernist for liberal stances. The realms of disagreement occur in five areas: family, education, the popular media, law and electoral politics. These realms house the various culture war issues of dispute. The hot-button issues are discussed, argued and passionately fought within the five spheres of influence. It is these issues that place homosexuality at odds with the traditional family, the teaching of evolution at

odds with religion, sex education at odds with abstinence, censorship at odds with freedom of speech, pro-life at odds with pro-choice and thusly republican conservatives at odds with democratic liberals. It is important to understand that these issues on opposing spectrums of the political debate are not abstract ideas to the people of the nation, but rather are representative of the people who support either end of the debate. Although Hunter defined a spectrum for culture war issues, the five categories of family, education, the popular media, law and electoral politics are not sufficient or appropriate for the purposes of this project. All issues defined in *South Park* and other satirical programs will fall under the popular media sphere.

Pat Buchanan brought the idea of culture wars to a mass audience during his 1992 Republican National Convention speech in Houston, Texas. “The agenda Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton would impose on America — abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat — that's change, all right. But it is not the kind of change America wants. It is not the kind of change America needs. And it is not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God's country” (Buchanan, 1992). The key word in this speech is “change.” This places the wars in a dichotomy of maintaining the same, and changing or pushing values further.

The split in politics and social values lies between a desire for tradition, and a need to progress further. What is needed to bridge the gap in value placement is discussion and debate, which is healthy and necessary to settle the culture war dispute. A view of multiculturalism is needed, where opposing sides of any given issue are appreciated and celebrated as essentials to a thriving democracy. In understanding the culture wars, one must have humility, courage, charity, intersubjectivity and understanding of the issues. Those caught up in the culture war debate must understand and appreciate their opposition, not merely vilify and demonize them. A free expression of ideas and viewpoints must be embraced. (Selbo, 2003).

The culture wars continue to endure in the political and social sphere more than 15 years after the coining of the term. People continue to be given polar and opposing alternatives to a variety of issues, including: abortion, gay rights, gun control, the flag, the pledge, Terri Schiavo, stem cells, and the war in Iraq. There is opposition to the idea that the culture war exists, countering that it is inconsequential and that politics has always been partisan. (Dionne & Cromartie, 2006).

“When you have such a profound cultural division in the country, it is hard to find those who are above the fray. Cultural differences are, in fact, far more profound than political differences. Whether one is culturally liberal or conservative defines the way you see the world, your basic values. People seem to choose up sides, especially those in the world of communications” (Bresler, 2004, p.30). Robert J. Bresler argued that the media is increasingly shying away from unbiased news reporting and toward opinionated and entertainment takes on news. He noted that until a truce is found in the culture wars, media will continue to reflect the divide. Many satirical programs closely resemble news programs and audiences are inundated with opinions on both sides of the cultural divide in a medium that postures itself as neutral.

The United States has seen the intense spread of culture wars beginning with the social movements in the 1960s viewed as threatening to conservative values and institutions. The culture wars raged through the 1980s and the Reagan-era, into the 1990s and the Clinton era with a monopolizing of talk-radio by conservative pundits and a control over government by Democrats. The media takes a large responsibility in the creation and fanning the flames of the culture wars from both sides of the political and social spectrums (Kellner, 1995).

Woodward (2007) says that public discourse in the media culminates around culture war issues. Popular culture and the mass media have the ability to define society as it is, and as it wishes to be. Culture wars in the media have been a key issue as to why entertainment media has been demonized and acts as a controversial lightning rod in public discourse.

## 2.5 *South Park*

Brody (1999) charges *South Park* as being childish and offensive. He argues that the show provides its largely college-aged viewers with escapism into politically subversive and incorrect territory while maintaining that it provides little more than potty humor and worry-free territory. It is clear that the satirical appreciation of the program and its purposefully skewering of absurd ideology is missed.

Viewers are “turning to *South Park* for the same kind of satiric take on current events that they got from Jay Leno's monologue or The Daily Show's fake newscasts. In "Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants," the boys are captured by al Qaeda in post-9/11 Afghanistan. In "Two Days Before the Day After Tomorrow," Cartman and Stan accidentally destroy *South Park's* biggest beaver dam, causing a Katrina-like flood. In "The Passion of the Jew," Cartman tries to rid *South Park* of Jews after seeing *The Passion of the Christ*” (Devin, 2006). This effectively places *South Park* in at level with satirical peers in the entertainment and social commentary realm. Devin recalls Trey Parker’s Peabody Award acceptance speech, “When Matt and I first started making *South Park*, we asked ourselves two questions: What is socially responsible broadcasting, and how can artists provoke a call to change?” Despite laughter from the audience regarding socially responsible broadcasting, clearly socially responsible is satirizing hypocrisy when it is found, regardless of the political or social spectrum. But possible stealthy approaches to ideology must be considered.

Grigoriadis (2007) wrote of *South Park* as a response to moral panics in the United States on issues of big and small concern. It is “the most ideologically opaque political show on *television*, fostering an open-ended dialogue on difficult questions like whether one has a duty to obey unfair laws or if there is a God in an evil world. Unlike *The Simpsons*, which is intellectual and pleasantly dumb in its portrayal of American life, using both to further a leftist agenda, *South Park* offers simple parables — often with an optimistic message — to take aim at all issues without ever showing its hand.” In her article, Grigoriadis notes that *South Park's* humor is a combination of radical individualism and

conservative rationale. Stone and Parker refuse to label their political views and refuse to be labeled libertarian, which has been assigned to them in recent years, while also arguing that the label of *South Park* Conservatives, is dumb.

In an interview with *TIME*, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone referred to the critical shift from viewing the program as merely vulgar to regarding it as social commentary, “We created a brand for ourselves, so that now people can't get mad at what we do, because then they're just making fun of themselves. We had an animated Muhammad five years ago. But people say, "Oh, yeah, that's just *South Park*.”

Anderson (2005) cites *South Park*, alongside the conservative blogosphere, *FOX News*, conservative talk radio, and anti-liberals as being a backlash against liberalism and toward conservative stances. He argues that due to the satirical programs’ targeting of the Hollywood elite and “left-wing celebrities” such as Rob Reiner, Barbara Streisand and Sean Penn, as well as left-causes such as: environmentalism, political correctness and gay rights, that *South Park* is in effect, anti-liberal, and conservative. Unfortunately, Anderson cherry-picks episodes for analyzing, focusing merely on episodes that provide liberals as the butt of the joke, while leaving out episodes that target conservatives, or more importantly, episodes that target both the left and the right on culture war issues. When asked about *South Park* being described by Anderson as anti-liberal satire, Stone replied, “I think that’s a fair description of some of the show’s politics. But you could also easily write a book called “*South Park* Liberals,” because we’ve attacked a lot of funny stuff that conservative people and institutions do in America. But we’re the only show that rips on Rob Reiner and antismoking laws and hippies, so we get that label” (Poniewozik, 2006). It is easy to find programming that negatively satirizes conservatives in Hollywood, but more difficult to find programs that negatively satirize liberals, and even more difficult to find one program that targets both, this is *South Park*. The concern for this project is the stealthy conservative approach in which, on the surface both the conservative and liberal extremes are targeted,

thereby seemingly advocating for a middle-ground moderate approach, while between the lines analysis provides illumination of a stealthy conservatism.

In a 2006 interview with *Reason*, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone responded to claims that they were Libertarian's, Stone saying, "People started throwing that word around to describe us right around the second or third season. They would sit us down and go, "So are you libertarian?" And I would always say, "I don't know, am I? You've seen my stuff...I still don't really know the answer to that question. I think I am, though." Parker replied, "I think it is an apt description for me personally, and that has probably seeped into the show. But we never set out to do a libertarian show." When pressed to explain what parts of libertarianism they believe they fell into they responded they merely do not like being told what to do, think or say.

Parker and Stone noted their dislike for extremists, "*South Park* has a simple formula that came from the very first episode, "The Spirit of Christmas," which featured Jesus and Santa fighting over who owned the holiday. There was Jesus on this side and there was Santa on this side, there's Christianity here and there's Christmas commercialism here, and they're duking it out. And there are these four boys in the middle going, "Dude, chill out." It's really what Team America is as well: taking an extremist on this side and an extremist on that side. Michael Moore being an extremist is just as bad, you know, as Donald Rumsfeld. It's like they're the same person. It takes a fourth-grade kid to go, "You both remind me of each other." The show is saying that there is a middle ground, that most of us actually live in this middle ground, and that all you extremists are the ones who have the microphones because you're the most interesting to listen to, but actually this group isn't evil, that group isn't evil, and there's something to be worked out here." Parker and Stone noted that growing up in the 1980's, they developed a punk sensibility where rebelling against popular concepts whether they be Reagan and Bush, or against punk sensibilities in college as they became the norm (Gillespie & Walker, 2006). While the middle ground

approach toward moderation is overtly argued within the issues, we found a subversive, stealthy conservative approach toward culture war issues.

Johnson-Woods (2007) claims that *South Park* is directly centered in popular culture and refers to it as another “hyper-ironic” television program that requires active viewing by an audience. The show follows a basic sitcom format: “the show opens, a problem is presented, chaos ensues, the problem is solved, and order is reinstated” (p.80). The show is not particularly innovative in its format as a hyper-ironic cartoon, considering shows like *The Simpsons*, but what *South Park* provides is a familiarity in format combined with previously completely taboo social and political topics. “Because of its multiple layers of meaning, *South Park* humor can be enjoyed at a variety of levels... Parody, satire, caricature, punning, ridicule, silliness, absurdity, irreverence, incongruity, and slapstick overlap and collide in the best *South Park* episodes” (p. 90-100). The show celebrates intertextuality, cultural cannibalism, and media self awareness that audiences currently possess. It is a show in which the children are the moral compasses and point out the absurdities in society. Despite being originally feared by the right as a left-wing program, and later being praised by the right as representative of a new type of conservative, the program is not a vehicle directly aligned to either side of the political spectrum. While utilizing stereotypes for various minority groups, celebrities as spokespersons for various interest groups, and staple characters from the town to pit against one another, *South Park* presents its unique brand of politics (Johnson-Woods, 2007).

A rhetorical strategy utilized not only by popular culture, but specifically by *South Park* is that of extreme exaggeration in which prejudices and stereotypes are presented (Samuels, 2008). Samuels criticizes the prejudice and believes *South Park* is a vehicle for circulating intolerance and racism under the guise of harmless humor. I believe that *South Park* instead is speaking to a media savvy audience that deciphers and reads between the intolerant lines. Groening (2008) argues that *South Park* is an example of cynicism and apathy in the media that has no use for ideologies and declares all things to be

equal. “*South Park* must be seen as deeply politically ambivalent. This ambivalence makes the show an effective mirror for a politically polarized nation racked by culture wars because in it every political stripe can see its own ideologies reflected and thus seemingly justified” (Becker, 2008, p. 160). Becker argues that the program offers no clear political worldview and no political solutions.

