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# Introduction

Animation has always appealed to all generations: it is timeless and can be enjoyed by everyone. There are current fashionable animations whose cultural roots can be traced back, as I show here, to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There are cartoons that are more successful than others, and my thesis is exploring the idea that *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are popular cartoons because they fit into the theory of ‘Carnival’ as identified by Mikhail Bakhtin. Both cartoons have elements of Carnival in them, which I argue is the reason they have become part of our popular culture today and continue to grow in popularity.

Chapter one concentrates on *The Simpsons*, a cartoon focussing on the lives of the people of Springfield, chiefly Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie Simpson. Creator Matt Groening has cleverly incorporated into this cartoon a series of Carnival traits or qualities that – in my opinion – have made it a successful part of our popular culture today. Popular culture, as I explain in chapter one, is a culture of conflict (Fiske, 1989, p.2), which is what we see within *The Simpsons*. Each person within the cartoon goes through a struggle to survive within his or her society; the cartoon represents many Carnival activities within each episode. *The Simpsons* appeals to a wide-ranging audience: the themes and morals of the cartoon are relevant to a vast proportion of the population, as very often the subordinate classes within *The Simpsons* are those with the power: they are experiencing a period of Carnival. *The Simpsons* is regularly celebrated for its depiction of the dysfunctional family in our society today. Many men would draw comparison between themselves and Homer, always trying their hardest and not seeming to get anywhere with what they do, or trying too hard so things fall apart. However, Homer is essentially a family man who shows a great deal of affection to his wife and children.

Similarly with Chapter two, I argue how Matt Stone and Trey Parker have introduced us to their characters in *South Park* who are experiencing Carnival – but on a larger and more explicit scale, as the cartoon is aimed at an older audience. As Twichell states “carnival thrives in times just outside the prime” (Twichell, 1992, p.220) so being shown later at night, *South Park* is inclined to be more carnivalesque. *South Park* also aims to show more of the excess – more sex, more violence, more scatology, more grotesque images, so it is a more Carnival cartoon. *South Park* certainly does include areas of extensive Carnival activity, and chapter two examines the reasons behind the success of the cartoon, focussing on the grotesque body, looked at closely in *South Park*, as well as the three main associations with Carnival: food, violence and sex. *South Park* is also responsible for bringing to our attention the funny side that has to come out of a tragedy, for example making light of the war in the 100<sup>th</sup> episode which was first screened during the recent ‘War Against Iraq’; other issues include September 11<sup>th</sup> and AIDS. Parker and Stone are also responsible for making us think of minority groups in a different way, tackling subjects such as homophobia, disability and xenophobia.

I begin by introducing the idea of Carnival, looking at the history and the origin, defining some of the key concepts to which I refer back during the chapters. The time of Carnival to which I refer is from AD 1550-1750, in medieval Europe. Carnival originally lasted, as Grey wrote in 1739 “only from Christmas to Lent”, and this was a time “opposed to the everyday, a time of waste” (Burke, 1994, p.178), a

time opposed to the official culture where the powerless were made powerful and there was an increase of aggression, degradation, desecration and destruction as well as violence, sex, eating and drinking. Carnival was about turning things upside down, looking at the world from the perspective of those who were not usually powerful. It was a time of temporary suspension where the hierarchies would be broken down, servants would become masters, the peasants would be at the same rank as the higher classes and there would be no boundaries for men and women to converse. Bakhtin's Carnival was concerned with inversion, parody, a celebration of the grotesque body and degrading and debasing the official as a "condition of popular renewal or regeneration" (Dentith, 1995, p.68). Later theorists of Carnival challenge Bakhtin's utopian view, and think that after Carnival, hierarchical structures would be more defined, the bonds of authority would be redefined and people would recognise their place within their society.

With Carnival, there were rituals and within *The Simpsons* and *South Park* there are certain series of events that produce the same outcome. For example, Homer's famous catchphrase is "D'oh" which he says when things don't go according to plan. Other rituals include Homer's phrase "why you little..." followed by his hands clamping around Bart's throat. Similarly with *South Park*, Kenny's death is followed by Stan and Kyle's lines, "Oh my god, they killed Kenny" "You bastards". These repetitions within *South Park* are also seen in the catch phrases every character has, helping to see the rituals as a way of containing the danger and making the repetitions recognisable and therefore familiar to the viewer. Within Carnival, ritual was an important part of the celebrations: the eating of meat, electing a mock king and the battle between Carnival and Lent. Satire is associated with danger and rituals help to secure the safety, if you know what happens next in the routine there are no grounds for shock or surprise.