Fallows (2008) believes *South Park* is representative of American culture as becoming increasingly “all or nothing” in its ideological approach, taking us into an absurd extremism. “*South Park* encourages us to think beyond mere repetition of ideological clichés and explore more creative ways of dealing with old problems” (Fallows, 2008, p.165).

## Chapter 3: Methodology

*South Park* will be examined in the context of a few categories. For the purposes of this project, the show will be analyzed in the context of culture war issues as the means to provide examination of polarization of the political spectrum. The program must be viewed with an understanding of intertextuality in popular culture, because popular comedic programs pull from various other texts in popular culture as setting the scene for satire. Main and secondary characters will be analyzed as they relate to culture war issues, their motives will be taken into account as providing meaning in the resolution of culture war issues within the show, the problem-solution and conflict resolution of culture war issues is essential to analyze for this project, and language choices that will comprise satirical representation. Finally, satire is an important part of this project; its direct and indirect messages in the show will be analyzed with particular attention to the indirect, comedic component of the message

*South Park* is chosen as an example of communicating to a mass audience via satirical social and political messages. It is important to utilize the entire spectrum of *South Park*'s 12 seasons and overview its 181 episodes in order to gauge the satirical representations of politics, political and social ideology and opinions and representations of culture war issues. Since the program has remained a staple in the world of adult satirical comedy for the last 12 years, it is an excellent vehicle to examine in this realm. Therefore, all episodes, up to but not including season 13 which is being aired at the time of the writing of this paper, will be granted an initial viewing. It is also necessary to view the vast majority of the episodes to understand a general sense of the program, its political and social perspective and agenda, possible jokes that overlap episodes, character development throughout the seasons and depth of character, popular culture references that adapt over time, choice language that is utilized and repetition of culture war issues over time.

As previously mentioned, *South Park* is created within a week of the original airing, and as such, provides a snapshot of American culture. Issues in any given week are immediate fodder for analysis by

an audience. In the episode “About Last Night” (2008), Barack Obama’s presidential win was shown only 23 hours after the actual event, including excerpts of both President-elect Obama’s and Senator John McCain’s speeches. The immediacy of the program also noted the exuberant reaction of the Obama voters and the strong sense of defeat of the McCain camp. Access to the episodes online also provided time markers in the episode which will be convenient to return to specific episodes and segments within an episode for secondary analysis.

Viewing of episodes was divided into two initial groups, with the possibility of further viewings to follow. In the first viewing, I gathered a general sense of the program and recurring themes throughout the entire up-to-date catalog of *South Park* episodes. The first set of viewings was guided by brief plot synopsis for each episode provided by ComedyCentral.com. Plot synopsis will act as an initial guide in locating culture war issues that dominate a particular episode. In the initial viewing, I took notes on the basic premise of an episode, and whether or not culture war issues appeared, which culture war issue was present and to what extent. I also noted the stance of the program on that issue, whether it be skewering through satire the conservative side, liberal side, or both sides.

In the second viewing of episodes, a narrowing of specific episodes was done. In-depth notes were taken on the episodes. I handwrote the notes as to be able to take them without distraction from moving to and from processing document to program playing. The criteria for episodes to be analyzed further included: relation to culture war issues, presence of an issue that causes social or political polarization or extremism. The initial presence of culture war issues within an episode acted as a marker to further analyze the particular episode or portion of an episode. Culture war issues are of particular concern, because the communicative properties that are utilized in mass media tend to be extremist and polarizing. In essence, the more divisive the issue, the more interest garnered by the program and audience. When culture war issues are presented, they are funneled through the media in oppositional and conflicting ways pitting one side against the other. Although Hunter (1991) argues that culture war

issues must fall under one of five areas of disagreement: family, education, the popular media, law and electoral politics, I argue that culture war issues in the context of popular satirical programming are encompassed by popular media and must be saturated already throughout the media to be satirized, then polarization on an issue must occur regardless of the area of disagreement. Almost any issue or topic can become a culture war issue when it is polarizing, divisive and places groups at odds with one another in the mass social or political arenas. The presence of an issue falling under one of Hunter's five categories is noted but not required for the purposes of this study. I then looked into satire and language in presenting the issue, which is noted later. Because the advocacy, presentation, satire and absurdity surrounding the given issues was be more important than the presence of the issue itself, the appearance of an issue could not alone be enough to note the program's political ideology, nor will the overt linguistically supported argument be. An examination of how the program handles an issue and its satirical representation of that issue tells us more and explained the presence of possible absurd ideologies as well as the between the lines stealthy conservative approach.

Since the coinage of the term culture war became prominent over 15 years ago, issues have been added to the realm to include: abortion, gay rights, gun control, the American flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, right to death, stem cell research, sex education, profanity, immigration, undocumented workers in the United States, marriage, separation of church and state, the war in Iraq, violence and sex in the media, foreign policy, welfare programs, affirmative action, judicial advocacy, the death penalty, the war on drugs, legalization of drugs, hate crime legislation, racial profiling, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, bias in the news, the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, among others not mentioned and some stemming from issues mentioned. It is important to note that not every advocate on every issue mentioned is necessarily an ideologue or extremist, and many have moderate and varied arguments to support one side or the other, but for the purposes of this project these issues are chosen because there are extremist advocates on both sides and these issues which run the gambit with regards to a political

and social spectrum from moderate in the middle to extreme poles on either side. Culture war issues are chosen as a focus for this project for a few reasons. First, the realm of culture war issues is continuing, evolving and constantly being inundated with new issues. This was important because modern programming will most likely be concerned with current political and social strife and disagreements, and thus must chose from the ever evolving realm. Second, culture war issues are inherently polarizing and tend to foster extremism from both the left and right sides of political ideologies, which makes them of particular concern with this project as we are seeking extremism and absurd ideologies. Third, culture war issues provide fairly easy pinpointing in programming as tension is always a necessity to create drama, comedy and subsequent interest in characters, and characters over time become increasingly defined and relatable, thereby demonstrating the various actor representations of the culture war issues. Although culture war issues can be fairly broad in that they are always evolving and adding new issues to debate, it is the debate and polarization that makes it specific, the impassioned viewpoints on opposite ends of a spectrum are easy to find.

Selbo (2003) notes that understanding the culture wars, intersubjectivity and an understanding of the issues is important. I will note that as the researcher, I have followed culture war issues in the media closely over several years, particularly popular culture representations. Selbo also points out that those analyzing culture war issues must understand both sides. A free expression of ideas and viewpoints must be embraced. Therefore, I will set aside, as best as possible, my personal bias and opinions regarding specific culture war issues and debates, in favor of analyzing the text itself and what it may be presenting.

It is necessary to understand the various conservative and liberal positions on the culture war issues presented in *South Park* as it affects the analysis later. Positions on an issue were broken up into liberal, conservative and moderate ideology for the purposes of examining the show's central advocacy. Analysts have argued both that *South Park* is essentially a conservative program as well as the opposite

casting it as a liberal program. My analysis returned to the question of conservative versus liberal, examining through the culture war issue funnel, placing particular importance on satire and the presence of absurd ideologies as determining the true nature of the programs political and social values. Although the political spectrum is varied and extensive, the opposite poles, as they will be extremist positions on an issue, were easier to spot and label as either conservative or liberal. Since the program pulls from reality to engage in the culture war debate, those advocating on either side of an issue are placed as satirical representations from real world advocates, this allowed me to determine the conservative and liberal players on an issue, as the stance they take is parodied from real life debates on that given issue.

Popular culture is essential to examine in the context of this project. Modern comedic programs thrive on skewering and intertextualizing themselves and popular media figures. We live in an increasingly media driven society and the overlapping uses of other popular media programs in any given media program is a staple in entertainment today. The *South Park* episode “The Passion of the Jew” (2004) was a spoof and parody of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), “The Snuke” (2007) was a full episode parody of FOX’s hit drama “24”. Aside from full episodes of *South Park* being direct parodies of other programs, within individual episode are countless popular culture references. As Kellner (1995) argues, culture war flames are largely fanned by media. The idea of celebrity advocacy in particular will be of interest. Celebrities often become the face and persona of a particular culture war issue in the mass media. I examined the use of celebrities as both advocates and representatives of their particular issue and as caricatures of themselves satirically presented. I was interested in how the celebrity is presented in the context of culture war issues, what their message is, and what *South Park*’s response to that message is. As well as celebrities and societal figures, obviously politicians and moral, social and political advocates appear in the program and were included in the analysis of the program.

Characters were important to analyze in this project. The four main characters of Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick and Eric Cartman provided the majority of the information regarding absurd ideological representations in satirical programs. The four boys will have the most in depth character development, especially Stan, Kyle and Cartman. As noted by show creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Stan and Kyle were initially modeled after themselves respectively, while they later felt they relate more closely to the character of Cartman. Stan and Kyle are positioned as the voices of reason, whereas Cartman is positioned as their opposition in most matters. The character of Kenny is trademarked by his parka style jacket which covers most of his face thereby making his voice muffled, for dialogue by Kenny, closed captioning will be utilized in order to determine what he is actually saying

Although the show typically centers around the four boys, other characters were also included for analysis as they related to culture war issues in the program, to name a few, but not limit to: Butters, Token, Wendy, Chef, Mr. Garrison, the boys' parents, the mayor and various townspeople. Since the program follows a model much like *The Simpsons*, in which Springfield is inhabited by numerous important characters, so too is South Park, Colorado, within the program inhabited by telling individuals who inevitably play parts in relation to the culture war issues. These characters become more solidified as staples with familiar personalities and expectations of actions as the show progresses over time. Because character within fictional pieces serves the function of relating an audience to the program, character also plays a role in connecting real-life participants in culture war debates with the program's satirical take on the issues.

Motive was helpful to consider in the context of the characters as it helps in determining the true intent in presentation of absurd ideologies. Motive plays an important role in the development of a plot, as such, it was telling in the realm of distinguishing absurd ideology from sound arguments. The character of Cartman in particular requires analysis of his motives within episodes, as he is positioned as

the opposition often and has elaborate plots and plans to achieve his goals. Motive is at the heart of satire, when analyzing a character's true intentions, if they present an argument that casts the opposition as rational, in essence it will be an example of satire, as their true motive is presenting the opposition as absurd ideologically, and thereby parodying them for ridicule. The three-part story arc "Imaginationland" (2007) shows Kyle losing a bet to Cartman and having to perform fellatio on him as the payment of the bet. When Kyle is injured and on the verge of death, Cartman has a dramatic appeal to save Kyle's life, even crying and begging Kyle to survive. Although Cartman's actions and emotions would argue that he truly cares about Kyle, his motive is keeping Kyle alive in order to have him pay his debt, Cartman isn't interested so much in Kyle's life, but rather him being able to officially lose the bet and perform fellatio on him.