Television is a strong medium; with more and more channels being available to the viewer, it is important that new shows have a successful formula. I argue, with the help of examples from my two chosen cartoons that the ideas Bakhtin has looked into in his book *Rabelais and his World* are the leading force within *The Simpsons* and *South Park* that makes them appeal to audiences today and helps them thrive in the ever growing television ratings battle.

# Chapter One: The Simpsons

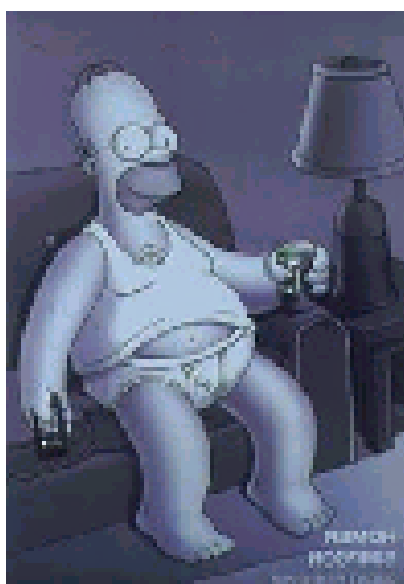
In the introduction to this dissertation, I explained how Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of Carnival have been included into various cartoons to produce television that is popular and fits into our popular culture today. My first chapter reads *The Simpsons* in relation to Bakhtin's theory of the Carnival. This chapter explores why *The Simpsons* is so popular, looking particularly at the forms of Carnival within the cartoon, and the demonstrations of popular culture within *The Simpsons*. I argue here that the reason *The Simpsons* is so popular today is because it provides a form of escapism to the viewer whilst also encapsulating various parts of Bakhtin's Carnival. I will focus on the similarities between Homer and 'Carnival', drawing comparison from Brueghel's painting. Moving from this, I discuss those elements of the show which most readily reveal it to be carnivalesque; primarily inversion and parody, with specific examples being drawn from the authorities, the health system and religion within *The Simpsons*, all points relating back to Bakhtin's Carnival.

Popular culture is defined by Fiske as "a culture of conflict, it involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology" (Fiske, 1989, p.2). With this statement in mind, I argue why *The Simpsons* is popular, how it has become part of our popular culture, and why I think it is still a very important cartoon in terms of ideas, concepts and perceptions of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century living, thirteen years after the first series.

"*The Simpsons* is one of the highest rating shows on the Fox Network", (Stepanas, 2002, [online]) and there are thirteen episodes aired per week on Satellite television. This must mean that the show has high popularity amongst all audiences and Fox has put the episodes on at extreme time slots varying from 3am to 7pm. Fox could be doing this so the cartoon is available to everyone at all times, and the repeats mean that there is scope to watch an episode if it has been missed earlier in the day, encouraging people to tune into the cartoon. *The Simpsons* is accessible to those without satellite television: it is shown every-week day at 6pm on BBC2, meaning that if you have a television, *The Simpsons* is available for you to watch. The popularity could be put down to many aspects, one being "its incisive wit and social satire, for its capacity to call attention through irony, to the absurdity of everyday social conventions and beliefs" (Bybee, 2000, [online]). Bybee also states that media has the ability to get across "ideological and political implications" (Bybee, 2000 [online]) so *The Simpsons* can be read as more than a cartoon comedy. It can also be argued that "*The Simpsons* is purely entertainment and escapism; it resolves within one episode", (Winstone, 2002, [online]) and as Twitchell states, "its purpose is to entertain, not to enlighten." (Twitchell, 1992, p.43). However, good entertainment often encompasses worthwhile issues, which Jozajtis reinforces; "*The Simpsons* is routinely organised around the intelligent exploration of big issues like corruption, the environment, race" (Jozajtis, 2002, [online]) meaning we should view it with more credibility. The cartoon regularly shows the family breaking free from social norms and Homer especially does what he wants to. Fiske points out how in popular television programs, the characters "demonstrate how escaping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom", (Fiske, 1989, p.69) which is exactly how Carnival worked; people would break free from all constraints temporarily and live without authority for a short period of release. Salingar, like Fiske agrees, "the mood

in these 'idyllic' comedies is a holiday mood or 'release'... the leading characters are set free from some of their previous social or psychological constraints" (Salingar, 1974, p.14) just as Carnival freed people from their everyday restrictions or barriers.