I needed to note the problem and solution provided within the episode regarding the culture war issue. How the conflict is resolved within the individual episodes provided insight into the characters and how the satire will be presented. The problem and solution was looked at individually, and as they relate to each other. The character(s) which solve the problem was also noted. "Butt Out" (2003) lampoons the often used *South Park* formula by having the boys see the predictable of what is to come. Basically the episodes in question start with the boys getting themselves in trouble and inciting a controversy between the townsfolk and/or a national interest group (or a major catastrophe) while trying to avoid punishments, subsequently learning a lesson from this conflict and explaining what they learned and teaching the townsfolk.

Language plays an important role in any analysis of comedy and satire. The rhetorical uses of language in a satirical context are informative to analyze as to how and what the advocacy of the program actually is. Sarcasm, parody, intertextuality from other popular culture texts will all play a part in painting a portrait presenting the culture war issues. Each character utilizes specifically chosen language that enhances the depth of the characterization over time. *South Park* utilizes profanity, as well

as racial, ethnic, religious and stereotypical slurs, for comedic purposes, and as such, they were included for analysis as they can be important in detecting and determining the purpose of an absurd ideology. The literal language that is chosen when analyzing a satire helps in providing the direct meaning, while the context and presentation of the language, whether it be through parody, changing of voice or tone, mocking, mimicking or clear and overtly “seriousness” in a change of tone comprise the indirect message satirically.

Coupled with presentation of culture war issues within the show, humor and jokes within satirical presentation lie at the heart of this thesis. Since jokes and humor rely on the laughter and positive feelings that they induce, viewers are more open minded to messages received through jokes and thereby are more likely to accept the messages sent. Lessons, advocacy and presentations of ideology through the use of humor will be less likely to feel like lessons, advocacy and presentations of ideology, which will remove a barrier to accepting the message by the viewer. Humor places the viewer “in on the joke” with the writers and creators of a given program. Humor connects the show’s creators with their specific audience and thereby, the creators understand the intertextual capabilities of their audience, whether it be television shows and films that the audience has grown up with, or social and political issues they are aware of currently. Therefore, jokes and humor from *South Park* will be important to examine closely as it is the essential message of a comedic program. It is also important to remember that because a joke is presented does not necessarily mean that the advocacy lie with the side making the joke, but could also lie with the side in which the joke is aimed or targeted.

Satire is comprised of both direct explicit and indirect implicit messages. The direct message is fairly obvious, it is comprised of what the character is actually saying, the specific argument they make with their literal choice of words. There is also the indirect message that is somewhat hidden between the lines. This indirect and implicit message was determined as to the context it is presented. If motive is understood, then I will be able to determine the true intentions and thereby the seriousness in the

presentation of an argument as true to the literal language, or satirically presented as an indirect message. I will analyze both the direct and indirect messages in satirical presentations within *South Park*. The direct message will possibly demonstrate the absurd ideology as it is reflected and represented in the program from real world counterparts. In essence the joke is the fact that real people share these beliefs. The indirect message, which is more subtle and hidden, is not the joke, but rather the opposite of the joke. For example, if a satirical representation of abortion advocates is over-the-top, a parody and a presentation in absurd ideological contexts that demonstrates them as ridiculous, then the indirect message would be that those abortion advocates are extremists and a more moderate approach would be reasonable. Satire also often utilizes stereotypes that are recognizable to a mass audience and indicative as presentation of various social groups, thereby, stereotypes in the satirical context will be recorded to add to the wealth of information for analysis. These stereotypes are commonly understood and can be identified by a mass audience, making them easy to note.

The second viewing of the episodes that have been narrowed down was much more closely analyzed in depth. Notes were taken regarding the plot, what culture war issue is present, how the culture war issue is presented, the first and secondary satirical meaning, which characters advocate for what position regarding the culture war issue and how the culture war issue is resolved in the context of the program. If motive is related to the overall meaning and analysis of a particular issue, it was justly included in the notes. Cause and effect, problem-conflict and solution were indicated as relates to culture war issues. In addition to thematic and satirical information provided from the program, I noted the date of the original airing, which might be informative as to the events going on in the world at the time and the immediacy that the program has been known for in producing the show within one week of its original airing. I attempted to locate any presence of an absurd ideological stance in the presentation of the culture war issues.

Upon completion of the initial viewing and the second in-depth viewing and note taking process, analysis began. I had episodes for in-depth analysis written on individual papers allowing me to break them into groups. The notes with culture war episodes were shuffled to eliminate possible problems with sequence. I then went through the notes of the episodes one by one, placing them into groups, the first groups will consist of Hunter's categories of culture war issues: family, education, the popular media, law and electoral politics. The second grouping consisted of overlaps on issues. While an entire episode may not be devoted to a particular issue, often an issue might be raised in passing on an episode through a brief comment. I then placed the notes into groups consisting of conservative and liberal. This categorization was regarding the satirical overt stance, and not the secondary meaning.

After placing the episodic notes on *South Park* into various categories, connections were drawn between the episodes, and later, more extensively to the program itself. The overlap of culture war issue relation and political and social extremism suggested that an episode be analyzed further. At this point, I returned to a brief reading of interviews given by the show's creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, as to exactly how they label themselves. I used their responses on *South Park* in their own words as a basis to form a response in which I laid out my argument regarding absurdity and absurd ideology.

For the purposes of this project, I placed episodes and presentation of issues through overlapping categories previously mentioned, to be essentially two: relation to culture war issues, and social and political extremism. The episodes were mediated between the two categories through satire and humor. The results were what this project was looking to examine. Therefore, should an episode be directly related to culture war issues and presented in a political and social extremist polarization, the satire that mediates this and the possible creation for consumption of absurd ideological understanding was the end product for analysis.

After completion of groupings I first drew a series of connections and conclusions in the context of the first group of culture war issues, then the second group of overlap or repeat issues, and finally

with regards to the break up between conservative versus liberal issues and stances on issues. At this point, I was able to draw a logical argument once viewing the satire and comedy within individual episodes and in comparison to other episodes of culture war issues. I was able to determine where the show stands politically, and socially. The rhetorical arguments utilized via the satire used were telling as to the position of *South Park* creators toward culture war issues. There is a potential to draw further connections with *South Park* as representative of current social and political satire on television to the broader world of satirical programming and thereby make an argument on absurd ideology as it relates to satirical comedy on television in general.

I believe a critical analysis of the text *South Park* as an example of political and social satire was a relevant example of absurd ideology with regards to the culture wars. Once completing the initial viewing of the entire *South Park* catalog of episodes, and a secondary closer analysis of episodes dealing with culture war issues in the context of the real-world issues and implications and considering language, conservatism versus liberalism, comedy and satire to include overt and secondary messages, characters, motive and problem-solution comparisons, I made an argument as to the power and abilities of absurd ideology as mediated through satire within a comedic entertainment framework.

## Chapter 4: Analysis

Analysis was divided into subsections that were broken up according to culture war topical themes found in *South Park*. Although other culture war issues may have been presented in the program, the culture war themes: homosexuality, abortion, stem cell research, war, euthanasia, immigration, and presidential elections, were prominently featured, thus served the majority of close analysis. Issues of gay rights and gay marriage were included together in an overarching theme related to homosexuality. Abortion and stem cell research are paired together for analysis as the episodes tackled both at the same time. The section on war includes both engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan as the commentary provided satirizes pro-war and anti-war advocates and opinions on war in general. The category of Euthanasia is noteworthy in that it was nearly completely represented on the program as a satire and parody of a specific citizen, Terri Schiavo. The culture war issue of immigration is tackled by one episode, but features prominently in the current culture war debates. The culture war issue of presidential elections is categorized by elections in 2000, 2004, and 2008, each presidential election year during the run of the program. It is placed last in the groupings of culture war issues because presidential elections serve as a referendum on numerous culture war issues.

A final category of analysis is stealthy conservatism, with which this thesis intends to describe and explain. Subsection 4.7, stealthy conservatism, will examine the named presence in relation to episodes and culture war issues that are described in the first six subsections. Stealthy conservatism will be described as it relates to the program, but also as to what it is and how it is utilized. I explained the importance of stealthy conservatism as it relates to the media and specifically satirical and parody entertainment programs, as well as the relation to culture war issues in the media.

The analysis was extrapolated from both language used on the program and visual cues noted both in the initial and secondary viewing. Specific quotations are provided for several of the culture war episodes that demonstrate stealthy conservatism and are explained and argued as to how they are representative of stealthy conservative. Individual arguments and analysis are provided as the end of each episode used in each subsection and an explanation of the importance.

### 4.1 GAYS, GAY RIGHTS AND GAY MARRIAGE

*South Park* introduces its first gay character with Mr. Garrison, the boys' 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher. He is displayed as being incompetent, reciting incorrect facts to the boys regarding the Civil War. He uses a puppet named Mr. Hat, but believes the puppet to be real. He is also shown as sexually perverted and an inappropriate role model for children by the second episode "Weight Gain 4000" (1997) with writing on the blackboard in Spanish, various sexual comments and innuendos.

By the fourth episode, the show dedicated an entire episode to gays with "Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride" (1997). In the episode, Stan's dog Sparky is gay, Stan is upset as Cartman and others make fun of his dog for being gay. Stan asks Mr. Garrison to tell him what a homosexual is. Mr. Garrison's response is that, "Gay people are evil. Evil right down to their cold, black hearts, which pump not blood, like yours and mine, but rather thick, vomitous oil oozing through their rotten veins, now go play football like a good heterosexual." Mr. Garrison whose voice is stereotypically gay but acts ambiguously when confronted about his sexuality, demonstrates the extreme anti-gay viewpoint as absurd and irrational. Cartman, who tends to fall on a more conservative and intolerant side of given issues, says "My mom says God hates gay people that's why he smotes the sodomies in France" (1997) providing a satirized, wrongly worded and watered down version of real world religious arguments against homosexuality.

Stan attempts to change his dog's homosexuality by taking away his pink scarf and presenting him with a fancy female poodle, to whom Sparky forces down and steals her diamond collar. When Sparky overhears Stan's disappointment he runs away and comes upon Big Gay Al's Big Gay Animal Sanctuary. Big Gay Al is a stereotypical homosexual man known for his flamboyant and positive demeanor, wearing a pink shirt. For example, he almost always responds to the greeting "How are you?" with an upbeat lisp-tinged "I'm super! Thanks for asking!" At one point in the show, he runs an animal farm for gay animals that have been rejected by homophobic pet owners. Stan eventually goes to find his dog and is shown that many animals have been rejected by society due to their sexuality and have

come for sanctuary. Big Gay Al takes Stan on a boat ride that shows him how gays have been around throughout time, and the “oppressors” that gays need to watch out for are “Christians, Republicans and Nazis.” Stan is no longer bothered by his dog’s homosexuality and tells the town that he doesn’t care that his dog is gay, “It’s ok to be gay, it’s a beautiful thing.”