During the festivities of this time of Carnival there would be processions through the streets, and games that focused on the figure of 'Carnival' himself. "Carnival' usually took the form of a fat man, pot bellied, ruddy, cheerful, often hung about with eatables (sausage, fowl, rabbits), seated on a barrel, or accompanied (as at Venice in 1572) by a cauldron of macaroni... 'Lent' for contrast took the form of a thin old woman, dressed in black and hung about with fish" (Burke, 1994, p.185). Homer Simpson battling with Montgomery Burns can be related to Brueghel's *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*.<sup>1</sup> This painting shows a duel between the pair, the figure of 'Carnival' can be related to Homer, who is a fat man and pot bellied and is often seen to be cheerful. The comparison of the two can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.**  
Homer  
Simpson and  
'Carnival'

Homer's evident love for food manifests in many ways throughout all episodes of *The Simpsons* but Homer takes his love of meat to a new level when he has a barbeque and spit roasts a pig to show his neighbour Ned Flanders, that more people would come to his barbeque than would attend the family reunion held by Ned the day before.<sup>2</sup> "The word 'Carnival' comes from an old Italian word that means to 'go without meat' or 'removal of meat'" (*carne* or *carni* = 'meat') (Petro, no date, [online]). This demonstration of spit roasting a pig is another prevalent association with Carnival activities, *i.e.*, eating meat to remove it, and how Homer is indeed a meat lover. Another example of Homer's gluttony can be seen when he tries to put on enough weight so he is classed as disabled and can work from home.<sup>3</sup> He eats excessively and manages – eating a piece of play dough for the last ounce – to reach his target weight, 300lbs. In the conclusion to the episode when there is a leak in the power plant, Homer saves the day when he falls and his body seals the leak. So at this humongous size, Homer saves the day and as a reward for saving the plant, "Mr Burns agrees to pay for liposuction so that Homer can return to his normal size" (Groening, 1997, p.188). Homer's period of obesity was in my opinion his time of 'Carnival' and

<sup>1</sup> Full painting can be seen in Appendix 1

<sup>2</sup> Episode 3F03

<sup>3</sup> Episode 3F05

when he had had his moment of glory it was promptly put to an end by Burns' reward, showing that after a period of Carnival and temporary change, things will always return to how they were pre-Carnival. This reduction in his size is showing Homer's regeneration and his rebirth. Regeneration also happens for the community of Springfield as they are saved from a nuclear disaster by Homer's body.

Montgomery Burns can be seen to be the 'Lent' figure, in this duel; Lent being represented "emaciated, as a kill-joy" (Burke, 1994, p.188) since Lent means "lean time" (Burke, 1994, p.188). Comparisons of the two can be seen in figure 2.



Burns

to himself, "only



Figure 2. Mr and 'Lent'

According to Burns he is old, eighty-one" (Groening,

1997, p.35) and is the mastermind behind the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. He is thin and scrawny, was once painted naked by Marge Simpson, and was described as "withered" (Groening, 1997, p.53).<sup>4</sup> "Burns is the most powerful man in Springfield" (Groening, 1997, p.19), and he is the only person who can give a decent form of employment in the whole of Springfield. We can see an example of his power when he gives Homer back his job when Marge falls pregnant with Maggie<sup>5</sup>. Homer needs his job back so he can bring extra money into the family home. Burns makes Homer crawl through a doggy door so when he sees Homer he says, "So, come crawling back eh?" (Groening, 1997, p.164). This master/servant relationship is reversed in the painting, similar to how it would be in Carnival, the master would be the servant and the servant would be the master. This is what Dentith would call a "characteristic inversion" (Dentith, 1995, p.65) and I will now begin to demonstrate examples of these within specific episodes of *The Simpsons*.