Parker and Stone utilize stereotypes in defining and presenting their first gay advocate character Big Gay Al. In order to present Sparky and Big Gay Al as homosexual, gay semiotics through dress and actions are utilized that appeal to the audiences preconceived societal stereotypes based on who homosexuals are and what they do, including negative stereotypes as evidenced by Big Gay Al’s extreme flamboyance in dress, appearance and speech. At the same time the show casts negative views on the extremist right wing that works to demonize gays, as seen by Mr. Garrison’s anti-gay tirade. It’s important to note the lumping together of “Christians, Republicans and Nazis” by Al, which places all three on the fringe of the right and thereby absurd to the left, Christians and Republicans are not as widely vilified by society at large, but by tying them in the comparison with Nazis, who are widely demonized by society the show is noting the extremist absurdity with all three in their view of gays and at the same time noting the intolerance of the left for Christians and Republicans by comparing them to Nazis based on their possible views toward gays. Based on the rhetoric of advocating for tolerance and acceptance of gays instead of shunning them from society, the stance appears to lie on the liberal side of the gay rights debate, but presents the argument by playing upon negative stereotypes of gays in society. Mr. Garrison displays self-hating repression of his own sexuality.

In the episode "Cripple Fight" (2001), Big Gay Al returns as the leader of the boys' Boy Scout troop and serves as a parody of the real life debate on the freedom of the Boy Scouts to enforce their own values and morals versus the ability for gays to be included and not discriminated against. The parents of the children are leery about a gay scout leader, and the club fires him, replacing him with a hyper-masculine Scout leader who is muscular and defined by his buzz cut. The boys rally to get Al

back as they are indifferent to Big Gay Al's homosexuality; but more importantly the new masculine Scout leader coerces the boys to take naked photos. Famed liberal attorney and advocate Gloria Allred and others lobby the Scouts to reaccept him, deciding to force the issue by suing the Scouts in a Supreme Court case that they win. Al rejects this, saying that he knows the Scouts are still good men, and since the Scouts are a private club, they should have the right to exclude people if they choose to, just as he has the right to express himself as a gay man. Big Gay Al views forcing any private group to accept gays as wrongfully imposing ones will on others. That satirized caricature of Allred proceeds to call Big Gay Al a "homophobe."

This episode appears to advocate more so for personal choice and respect of differences not only in sexuality but opinions, morals and values by utilizing the end lesson to point out the flaw in forcing the Boy Scouts to accept homosexuals into their club. Furthermore, the caricature of Gloria Allred places extremist liberals on the fringe of the debate and separates gays into freethinking political actors rather than a single acting political group. Again, Big Gay Al is a blatant stereotype whereas the Boy Scout leaders are not stereotyped with negative conservative brands; they are not portrayed as hating gays, but rather not accepting and afraid of the possible influence on the children. In fact, they are shown as very tolerant as Big Gay Al had served in the Scouts since he was a child and only when the parents raised concerns about him did they remove him. This places the groups at odds, although through their language and political/social opinions, both Al and the Scouts are demonstrated as being moderate and reasonable; Al serves as a stereotype for laughs, while the Scouts are shown as average Americans.

"The Death Camp of Tolerance" (2002) has Mr. Garrison being reinstated to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and Principal Victoria apologizing for firing him for being gay, noting that they would now respect his personal life and that they couldn't fire him for being gay anymore anyhow since laws would protect him and he could sue them for lots of money. Mr. Garrison sees this as an opportunity to get rich and

tries to be as inappropriate and overtly “gay” in the classroom as possible, enlisting the help of Mr. Slave, who is dressed in leather chaps, biker hat, and vest and a handlebar-moustache. Mr. Slave has a lisp. Mr. Garrison uses words “long,” “hard,” “silly” repeatedly and punishes Mr. Slave in the classroom in a sexual way. The boys are bothered and go to their parents to complain about their gayness in the classroom, which gets their parents angry at the children’s intolerance toward gays and prompts them to force a visit to the “Museum of Tolerance.” Mr. Garrison has disappointment at not being fired for his blatant inappropriateness goes further by putting the class gerbil Lemmiwinks into Mr. Slaves’ anus in front of the children. The Kyle and Stan feel guilty at being accused of being intolerant and homophobes and ask Chef for advice, Chef understands that the children are uncomfortable around Mr. Garrison because he is perverted and inappropriate with the children, and not because he is gay. Principal Victoria sends Chef to a tolerance seminar for calling him a “sick queer.” School councilor Mackey confronts the parents about sending their kids to a Tolerance Camp which is a parody of *Schindler’s List* (1993) having the political correctness advocates in charge of the camp as Nazis and the unaware and innocent boys as the Jewish Holocaust victims.

The German Tolerance camp Warden is brutal telling the boys, “You will make a painting that shows people of different races and sexual orientations getting along. Figerpaint. Figerpaint! You will not make any distinction between people of different colors! People with different sexual preferences! You will accept everyone!” Meanwhile the townspeople give Mr. Garrison an award for courage after dealing with their children’s behavior.

Mr. Garrison vents, “Look, just because you have to tolerate something doesn't mean you have to approve of it! If you *had* to like it, it'd be called the Museum of Acceptance! "Tolerate" means you're just putting up with it! You tolerate a crying child sitting next to you on the airplane or, or you tolerate a bad cold. It can still piss you off! Jesus Tap-dancing Christ!” The show is blanketly stating that tolerance has become so militant and forceful that it has essentially become intolerant. The show remarks that a

call for tolerance of homosexuals is asking people to ignore their personal morals and feelings and thereby imposing your own morals and feelings. They are advocating that homosexuals can be seen as “perverted” if they are “perverted” not merely because they are homosexual, but rather because of their inappropriate actions. At the same time, it is relevant to note that the only homosexuals being presented are inappropriate and perverted, thereby they alone portray the gay community as possibly inappropriate and perverted.

I believe this is a framing of the gay debate in a way that justifies intolerance and moves tolerance of gays into a stance that can be seen as intolerant itself of varying independent opinions and values. By providing only gay characters that are essentially poor role models for the children, the assumption can be made that all gays, as all gays in the context of the program, are in fact sexually perverted and dangerous role models for children. Political correctness was also being skewered here as it overemphasizes acceptance and tolerance over any real thought, position or opinion regarding issues. There is an apparent argument by satirizing the ignoring of differences in lieu of tolerance, whereas the show appears to be advocating understanding that differences do in fact exist, and should not be ignored even at the expense of avoiding a promotion of tolerance.

In “Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina” (2005), Mr. Garrison believes he was meant to be a woman and decides to undergo sex-reassignment surgery. This encourages Kyle to undergo surgery to become an African American basketball athlete, because he feels he should be one and Mr. Broflovski to undergo surgery to become a dolphin, because he’s always felt he was one. This presents sex reassignment surgery as absurd by comparing sex-reassignment surgery to an absurd surgery to transform from human to dolphin. There is an emphasis placed on the fact that the surgeries are merely cosmetic and used to make one look as they feel on the inside, as now Ms. Garrison finds out that just because she now has a vagina, she is not a fully functioning female, and cannot get pregnant. Also Mr. Slave, Mr. Garrison’s boyfriend decides to breakup with him because he is gay and attracted to men, not

women. As Mr. Garrison was the primary and most predominant homosexual representative on the program and previously was seen on the program as a gay man, this places the idea of sexual confusion, and stereotype that gay males wish to be women. Limiting exposure of gay characters puts all understanding of gays and gay issues on a limited amount of character representations of gays. If Mr. Garrison is one of few gay characters, and is shown to be sexually perverted and inevitably deciding to undergo sex reassignment surgery to become a woman, then the audience understanding of gays is skewed and slanted in a negatively biased fashion toward homosexuality.

The controversial culture war issue of gay marriage was tackled in "Follow That Egg!" (2005). Ms. Garrison is angry that her former lover Mr. Slave is attempting to marry Big Gay Al when Colorado legalizes gay marriage. Enraged, Ms. Garrison vows to fight gay marriage. "You can't get married, you're faggots! We'll just see about this, you fudge-packin' fags!! I'll stop that gay-marriage law!" Ms. Garrison becomes a parody of the far right and is representative of homophobic bigots. Ms. Garrison resembles extremist right anti-gay activists through her language:

These homosexuals think they can just step all over our traditions! Well I say: Marriage is a holy sacrament between a man and a woman! They passed this law behind our back! We need to tell the governor and the world that gay marriage is not okay! That homosexuals cannot muddy our traditions! And there is only one way for us, all together, to make that message very clear! We need to round up three or four queers and beat the livin' hell out of them! Come on, everybody! Let's get some queers, and some trucks, and have us a good old-fashioned fag drag!"

The people in the audience who were originally receptive to the argument that marriage is a holy sacrament between a man and a woman are now alienated by the "gay-bashing" call to action wanting to instead appeal to the governor. A man in the audience replies, "We don't "hate" homosexuals, we, we just don't want them to be able to marry." This places anti-gay marriage advocates as reasonable and in opposition to homophobic gay-haters who as represented by Ms. Garrison are shown as the absurd

extremists. The governor of Colorado is upset that he has to decide on the gay marriage debate, he doesn't have anything against homosexuals and has no cause to prevent them from having the same rights, but also understands and respects those who have moral objections to gay marriage. Although he is shown as being moderate on the gay marriage debate, he is also shown as indecisive and unwilling and unable to make the tough decisions that government must confront each day.

In order to prove to the governor that gay people should not be allowed to marry, Ms. Garrison decides to use the children as an experiment in displaying why they shouldn't be allowed to do so. The children are responsible for parenting an "egg-baby" for a week, all the couples are one boy and one girl, Ms. Garrison switches to put Kyle and Stan together, as the "gay parents" hoping that "boys will be boys" and break the egg. When Cartman accidentally breaks his egg, Ms. Garrison decides to give him a new one to show that heterosexual couples can keep the egg safe. Later, she hires a hit-man to "kill" Kyle and Stan's egg since they have kept it safe. The governor comes up with a solution:

I believe that I might have come up with a compromise to this whole problem that will make everyone happy! People in the gay community want the same rights as married couples, but dissenters don't want the word "marriage" corrupted. So how about we let gay people get married, but call it something else? *[everyone listens quietly]* You homosexuals will have all the exact same rights as married couples, but instead of referring to you as "maarriied," you can be... butt buddies. Instead of being "man and wife," you'll be... butt buddies. You won't be "betrothed," you'll be... butt buuuddies. Get it? Instead of a "bride and groom," you'd be... butt buddies.

When asked about lesbians, he replies, "Well like anyone cares about fuckin' dykes. *[the crowd goes into an uproar]* Oh, God, I was sure that would work. This places the idea of separate but equal, or civil unions versus gay marriage as satirized absurdity into the gay marriage debate. Gay slurs are used to connect with the audience as well as provide humor in equating to gay marriage. By comparing man and

wife, with what would be man and man, or husband and husband, and further comparing to “butt buddies” the show is essentially remarking on the absurdity of gay marriage as a whole and reminding the audience of possible negative bias through humor that connects the creators to the audience.