Inversion was an important part of Carnival, allowing things to be turned upside down, making the powerless powerful. Inversion takes many forms in *The Simpsons*, meaning there are ways this aspect of Carnival fits neatly into making this cartoon humorous. The first example shows character inversion when Bart becomes a ballet natural and performs to his school.<sup>6</sup> In the audience are two of the school bullies who are compelled by Bart's dancing and comment on his grace and style. In this instance, we are seeing how the bullies have a reversal of character by loving ballet, and how Bart is accepted though doing something often perceived as essentially feminine. "Carnival costume allowed men and women to reverse roles", (Burke, 1994, p.190) so inversion with regards to role reversal can be related to this, and can also be

<sup>4</sup> Episode 7F02

<sup>5</sup> Episode 2F10

<sup>6</sup> Episode 2F14

seen when Marge enlists in the Springfield Police Academy and gives up her day to day role as a homemaker and becomes a cop.<sup>7</sup> Again, this inversion of jobs and roles can be linked to an example of Carnival activities when “the husband [is] holding the baby and spinning while his wife smokes and holds a gun” (Burke, 1994, p.189). Bart comments when Marge is a cop that he has “never pictured [Marge] as any kind of authority figure before” (Groening, 1997, p.174). However, Bart, when talking about Krusty the Clown proclaims, “He’s my idol. I’ve based my whole life on his teachings” (Groening, 1997, p.28).<sup>8</sup> These two comments by Bart show how he is inverting the usual way of thinking, having a clown as an idol and a mother who he doesn’t think of as an authoritative figure. Homer is classified as disabled when he weighs over 300lbs and demonstrates another example of reversal of roles when he wears a dress.<sup>9</sup> As Homer is so obese, he chooses to wear a ‘muu-muu’, which is like a dress, for which Bart gets teased about at school. We as the audience laugh because Homer is wearing a dress; the inversion is making a comment on our Western culture, that men wear trousers and women wear dresses but relating this to Carnival practices, it can be seen as an expression of free gesture.

“Cartoons and comedies frequently invert ‘normal’ relationships and show the adult as incompetent, unable to understand, and the children as superior in insight and ability” (Fiske, 1987, p.242) and we can see many examples of this when Bart and Lisa come out on top of a situation when Homer is left either not understanding or unable to comprehend. When Homer goes into hospital to have a triple bypass, he seeks the help of Dr Nick Riviera, “Springfield’s professional alternative to Julius Hibbert” (Groening, 1998, p.102). Dr Nick is not a qualified doctor, however he will perform any operation for \$129.95 and rents an information video to help him with the procedure. When the time comes for Dr Nick to perform the operation, as the final moments of the video have been taped over, Lisa steps into the breach and helps talk Dr Nick through the rest of the operation. Here we see a Carnival moment, when a young child who is usually powerless within the community is made powerful and Lisa who is only eight years old, executes her superiority over a ‘doctor’.

The election of a mock King was an important ritual of Carnival (Bakhtin, 1968, p.81, p.197): the people would elect him then mock him, and then he would then be uncrowned. We see Homer going through this process of crowning and uncrowning when he becomes a member of a secret group called *The Stonecutters*, but disgraces himself by using a sacred parchment as a napkin.<sup>10</sup> Homer becomes the hero instead of the fool, but when he is stripped of his membership a distinct birthmark is noticed on Homer’s back that identifies him as the true leader. Thus, Homer becomes powerful within an organisation and is treated with respect and is honoured by the other members of *The Stonecutters*. “But when Homer uses his power to help those in the community, *The Stonecutters* reject him... and resort to their old ways” (Groening, 1997, p.162) thus showing the characters go back to pre-Carnival practices. The actions seen here are intended to, as Burke quotes from Gluckman: “strengthen the established order” (Burke, 1994, p.201) meaning that back in the power plant, it will be more emphasised that Burns is the boss. This episode is parodying the Masons, the organisation famous for its privacy and secrecy. *The*