Unaware of the circumstances surrounding the egg and gay marriage debate, Stan and Kyle view their egg as representative of their friendship which is strained because Stan was afraid of Kyle stealing his girlfriend Wendy. When they finally present their egg in front of the governor, he signs gay marriage into law. The boys’ parents congratulate them for helping to advocate for gay marriage, unbeknownst to them. Mr. Slave and Big Gay Al are married, both wearing white wedding dresses. Again, a stereotypical view of gays wearing women’s clothing is utilized and playing upon those stereotypes of the absurdity that is argued as gay marriage. Although I don’t believe the show is overtly arguing against gay marriage, but initially stands in support, though through Stan and Kyle’s unknowing advocating of it, the show is reminding the audience of potential prejudice they may have toward gays and gay marriage, developing the potential discomfort that one may have regarding the issue.

It is worthwhile to note that Satan is portrayed as being gay in numerous episodes, as well as *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut* (1999). Satan enters a homosexual relationship with Saddam Hussein which is a continuing story arc throughout the seasons. This returns us to the limited portrayals of gays as representing gay issues with Mr. Garrison, Big Gay Al, Mr. Slave and Satan and Saddam Hussein all can be viewed as somewhat negative stereotypes. These stereotypes are called upon to provide humor for the audience which understands and may appreciate the stereotypes.

#### **4.2 Abortion and Stem Cell Research**

“Cartman’s Mom is Still a Dirty Slut” (1998) has a subplot involving Mrs. Cartman, who does not feel she is a responsible mother, and goes to an “Unplanned Parenthood” clinic seeking an abortion. After being told that it is too late for her to have an abortion, as her son is in fact 8 years old, Mrs. Cartman decides to try to change the law by sleeping with her Congressman, the Governor, and even President Bill Clinton. Finally, President Clinton agrees to change the law on late-term abortions. It is

after finally legalizing 40th trimester abortions when she learns what an abortion actually is, and that she had the word "abortion" confused with "adoption".

This episode explores a culture war issue early on in the series life. Satirizing the desire to extend late-term abortions notes the absurdity in the abortion argument. "Cartman's Mom is Still a Dirty Slut" demonstrates the indifference to the morality and value-laden arguments against late-term abortions by liberals as displayed by President Clinton's willingness to change his mind and limit the restrictions on abortions after having sex with Mrs. Cartman. Clinton is portrayed as being indifferent and only convinced when appealing to his satirized sexual appetite.

In 2008's "Eek a Penis!" Cartman is a parody of Edward James Olmos' character from the film *Stand and Deliver* (1988). As such, Cartman teaches a group of inner-city youth about cheating. He teaches them to memorize test answers, use cameras, and, in the case of a pregnant girl who comes to him for advice, advocates an abortion which he explains is "cheating nature itself", and that "white girls do it all the time and get away with it." Cartman compares and places abortion on par with cheating in a test, thereby placing a clear judgment on both. Abortion is rhetorically framed as a loophole around nature.

In the episode "Kenny Dies" (2001), Trey Parker and Matt Stone explore the controversial issue of stem cell research and utilizing aborted fetuses. The episode begins in an abortion clinic with a woman giving her permission for scientists to use her unborn child for stem cell research. Cartman stumbles upon biohazardous cargo that ends up being aborted fetuses, which he intends to resell for profit. Interfering with Cartman's fetus-for-profit business, the government puts a ban on stem cell research. Meanwhile, Kenny is diagnosed with a terminal illness, and his friends and family are told that he will probably die. Although Kenny dying is a common theme in *South Park* episodes, this time, his dying is decidedly more permanent and is used in opposition to the common theme by making this death much more serious, thereby causing Stan, Kyle and Cartman much distress.

A researcher explains to Cartman how stem cells actually work, in that they can be used to replicate other cells in the body, therefore they might be used to help Kenny. Cartman asks about using stem cells to duplicate a "Shakey's Pizza", to which the researcher points out that lumber would be more advisable. Cartman gives a speech in front of the House of Representatives on behalf of stem cell research. He succeeds in getting the ban lifted by singing "Heat of the Moment" by Asia and begins visiting abortion clinics around the area to collect more aborted fetuses. He goes so far as to convince a woman who was noticeably far along in her pregnancy and was planning on giving birth to the child to instead submit to the abortion procedure, in order to help his sick friend. There is an obvious ridiculousness and note of absurdity in the move from an argument for stem cell research to convincing women unwillingly into abortions. This move makes fun of the argument against stem cell research, as well as noting the harsh reminder that aborted fetuses can be utilized, which the pro stem cell advocates would avoid informing the public.

Unfortunately, Kenny dies despite the passage of favorable stem cell research. During the funeral, Cartman bursts in and exclaims that a miracle has occurred. He drags Stan and Kyle away to show them how he has manipulated the stem cells from his aborted fetuses into building his very own Shakey's Pizza. Kyle is extremely upset with Cartman because he realizes that Cartman in fact was never advocating on behalf of stem cell research to save Kenny, but in fact to earn profit, and ultimately create his own Shakey's Pizza. Cartman as the usual conservative voice on the program was suspect all along when he took the liberal side of the stem cell research debate and favoring abortion, his motives were thereby suspect and provided comedic fodder for the episode.

Although on the current culture war issue of stem cell research, *South Park* appears on the surface to take a more clearly defined position for stem cell research, they do so in a way that moderates the divide politically. They harshly point out the fact that abortion, and aborted fetuses are used in the research, and that the absurdity of convincing women or encouraging women to have abortions is not

appropriate although the reality is parodied to an extreme point in order to utilize humor, the ever present reminder at the connection between abortion, unborn fetus/babies and stem cell research is presented to the audience. Even the researcher's motto which is shown in the background several times is "Yesterday's Future Today" using humor to point out a harsh reality. The motto points out the central debate in utilizing the unborn to help people who are currently suffering. Having Kenny die, despite removing the ban on stem cell research reminds the viewer that in fact, stem cell research is not a cure-all, but rather a chance to do research, which may, or may not help. Ending with Cartman's blatant abuse of stem cell allowances and preying upon people's guilt in helping sufferers of various diseases with leniency in stem cell restrictions, also reminds the viewer that stem cell research has the potential to be used for ill-advised purposes as well as positive research.

Stem cell research is directly connected to the abortion debate within *South Park* and although through the use of rhetoric and language the creators note the possible benefits that may come with stem cell research and funding, they do not believe it to be a cure-all and find uncertainty in the abilities. The show is also connecting to the abortion debate with the constant harsh reminders of the utilization of unborn fetuses which places a negative cast on the reality of stem cell research that is skimmed over by the liberal side of the issue.

In "Krazy Kripples" (2003), Christopher Reeve campaigns for stem cell research for the handicapped. Jimmy, a disabled character, is upset at Christopher Reeve taking attention away from him, as he has been disabled his entire life. By graphically cracking open fetuses and sucking out their juices, he soon regains mobility, and even superpowers like the character he portrayed, Superman. He eventually takes on the role of a supervillain, and is opposed by his archnemeses, Gene Hackman (the actor who portrayed supervillain Lex Luthor, Superman's archnemeses). They note the irony in placing Reeve, Superman, as villain and Hackman, Luthor, as a hero with the good intentions. In the beginning of the episode the boys note that they're going to stay out of the issue when Jimmy is upset at

Christopher Reeve for using guilt to coerce people into supporting stem cell research. In the end, the boys reiterate that they are “so glad we stayed out of that one” referring to the stem cell research debate and controversy. The graphic display of Reeve sucking life out of unborn babies to gain power is relatable to shocking and graphic billboards and ads put forth by anti abortion advocates which wish to shock the public with guilt and disgust at the process in order to convince.

### **4.3 War**

Airing nearly two months after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” (2001) addressed what life had become in America and opinions on Afghanistan, terrorism. Following the call of President Bush for charity to Afghanistan, the boys send a dollar to the children there. The dollar is meaningless to the children of Afghanistan, who are shown with buildings exploding from American bombers all around them. The Afghan children send a goat to the South Park boys, noting the culture divide and uselessness of both gifts for the recipients. Cartman, satirizing newfound American patriotism, notes that the goat can’t stay in America, “or it will choke on the sweet air of freedom.” Eventually the boys manage to find their Afghan counterparts, who refuse to take back the goat; furthermore, the two groups get into an argument over America. The South Park boys offer an American flag as a gift, which the Afghan boys throw on the ground, stomp on and light on fire. The boys assumed that most Afghans liked America, but the Afghan boys reveal that they hate the country.

Stan explains what he’s learned in school saying, “Yeah, they told us in school that everyone but terrorists love America.” Akmar angrily responds, “Your country is the evil empire! Your government wants to rule the world! But your values and your spirituality are in the guh-ter!” (Parker & Stone, 2001)

Later in the episode the boys come to terms with the fact that Afghans hate America despite the supposed gift of freedom given to them. The show notes the irony in attempting to make Afghanistan a better place, yet being viewed as invaders and conquerors by Afghans who hated America along with

the Taliban and many parts of the world. The show ends with the boys placing an American flag in the Afghan ground.

Kyle is relieved and tells Stan, "Dude, I almost thought those Afghani kids talked you into not liking America." Stan replies to Kyle, "No, dude. America may have some problems, but it's our home, our team. If you don't want to root for your team, then you should get the hell out of the stadium" (Parker & Stone, 2001). Although the episode shows the horrors of war, it ends with a pro-American patriotic stance that defends Americanism and rights in the world.

Debating the Iraq War was the central culture war issue in "I'm a Little Bit Country" (2003). Mr. Garrison gave the children an assignment to figure out an opinion on the Founding Fathers' view of the war after realizing that the students know nothing about the war in Iraq or the Founding Fathers. Stan, Kyle, and Kenny begin to study for their projects, while Cartman hatches a plan to go into a coma and have a flashback that will allow him to witness the build-up to the Declaration of Independence. Meanwhile, the people of the town are divided about the war, and after splitting in opposing parties, they both plan rallies: one pro-war, one anti-war, both on the same day in the same place. The protesters on either side of the war issue were representative of protesters in real life and their arguments for and against the war, and calls against the opposition as being unpatriotic:

Pro-war Advocate belligerently says, "Hey all you Un-American bastards, if you don't like America, why don't you get out?!" Anti-war Advocate responds condescendingly, "Don't you call us Un-American. This country was founded on the right to protest, mm-kay?" Pro-war Advocate angrily says, "If the Founding Fathers saw you burning your flags and calling the president a 'Nazi' they'd roll over in their graves." Anti-war Advocate passionately responds, "The Founding Fathers would agree with our right to protest." Pro-war Advocate gets in Anti-war Advocate's face, saying, "The Founding Fathers would kick all your asses!" (Parker & Stone, 2003)

The protesters eventually turn to having a great argument during both rallies, and in the end get into a massive fight where they begin to kill each other. The adult protesters also force their children to slant the report in favor of their side of the issue, putting pressure on the students to provide a biased and subjective report as well as splitting up Stan and Kyle from Kenny. The show utilizes absurdity in having both the peace demonstrators as well as those in favor of the war resort to violence to make their point. It is absurd to assume that the Founding Fathers would agree to invade Iraq, and absurd in the same instance that the Founding Fathers would be opposed to defense of the nation. Although both sides are shown absurdly, the peace protesters are shown as hypocrites as they're willing to turn to violence when it suits their needs but at the same time criticize the country for resorting to violence noting that it's unnecessary.