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<sup>7</sup> Episode 2F21

<sup>8</sup> Episode 7G12

<sup>9</sup> Episode 3F05

<sup>10</sup> Episode 2F09

*Stonecutters* is an exclusive ‘members only’ group, such as the ‘elite’ classes that the period of Carnival broke down, as Carnival was a period in which everyone could be involved. The inversion of power within this episode is seen when Montgomery Burns who is the all powerful nuclear plant employer, numbered 29 in *The Stonecutters* rank has his nose squeezed by Lenny, who is a power plant employee. “Lenny squeezes Burns’ nose hard and it makes a honking noise” (Groening, 1997, p.162). Taking this point of mocking higher authorities, I can move onto the demonstrations of parody within *The Simpsons*. This particular episode appeals to the viewer as it shows, for a brief time, Burns unable to use his powerful status to be the person to do well, from a bad situation. Lenny is having the last laugh and for once we see Burns degraded and powerless in this situation.

Parody was another highly important factor of Carnival and mocking the authorities was part of the satirical humour of the Carnival period. On viewing *The Simpsons*, there are occasions when the cartoon mirrors everyday life, so it is parodying our society, the main areas of parody being the health system, the authorities and religion.

The Health System is caricatured, for example when Burns needs a blood transfusion to keep him alive because he does not have enough blood.<sup>11</sup> A “double O negative blood donor” (Groening, 1997, p.58) needs to be found for Burns as soon as possible to keep him alive. Here we see a parody of the blood service in America. You are paid for giving blood in America, and Homer wants to give blood so he can be rewarded from his very wealthy boss, not because he wants to save Burns’s life. However when the gift arrives to the Simpson household, it is a “\$32,000 statue of the Olmec Indian God of War” (Groening, 1997, p.58) and Homer is clearly disappointed. Another example of the health service being parodied is when Abe Simpson needs a kidney transplant because of Homer’s neglect.<sup>12</sup> Homer volunteers to give his father one of his kidneys, but when the time comes for the transplant to take place, he gets cold feet and flees via a window in the hospital, getting crushed by a car as he reaches the road where he is promptly taken back to the hospital. When Homer comes round, Dr Hibbert says: “While we were setting your broken bones and putting your blood back in; we helped ourselves to a kidney, and gave it to your father.”<sup>13</sup> This is a parody of the lack of organ donors and showing how the Carnival in Springfield enables the medical system to do anything they want to with regards to getting people back to health. It also shows that Homer is selfish and brings to light the majority feeling with regards to donating organs, most people are not willing to donate an organ when they die, let alone when they are alive, even to a family member who needs one.

The Springfield authorities are degraded extensively; corruption takes over from normal practices. There are several occasions when you wonder how Springfield manages to run under the current hierarchy. Bybee’s observation is that “*The Simpsons* certainly appears to belong to a wide range of cultural products and arguments that have rabidly attacked all forms of traditional authority” (Bybee, 2000, [online]) and we can see traditional authority being challenged when Bart gets stuck

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<sup>11</sup> Episode 7F22

<sup>12</sup> Episode AABF04

<sup>13</sup> Transcribed by Baird et al.



down a well.<sup>14</sup> Chief Wiggum is explaining to Marge that there is a budget problem; “Your boy picked a bad time to fall down a well. If he had done it at the start of the financial year, no problemo” (Groening, 1997, p.77). This episode shows that “this is a world where nearly of all the promises of traditional institutions and authority have been found to be bankrupt” (Bybee, 2000, [online]). This can also be related to Le Roy Laudurie’s analysis that Carnival “could be used as symbolic means for expressing social and political antagonisms” (cited Dentith, 1998, p.75). The comedy here with relation to Wiggum’s incompetence comes from the viewer being able to relate this to an experience they have had, or an instance well publicised with relation to incompetence in the police department in America. The audience are being shown “liberating fun that inverts social norms and momentarily disrupts their power” (Fiske, 1989, p.8), which appeals to the viewer as they are able to identify it as a comment on society.

There are many examples of corruption around Springfield police department, all including Clancy Wiggum the Chief of Police. As Groening himself describes him, he is “common sense-challenged, attending personally all calls involving donut shops, ice cream parlours, and food processing plants” (Groening, 1997, p.109). Wiggum’s incompetence is also demonstrated when he catches Homer using an auto-dialler.<sup>15</sup> He reminds Homer to bring the evidence to court with him, “Otherwise, I got no case and you’ll go scot-free”. “The chief is foolishly telling the law-breaker how to evade punishment” (Durham, 2001, [online]), thus making himself and the police force in Springfield out to be incompetent. Another instance of Wiggum’s incompetence and general lack of understanding of policing is when he captures the resident bad boy in Springfield, Snake, and the following conversation takes place:

Snake: Ha! I’ll be back on the street in twenty-four hours.