Meanwhile, Cartman, in an induced flashback from falling into a coma; travels back to colonial-era Philadelphia. Cartman manages to get the job of delivering the Declaration of Independence from Thomas Jefferson's home to the Continental Congress for a vote; there, a great argument (much like the present day debate on Iraq) breaks out about whether or not to go to war against Great Britain. Benjamin Franklin enters the room, meshing together the opposing views, stating:

I believe, that if we are to form a new country, we cannot be a country that appears war hungry and violent to the rest of the world. However, we also cannot be a country that appears weak and unwilling to fight to the rest of the world. So, what if we form a country that appears to want both... that means that as a nation, we could 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 (Parker & Stone, 2003).

The agreement is summarized as "having your cake, and eating it too," and "an entire nation founded on saying one thing, and doing another." Cartman returns from his self-induced flashback to give his report on what the Founding Fathers would say, stating, "You people who are for the war, you need the

protesters, because they make the country look like it's 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." Cartman thereby makes fun of both the anti-war protesters and the flag-waving pro-war advocates, while at the same time, pointing out that both are necessary as a balance to the other.

Although the show emphasizes the need for both positions, in the end, a defense of the country would be advocated and the anti-war protesters are utilized as a public relations necessity to put a positive spin on the United States. It is also important to note that the show has not dedicated another entire episode to the Iraq War or the apparent fallout from mistakes made in executing it. War is a prominent culture war issue, and as presented in the show, war appears as a necessary show of power, and America's right in the world, whereas liberal opposition to war is shown as weak, and merely a way of demonstrating our false good intentions.

#### **4.4 Euthanasia**

"Death" (1997) takes a look at the right to death debate. Stan's grandfather celebrated his 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday and wishes to die. As Grandpa is too old to do it himself, he asks Stan to help, telling him that when he was Stan's age he helped his own grandfather die, but Stan refuses. When Stan asks those around him if it's alright to kill your Grandpa who is sick, both Mr. Garrison, Chef and even Jesus tell him "I'm not touching that one," noting the controversial essence the issue holds. In order to show him what it's like to live like him he traps Stan in a room and forces him to listen to Enya, at which point he and the rest of the boys agree they must do it. They hang a cow from a tree to drop on Grandpa when "Death" shows up and begins to come after the boys. Death kills Kenny instead, and Grandpa argues with Death about not taking him. Grandpa demands Death to kill him, but Death refuses. Then, Grandpa's Grandpa, whom he assisted in suicide, shows up and tells him to not kill himself or he'll end up in limbo like himself; death must be from natural causes.

This episode takes a clear stance against euthanasia and argues in favor of leaving death up to nature and “when your time is up.” Although terminal illnesses, diseases and disorders that are often the catalyst for the desire to seek assisted suicide are satirized by Grandpa’s advanced age, 102, this is not cause enough to end one’s own life. In the end of the episode Grandpa is shown as being selfish for asking others to help him kill himself as it places his family in an impossible position of guilt in helping to end suffering versus guilt at having killed someone.

“Best Friends Forever” (2005) was a direct parody of the Terri Schiavo debate, and won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program. Kenny is the first person in town to get a new PSP video game system and becomes inseparable from it. Meanwhile, Cartman, who couldn’t get his own PSP, grows envious of Kenny’s new game system. Kenny quickly works his way up to level 60 of the game *Heaven vs. Hell*, but he is run over by a van and dies, as is the case with many *South Park* episodes.

After ascending to Heaven, Kenny learns that God created the PSP to search for the person who can command his legions against Satan’s forces of Hell, much like a parody of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy battles. Kenny agrees to use the PSP to command the forces of Heaven, but is revived and taken from Heaven by doctors using extreme measure. Because he had been dead for an extended period, he cannot communicate or sustain his life without the help of machines and extraordinary means, as he suffered permanent brain damage. He is kept alive through the use of a feeding tube. The reading of Kenny’s will, in which Cartman is given the PSP, out of pity, and Stan and Kyle are given everything else, is interrupted by the announcement that Kenny was revived, thereby not giving the boys anything. Stan and Kyle are thrilled that their friend is alive, while Cartman is angry because he will not be given Kenny’s PSP. The lawyer mentions a passage about Kenny’s wishes in the event of him being in a vegetative state, but the last page of the will is missing, making it impossible to tell what his wishes were.

As Satan's army begins to close in, the angels need Kenny dead and in Heaven so that they can win the battle. Cartman claims to know Kenny's wishes as he says they were "best friends forever" and argues in front of the Supreme Court with the first half of the BFF medallion. Cartman successfully gets an order to take out the feeding tube and he removes the tube. Stan and Kyle, along with Kenny's parents and other protesters, wage a media war to put the feeding tube back in and keep Kenny alive, while Cartman enlists supporters of the rights of "BFF's" to leave advocate that Kenny be allowed to die with dignity. The familiar breaking along the culture war divide takes place. As the same time Satan enlists the help of Republicans in order to get the feeding tube put back in.

George Bush, being told what to say by a minion of Satan, says, "We Republicans are deeply saddened by the tragic events in Colorado. Removing the feeding tube is murder! Who are we to decide if Kenny should live or die? It is God's will that he live!" (Parker & Stone, 2005)

After an angry media blitz, the two sides are arguing in Kenny's hospital room when Kenny's lawyer announces that the last page of the will has been found, and that Kenny's wishes were that if he were ever in a persistent vegetative state, "please, for the love of God...don't ever show me in that condition on national television." In a full twist of irony, the two sides immediately realize that they have both been disrespectful of Kenny's wishes for their own purposes. Kyle then realizes they should not have made this issue into such a media circus, and concludes that Kenny should be taken off life support, commenting that Cartman was "right for the wrong reasons," because his true motivation was to get the PSP, while he and Stan were, "wrong for the right reasons," because as his best friends, they loved him and weren't ready to let him go. Everyone in the hospital room quietly leaves to allow him to die in peace. They rip out the feeding tube violently. Kenny returns to Heaven just in time to lead the angels to victory.

This episode seems to stand at the heart of many of the debates, with Kyle and Stan's intentions genuine and true, despite being on the wrong side of an issue from time to time, and Cartman being

correct but with bad-intentions. Furthering the irony of intentions, the Republicans, as represented by President Bush, have good intentions but are puppeted along this issue by Satan. Technology is placed at odds with nature.

#### **4.5 Immigration**

*South Park* tackled the ongoing culture war issue of immigration in the episode, “Goobacks” (2004). The problem is set up with immigrants from 1,000 years in the future come back to 21<sup>st</sup> century South Park in order to find work, because the future is so overly crowded. The immigrants find menial jobs and offer to work them for lower wages, and then put the savings in an account that will gain interest to be given to their families in the future. The plan apparently works and encourages an increasing number of immigrants from the future to return; taking jobs from present day South Park residents. These immigrants from the future are a brownish color, explained by all races being mixed together in the future. The language from the future is shown as being indistinguishable and unclear to present day people.

The opposing sides on the issue of immigration are set clearly and placed in strong polar and competing sides as is typical of *South Park*. On a parody of *The O'Reilly Factor*, a debate of the guests referred to as “Pissed Off White Trash Redneck Conservative,” and “Aging Hippie Liberal Douche” takes place, clearly linguistically insulting both extreme positions of the issue by placing them into stereotypical named archetypes.

Redneck, responding to O'Reilly's suggestion that we shouldn't allow anymore immigrants through the time portal: “You're Goddamned right! These people from the future are takin' all the work away from us decent present-day Americans! [*leans in and low and almost grunts*] They took our jobs!” Hippie condescendingly says, “Heh it's typical for conservatives rednecks like these to view the immigrants as the problem, heh, but really, the problem is America. It is our greedy multinational

corporations that keep everyone else in poverty. Your ancestors came to America as immigrants. What right do you have to turn these people away?” (Parker & Stone, 2004)

Both advocates are absurd ideologues advocating for opposing sides. The solution put forth by the anti-immigration wing is to prevent the future from happening, by turning to homosexuality, thereby preventing people from having children and erasing the future. While the solution presented by the pro-immigration wing is to allow for free unfiltered immigration into the United States. The absurdity of both solutions is clear, immigration can neither be totally free-flowing and unchecked, nor can it be completely prevented.

Life in South Park is accommodating itself to the immigrants to a point where Mr. Garrison must teach in both current English and the future language. The kids object to it, but the hippie arrives to speak in the immigrants' defense. Stan later becomes more upset with the influx of immigrants when he is unable to keep his snow-shoveling job and loses it to an immigrant who agrees to do the same job for 25 cents. He is further angered when he goes to a fast food restaurant and can't find an employee who speaks present day English. Stan uses the 'time-ist' slur "goobacks" which upsets his parents who say he is being intolerant, until Stan's father Randy loses his job as well. "Goobacks" along with the previous description of the time travelers presents a satirizing of the hate slur for Mexicans, "wetbacks."

Stan's speech at the end of the episode summarizes the moderate social political ideal that *South Park* advocates:

"I-I think it's wrong to call them 'goobacks' because they're no different from us. They're just humans trying to make their lives better. Look it sucks that the immigrant's time is so crappy, but the cold hard truth is that if we let them all come back to our time, then it's just going to make our time crappy too. Maybe the answer isn't trying to stop the future from happening, but making the future better. I mean maybe if we all commit right now to working towards a better

future, then, then the future won't be so bad and these immigrants won't need to come back here looking for work" (Parker & Stone, 2004).

Although Stan provides a moderately liberal solution to the problem avoiding the extreme polarization of the right and a slant to the left, the show then provides a montage demonstrating the townspeople making the world a better place which is overlapped with a folksy/hippie song, the immigrants disappear as the work continues.

Stan suddenly stops, however, when he realizes that "this is gay"; Kyle agrees that "this is really gay"; Cartman says that it "is gayer than when the men were in a pile having sex." Stan apologizes for his solution and says, "Everyone back in the pile!" The children follow the men, thereby landing on the side of the conservatives. Therefore an ideal, however reasonable it may be, may not be realistic, and still needs to be connected to the humor of the target audience who will find the solution ridiculous.

The episodic solution can be extrapolated to the real world immigration debate. The immigrants from the future appear to be a satirical representation of Mexican immigrants. Therefore, just like Stan's argument, the solution would not be to prevent immigration from Mexico, but still understanding that the United States economic system cannot be unregulated and allow any and all into the country. The best solution, keeping both extreme positions in mind, would be to work with Mexico and other countries with high influxes of immigrants to the United States towards economic stability for those countries. With economic equality, comes empowerment which would naturally decrease the desire for immigrants to come to the United States to work menial jobs for lower wages than would American workers. This rational, moderate position is in direct opposition to pole extreme poles on either side that have merely become absurd ideological stances. That being said, the end comedic skewering of the episodes own moderate solution provides a political slant regarding this culture war issue, that although the moderate approach does appear to be reasonable, it is ridiculous in its inability to be enacted.