Wiggum: We’ll try to make it twelve. (Groening, 1998, p.174)

Wiggum is also degraded in Groening’s *Guide To Springfield* where he is seen in the stocks holding a sausage. The sausage carried by Wiggum is also a carnival-esque gesture, as a sausage was “carried in a procession at Koenisberg” (Burke, 1994, p.187) to exaggerate sexuality with the phallic symbol. This picture can be linked to Carnival activities, when “comedies were built around situations of reversal, like the judge in the stocks” (Burke, 1994, p.202) here Wiggum is being publicly humiliated.<sup>16</sup>

Another example from the same book, showing how an authoritative figure is parodied, is a picture of Reverend Lovejoy with a gust of wind blowing around him revealing his bright pink boxer shorts with smiley yellow faces on them. The congregation is looking with shock and humour across their faces and Reverend

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<sup>14</sup> Episode 8F11

<sup>15</sup> Episode 4F01

<sup>16</sup> Wiggum is seen to be a corrupt police officer asking for bribes and helping people who have given him tips in the past. When Troy McClure gets stopped whilst driving, he is requested to show his license. When none appears, Wiggum says: “I’ll tear up this ticket, but I am still going to have to ask you for a bribe” (Groening, 1998, p.199). This type of occurrence can be associated with the American police force in the west where the local police are well known and this type of corruption is prevalent within these smaller communities; Groening is choosing to parody it in *The Simpsons*. In the episode when Mr Burns is shot, Wiggum is in charge of finding the suspect and seeks help “from an Agatha Christie book” (Episode 2F16) (Hall, 1997, [online]) showing his total incompetence in solving an important crime like a shooting. Wiggum’s lack of common sense can also be seen in an episode where Bart and Lisa have their 25 greyhound puppies stolen. Wiggum explains to the children: “I’m sorry kids. I don’t think we’re ever going to find your greyhounds. Maybe Mr Burns will sell you one of the 25 he got last night” (Groening, 1998, p.171).

Lovejoy with a look of grief on his face is trying to push his robe back over his nether regions similar to the famous image of Marilyn Monroe. In times of Carnival, “the clergy were often presented as villains, fools, as ignorant, proud, greedy, lazy and lusting after other men’s wives” (Burke, 1994, p.156) so it seems appropriate that Reverend Lovejoy is not as dedicated to his work as he could be. His role as Springfield’s vicar is to provide them with spiritual guidance, but often Reverend Lovejoy does not do this, as we can see when Homer tells his friends intimate details about his relationship with Marge, for which, she throws him out of the house.<sup>17</sup> She seeks solace in Reverend Lovejoy, who tells Marge to get a divorce.

Lovejoy: Get a divorce

Marge: Isn’t that a sin?

Lovejoy: Marge, just about everything is a sin. (Holds up the Bible) Y’ever sat down and read this thing? Technically, we’re not allowed to go to the bathroom (Groening, 1997, p.145).

This quotation shows that Reverend Lovejoy is going against his religious responsibilities with his advice to Marge, reinforcing the argument that *The Simpsons* uses the undermining of authority as a large part of its success. Another example of Lovejoy not totally ‘practicing what he preaches’ can be seen when he takes his dog out for a walk. He stops by Flanders’ house and says: “c'mon boy, this is the spot – right here. That’s a good boy. Good boy. Do your dirty, sinful business” (Groening, 1998, p.202). Lovejoy can here be accused of using double standards, people would not usually associate a priest with encouraging a dog to foul on someone’s front lawn. Lovejoy also has an obsession with the collection plate and how much money the congregation gives to the church each week. When a new religious sect comes to Springfield and people stop attending church, Lovejoy gives a sermon to the almost empty church: “This so called “new religion” is nothing but a pack of weird rituals and chants designed to take away the money of fools. Let us say the Lord's prayer 40 times, but first let's pass the collection plate!”<sup>18</sup> This quotation is clearly a contradiction of what he has said in the earlier part of the sermon, and when the collection plate comes back almost empty, Lovejoy pours gasoline on the floor of the church because he thinks that it is not worth being a priest if there is no money in the church funds, thus showing us that he is not as committed to his religion as he could or should be.