Lamponing its own moderately liberal position is stealthy as the show initially goes after both the right and left extreme, landing on a reasonable moderate approach, then noting the absurdity in it.

#### **4.6 Presidential Elections**

The subplot of “Trapper Keeper” (2000) is a parody on the 2000 Presidential election and the debacle it became in Florida between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Mr. Garrison has been demoted to a kindergarten teacher, and his class holds an election for class president. Kyle's brother Ike runs against a boy named Filmore, the result being a tie that would be broken by the vote of a little girl named Flora. Unfortunately, she cannot decide whom to pick. After she picks, the kids protest about an absent student, then demand recounts, of which there are numerous shown on the blackboard. The liberal side then calls upon Rosie O'Donnell, who comes to protest that Filmore (her nephew) hasn't won. After numerous legal fights and endless meetings, Filmore concedes saying, "this game is stupid." Filmore, who is designed to be representative of Gore, continues to protest, even crying at the loss.

The 2000 Presidential election is depicted as absurd and childish. Although both candidates were parodied as kindergarteners, Filmore, Gore, was shown not to let go of the election when it was clear all the ballots had been counted. This appears to be a clear, subversive political element in the program. Parker and Stone parody both Bush and Gore, as well as the election mess as a whole, but take an extra shot at liberals, who are shown acting like babies about the election. Including a liberal celebrity caricature of Rosie O'Donnell who wishes to impose her will on the election, is commentary toward liberalism in America.

“Douche and Turd” (2004) aired shortly before the 2004 Presidential elections between George W. Bush and John Kerry. The episode focuses on the election for a new school mascot. Students are told to vote for a new mascot. Annoyed by the choices, the kids decide to fill in a joke candidate but disagree as to whether it should be a "giant douche" or a "turd sandwich." Kyle rallies his friends to fill in the giant douche, and Cartman gathers support for the turd sandwich. Cartman wins Butters' support (by

slanting the question when asking Butters which of the two choices was funnier). The result is the two joke candidates get the most votes and the students must choose between the two in an election.

Stan decides that he doesn't like either candidate, and declares that he won't vote at all, much to everyone's dismay. Stan is upset, wondering why anyone would care about such a pointless exercise in elections. He talks about it with his parents at dinner, but his parents get into a fight over who should win when Stan explains who the two competitors are. The parents, along with the students of the school are divided in a culture war situation over political support. Stan's political apathy results in Kyle calling on Puff Daddy, who intimidates Stan with a parodied literal version of the liberal Vote or Die campaign to get young people more involved in elections. Meanwhile the campaign continues, with the turd sandwich supporters rallying against the giant douche supporters, using bribes and scare tactics to gain support. By the time of the election, Kyle has finally convinced Stan to vote. While in the process, Stan realizes Kyle only wanted him to vote if he was going to vote on Kyle's side. Disgusted, Stan once again refuses to vote and is banished from the town.

In the end, Stan is finally convinced to vote and chooses turd sandwich, although he is indifferent to both candidates. Despite adding his vote to the tally, the giant douche still wins the vote 1410 to 36. Stan is initially dismayed that his vote didn't matter, but Randy informs his son that all votes matter even if it's for the losing side. Suddenly Mr. Garrison runs in with the news that the cow is reinstated as South Park Elementary School's mascot. Randy tells Stan that now his vote didn't matter, to his intense anger at having gone through so much for nothing.

Although this show provides commentary on the little difference between the major political parties, it is important to remember that the episode was created while Republicans were in control of the White House, and Legislative branches. I would extrapolate the argument that criticizing the lack of differences between the parties is in fact more critical of the Democrats and liberals since the commentary notes that they wouldn't do any better or be enough of a change or difference to be of

consequence. Therefore, one might as well quit constantly criticizing the administration as it is easier to criticize when not in power, but the change in power would be inconsequential.

The episode is also a critique on liberal voter registration movements that seek out new youth voters. *South Park* is satirizing them in a way to point out that the desire isn't to get more people across the board involved, but rather to get young voters, who the Democrats are well aware tend more often than not to vote for them. The phony concern for voter/electorate involvement is parodied to show the actual lack of concern for the voter, but rather to move forth an agenda using voters.

“About Last Night” (2008) is a parody of the *Ocean's 11* series using Barack Obama and John McCain as the main characters. The subplot of the show focuses on the aftermath of the Obama victory. Obama supporters are shown with their “hope t-shirts” ecstatically partying in the streets and becoming cocky at the results. McCain supporters are shown completely defeated, depressed and afraid of what will happen. McCain supporters are later shown moving into an underground bunker to ride out the new President as they believe it will be the end of the world. Obama supporters are shown drunk and obnoxious toward non-Obama supporters. We see that both sides are ridiculed as being absurd, but it is worthwhile to note that Obama was elected the night before and the supporters were given less than 12 hours of celebration to be declared as absurd. It is reasonable to assume that a candidate's supporters who have won a historic election would be excited, even exuberant the night of the win. The show is asking that exuberance to be tampered down after only hours. This appeared to be a critical stance on the change taking place.

#### **4.7 Stealthy Conservatism**

These examined culture war issues, among others, as displayed within *South Park*, comprise a stealthy conservative viewpoint that is camouflaged utilizing satire, parody and humor. Previous arguments that *South Park* is essentially a conservative program focused on the overt arguments made regarding issues and the skewering of Hollywood liberal celebrities such as Barbara Streisand and Rob

Reiner. That argument did not hold up as *South Park* may criticize smoking bans while at the same time minimize the problems gay marriage present, while going after Streisand, they also show the hypocrisy in the American Catholic League's William Donohue or Bill O'Reilly. These citations of possible conservatism are overt, and clear, but confounded and contradicted with overt and clear citations of liberalism. Trey Parker and Matt Stone's coyness on their political persuasion notwithstanding, they have goals and leanings with regards to political and social culture war issues and politics in general, it is merely much stealthier.

Popular entertainment programming is fairly easy in general to disguise itself as liberal, being that the stereotype of the entertainment industry as a whole is one of liberal activism. *South Park* pushes the envelope with regards to language, violence and controversy, which too is stereotypically viewed as a hallmark of liberal Hollywood. This assists in a stealthy conservative delivery by the comedic program.

Returning to Buchanan's culture war speech (1992), a key aspect of the culture wars is "change." The conservative versus progressive paradigm is essentially an argument for things to stay the same as opposed to an advocacy for change. What is comfortable, secure and familiar to one side, is a call for new, inventive ways of looking at things for the opposite side. It is this change, or lack of change that is important when considering the absurd ideological in the stance of the program in question. Conservatives wish to hold the line, and return to classic morals and values, while progressives wish to further include, adapt and change.

Returning to the essential plot line for a given culture war issue topical episode of *South Park*, in which an issue is presented, the boys and townspeople are drawn into a debate, controversy and disagreement ensue, chaos erupts and eventually the boys help the adults learn a more moderate approach and avoid extremism, allows us to analyze the true intent. Although moderate approaches are often specifically referred to in ending speeches of what was learned, the following week, the program is

back to the same formula, ignoring any previous week's lessons. Change is not embraced for the betterment of the town, rather the town is returned to itself. Any given progressive stance on an issue for the good of the people of South Park is wrapped up in a 26 minute storyline where satire, parody and stereotypes poke fun at both conservative and liberal, but in the end, the town as a construct, the people as characters do not maintain any changes toward a progressive future but are returned to their original state, viewpoints intact. Noteworthy is "Goobacks" in its portrayal of a negative future that is meant to prejudicially lampoon Mexicans.

It is important to remember the target audience demographics as previously mentioned is essentially white males between teenage years to early 30's. Considering this, we know that Parker and Stone have a clear idea in mind of who they wish to reach with their program, who is "in on the joke" and who will understand intertextual, political, social, popular culture messages intended to further their presentation of the extremist absurd ideology. The required intertextual knowledge of the audience is specific to them, although it spans most of what enters the popular culture, followers of the media, and members of this media culture would be inclined to know the references, while other references are specific and would be mostly appreciated by young to mid-adult white males such as: *Star Wars*, *War Craft*, *Dog the Bounty Hunter*, *Star Trek* etc. all of which have been parodied on the program. Parker and Stone pick and choose from their own body of knowledge what they wish to satirize and parody, and thereby have an appreciation and understanding of what they will, thus, it must translate similarly to the audience understanding. Many of the programs, films and popular culture references are directed to a similar audience demographic as that of *South Park*. These viewers tend to be more conservative than the American population as a whole, and certainly more conservative than minorities, all of which become fodder for the program at one point or another. Connecting with this audience are the main characters: Stan, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny, all of which are white boys. Granted, Kyle is Jewish, and

thereby a minority, but the tension is present between Kyle and Cartman as a storytelling tool of conflict.

Moderately liberal positions, such as the solution put forth by Stan in “Goobacks” to make the future a better place as a means to curb immigration from the future are inevitably lampooned as being “gay” or “retarded” by the boys, who were the ones that thought of them in the first place. One must read between the lines in order to find and gauge the true stealthy conservatism. A surface reading of the episode would lead one to believe that a moderate, to moderately liberal approach to immigration is being advocated, when in fact, the solution is ridiculed as being absurd itself and thus everything stays the same and the show will move on to the next culture war issue similarly. It is relevant to note that much like the issues that are chosen for the show exist in the real world and are satirized and parodied on the program, so too are many of the solutions a parody and satire, absurdly so, of what is a possible solution that could be extrapolated to the real world. By noting the ridiculousness, absurdity of their own moderate approach, the show’s creators are able to stealthily provide moderate approaches, which would allow them to be viewed as moderate advocates, then lampoon their own solution at the end of the episode, finally leaving the issue, solution, and continuation of the program with a slight conservative slant.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Culture war debates have remained a constant in media portrayals, through news, debate, speeches and entertainment programming for decades. The prominence and continuity of culture war debates has led to an increased polarization in the electorate between liberal and conservative poles. Although there appears to be lulls in the culture war debate marked by flares in polarization, the debate may fluctuate, but remains steady and adapting. Over time new representations of culture war issues enter the public consciousness, as well as new debates that join the culture war staples from the coining of the term: the war in Iraq, Terri Schiavo's right to life vs. right to die, and stem cell research.

As technology increases, there is heightened access to opinionated news media, such as *Hardball*, *Lou Dobb's Tonight*, and *The O'Reilly Factor*, internet satirical news, such as *The Onion*, blogs, such as *Daily Kos* and *Huffington Post*. Mediating opinion along with new technologies are political opinion staples of radio personalities Rush Limbaugh or Ed Schultz, and newspaper driven opinion pieces from *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Media driven opinions are increasingly passed off as fact. Individual opinions are broadcast to an audience that celebrates opinion over neutrality by popularizing the internet bloc, news punditry, and infotainment. These opinion leaders frame the debate according to personal values.

Culture war debates allow for a labeling of the spectrum from conservative to liberal poles or extremes, with moderate approaches standing between. Conservative approaches value tradition, maintaining, and holding back against the changes, while liberal approaches wish to progress, change and adapt. The presence of final changing and progression with regards to a culture war issue provides important insight into the overall stance the program is taking on a controversial issue.

Stealthy conservatism provides a unique, new, and interesting approach to provide a political slant in the realm of entertainment, political, and social satirizing. Utilizing entertainment programs to note possible absurdity through satirizing of culture war issues constructs a political and social bias

depending on where the slant of the absurdity lands. The perceived non-biased nature of the overt argument that both the liberal and conservative extremists are promoting through the presentation of absurd extremist ideologies, is disingenuous and in fact there is a real bias that exist by extrapolating a stealthy conservative approach.

Understanding the power and prominence of media culture (Kellner,1995) as well as cultivation (Gerbner, 1986) and mainstreaming (Miller, 2005) effects underscores the importance of this project. Presenting stealthy conservative approaches toward culture war issues framed as moderate through a vastly media, opinion, and entertainment driven society provides a reframing for the audience that is likely to cultivate similar opinions and viewpoints as well as mainstreaming of conservative as moderate and reasonable, while leaving liberalism as extremist.

Satire, comedy, and parody present social criticism in non-threatening way. Upon entering the public realm, issues, person, idea can expect to become fodder for comedy. Comedy must be relatable to reality. In order to lampoon something, one must understand it and appreciate it. Comedy allows for a more palpable introduction of controversial issues.

Political cartoons are an old medium for lampooning issues of the day. They provide unique access to criticize political and social taboo issues as they come from a tradition of being child oriented, and therefore non-threatening. Cartoons allow for a non-threatening presentation of culture war issues and opinionated pieces as presented through satire and parody, or referencing ideologies as being absurd. *South Park* has been a popular staple of Comedy Central for 13 seasons beginning in 1997. Its constant look at issues of the day and long run has allowed it to tackle nearly every culture war issue that has entered the public sphere. The program has been heralded and attacked by both liberals and conservatives, each accusing it of attacking them as well as believing it to belong to its side. Children as the voice of culture war debates allows for a connotations of fun, carefree, and childlike honesty. Utilizing children as the voice of reason in *South Park* implies that they are honest and without ulterior

motives, aside from Cartman as an antagonist. *South Park* continues that tradition, but in a new way of presenting stealthy conservative viewpoints packaged as unbiased critique of both sides of the political and social realm. Parker and Stone coyly abandon any public commentary on their politics, leaving the analysis up to the public at large. Although liberals and conservatives have both claimed the program as being a vehicle for their political persuasion, and both sides have accused the program of lying on the opposite political end, the program skewers both liberal and conservative in overt and clear ways, while subtly slanting right in a stealthy conservative approach.

One must remember that *South Park* has had a niche target audience of white males between teenage years and early 30s. As such, the program is not speaking to the electorate as a whole. Trey Parker and Matt Stone create their program for a target audience that they know will understand the intertextuality, humor, and be familiar with the culture war issues that are discussed. They know that their audience is inclined to “be in on the joke” which is reason for *South Park’s* long run and appreciation.

Assumptions made on *South Park* allow it to be stealthy conservative. The program is often written off as “potty humor” and scatological in nature. When viewed as nothing more than toilet humor, the program’s political and social value is overlooked and not analyzed. Since the program airs on Comedy Central, it can be assumed to be nothing more than comedic entertainment. The program has been repeatedly accused of being both liberal and conservative from the opposing side, without close analysis. The blanket accusations and attributions of political and social values given to the program provide for a generalization of the program’s stance that ignores stealthy conservatism. Once the program targets a specific interest group, religion, or social or political stance, that group might assume that *South Park* is mindlessly offensive and ignore its potentially powerful political and social messaging. As part of the entertainment industry, the program falls under the stereotypical assumption of a “liberal Hollywood” and as such is assumed to hold liberal social values. The assumption of a

stereotypically liberal Hollywood allows *South Park* to stealthily approach a conservative stance. These preconceived possible assumptions create beliefs and notions regarding the program that may not fit it, but hold importance as they ignore the stealthy conservatism that exists in the show and write off the program without analysis, or assume it to be liberal, the opposite, or moderate.

If change is essential when considering the difference between progressive and conservative stances with regards to political and social culture war issues, then the presence of change that is observable within a satirical entertainment program would denote a progressive slant. The lack of observable change and adaptation when accepting liberal solutions is thereby an argument for a conservative stance, albeit stealthily approached. Targeting both liberals and conservatives does not necessarily express a moderate approach.

Events in *South Park*, regardless of the skewering of either liberal or conservative ends, eventually returns to a status quo after the standard storyline. Any progression toward a liberal or moderate position regarding culture war issues is returned to the initial stance at the beginning of the program. All following weeks are shown without change achieved toward a political/social end. Change is not achieved for a positive progressive end. Liberal, or moderate approaches and solutions put forth by the program itself regarding culture war issues are then ridiculed as being absurd, “lame,” or “gay” as noted in the solution at the end of “Goobacks” (2004). As witnessed in “I’m a Little Bit Country” (2003) both the liberal and conservative sides were lampooned, but in the end, the show advocated for strong military action and merely noted the need for the liberal anti-war side as a means of public relations to the world, they never advocated for an end to military conflict. Negative stereotypes that are recognizable to both the show’s creators as well as their niche audience are utilized at the expense of those affected by the stereotypes, most notably through the presentation of homosexuals in culture war episodes that deal with gay rights and issues.

The conservative stereotype of conservatives as being old white males, alienates large portions of the electorate whose face is constantly updating, adapting, and changing itself. By placing conservatism in a mass media entertaining context that broadens the face of conservatism in general garners larger appeals to a variety of people who may not have previously considered themselves conservative. Reframing conservatism as “cool,” “funny,” pushing boundaries, and edgy allows an appeal to the niche audience that *South Park* caters to.

Camouflaging oneself as unbiased through lampooning of both extremist sides as absurd in an overt way welcomes audiences to accept stances that appear on the surface to be moderate and view them as unbiased. The reframing of conservative as moderate and reinforcing liberal as extremist mainstreams a new idea of a populist moderate conservative approach that is not viewed as being skewed from the center, thereby reasonable and welcoming. This resets the debate and alters the political and social spectrum in a way that favors conservatism in a stealthy manner.

Stealthy conservatism and presentation of extremist ideologies as absurd is essential to understand in the field of communication. There are possible effects of reframing conservative in a populist, entertaining, moderate way that is not understood due to the stealthy approach. While overtly conservative or liberal messaging may reinforce ideas of those who already agree with the side they stand with, many are turned away from ideas that are overtly politically biased. Selling conservatism as moderate through satirical messaging provides the audience with an altered belief that they are not being preached to, but rather accepting the message as moderate, and entertaining in a non-threatening way.

It is important to note possible unintended consequences of stealthy conservatism and satirical presentation of extremist ideologies as absurd. Parker and Stone are asking their audience to be in on the joke, and trust that the audience will appreciate the humor and “be on the same page.” There is a risk that some audience members may not understand that the show is satirizing and instead view the message as being realistic rather than absurd. Accepting the ideas presented by the show as gospel

without close analysis and understanding of the satire and parody within, risks a potential to promote intolerance of the various value-groups that are lampooned. If the satire is lost, it may become offensive and/or justification for prejudice. Mainstreaming language on the program is argued to be reflective of real-world language taken for society, but must also be viewed as having the potential of normalizing the language. When presenting issues as absurd, there is a danger of presenting them in an overly absurd manner which has the potential to debunk any message at all.

This project examined *South Park* specifically in order to examine the idea of absurd ideology within satire, comedy and entertainment and debunk perceptions of its advocacy of a moderate approach by placing both liberal and conservative extremes into absurd contexts. The program analyzed presented absurd representations of actual culture war debate taking place in politics, society and the public sphere, satirized for entertainment purposes. Creating comedic fodder from the extremism that exists in the United States, creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone targeted both poles; right and left, conservative and liberal, to demonstrate the absurd arguments posted by both. Stealthy conservatism is present within the program and must be considered when analyzing such a program as mainstreaming effects would argue that there is a possibility for influencing an audience's perceptions. The increasing blurring of the lines between news, debate, entertainment, comedy, satire, politics and social issues increases the importance of such programs as *South Park*. Of course, *South Park* is merely one example of the ideology of absurdity.

Although I viewed the entire *South Park* catalog for analysis on this project, I did not include Parker and Stone's film adaptation of the show, *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, (1999) or their political satire *Team America World Police* (2004) for further analysis, which would provide a closer look toward their political and social values and expand the idea of stealthy conservatism. Future projects by Trey Parker and Matt Stone could potentially adapt the analysis of this project.

Understanding and analysis of satirical and parody programs, such as *South Park*, underscores the importance of visual cues. This project is highly visual, and as such, many of the cited examples must be viewed in order to fully appreciate the satire and presentation of ideologies as absurd. Visual cues also connect the creators with the audience through the intertextual appreciation that exists between them. Creating caricatures of real-world figures, celebrities, politicians as representatives of culture war issues is a mix of visual cues and language.

Obvious connections can be made to similar programs such as: *Saturday Night Live*, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *The Daily Show* among others. These all stand as examples satirizing absurd ideologies. These programs should also be returned to for closer analysis “between the lines” in order to gauge the potential stealthy conservatism that may exist. Popular media entertainment programs are not the only vehicle to examine stealthy conservatism and absurd ideologies, other ideas would be to examine political cartoons, billboards, news programming, stand-up comedy etc, through the stealthy conservative lens. The idea of absurd ideologies, and the comedic fodder they provide should be taken as a real-world indicator of extremism on both sides of the important and divisive culture war issues.

Stealthy conservative as presented through *South Park* is also essentially commentary on the role of portrayals in the media, both satirizing current portrayals and noting the absurdity in them. Stealthy conservative analysis should be utilized not only in comedic programming, but real hard news programming and news commentary. Deciphering between presentation of issues as being an overt argument for the political and social values and the presence of any real change, or advocating of change as being liberal, or lack thereof being conservative must be used when viewing news media. To understand a stealthy conservative approach in the mass media and the framing of conservatism as moderate alters the audience perceptions of news, and understanding of bias.

Stealthy conservatism opens up new debate regarding culture war issues that have been framed for so long in the context of extreme poles that were easy to lampoon as absurd. With conservative

approaches disguised, camouflaged, and presented as moderate, liberal approaches are left, on the far left. Moving conservatism toward a center right and mainstreaming as reasonable resets the debate on television, in the media, and for the audience.

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