With regards to my comments here on *The Simpsons* and its popularity, I have been exploring the links between the Carnival and *The Simpsons*, namely, the anti-authority, the political and social parody and the upturning of hierarchies. These comedy devices help to make people laugh at their own society in which they are a part. The overall humour and popularity is a combination of Bakhtin’s themes of Carnival and the innovative ideas Groening has included in *The Simpsons* to make it appeal to so many people. The humour is at different levels, a child and an adult will laugh at completely different times during the episode which also adds to the popularity, as it can be enjoyed by people of all ages. The long running success of *The Simpsons* could be that other programs aimed at similar audiences are not being accepted as part of viewing routine as *The Simpsons* clearly is, which could be due to the lack of Carnival elements. While Groening continues to use Bakhtin’s ideas *The Simpsons* can’t fail, as the grotesque and carnivalesque are always going to have a place in our society as a form of entertainment that is secretly pleasurable to all

<sup>17</sup> Episode 1F20

<sup>18</sup> Episode 5F23. Transcribed by Baird et al.

generations. This cartoon is able to give people a short liberating experience, a period of escapism, which is similar to the release that Carnival would give the viewer.

## Chapter Two: South Park

*South Park*, a cartoon characterised by excessive satire within every episode, has been subject to thousands of complaints, commenting on its inappropriate content. “Every few years, an American cartoon series is the subject of a small moral panic” (Lanchester, 1998, [online]). *The Simpsons* had this effect when it first aired in 1990 and now the same thing is happening with *South Park*. Making its television debut in 1997 the cartoon has now been made into a Movie, *South Park – Bigger, Longer, Uncut* successfully making \$52.01 million at the box office.<sup>19</sup> This chapter reveals some of the reasons why *South Park* has continued to grow in strength and why it is subject to so much criticism. I look closely at the carnivalesque elements within the cartoon, concentrating on the grotesque body, and read this in relation to Bakhtin's Carnival. I concentrate particularly on scatology and the characters with apparent grotesque images, principally Timmy, Jimmy and Token. I look at the over active political correctness within *South Park* and examining why this aspect of the cartoon is funny. I examine Parker and Stone's ability to make our society laugh at ourselves, focussing on the satire and parody used within the ‘Terrance & Phillip’ cartoon and using political figures to generate controversy and satire. However, my overall aim for this chapter is to show that *South Park* is popular as it incorporates the elements of Carnival into a cartoon and can give a sense of release to the viewer. So does *South Park* deserve all of the disparagement it receives? In my opinion it does not. However, this section aims to argue why it could be incorrectly perceived as an offensive cartoon, incorporating arguments from a BBC discussion and from the creators themselves.

Cartman (who is not fat but big boned) has become a role model for children, as on a discussion entitled ‘Cartman as a role model? Your reaction’ on the BBC website in August 1999, one man commented that “usually it's fat kids that get bullied – but now they're worshipped” (‘Duncan’, 1999, [online]). This web chat/discussion stirred up a huge divide between those who love and those who hate *South Park*. One comment from Joe Gates, someone who is not a fan of *South Park*, says: “I believe *South Park* is an example of the WORST that America has to offer the world!!! It promotes incivility, encourages a break down in family values, and, these cartoons glorify and encourage our youth of today to disregard any and all forms of authority. I'm grieved over the "success" of this despicable cartoon” (Gates, 1999, [online]). Gates is complaining about the content of the cartoon, notably the Carnival element of the breakdown of authority, so in effect, Gates is opposed to the carnivalesque. I am arguing that *South Park* contains many aspects of Carnival that can be recognised by someone who is aware of Bakhtin's Carnival theories, whereas those who are not familiar or sympathetic to these ideas will either be offended by the content or will laugh at the humour. However, there are people who can understand and appreciate the satire and humour. One such person says: “The *South Park* movie mocks all the irrational responses against it. In the movie, Terrance & Phillip hold the place in their world that *South Park* holds in ours. It is intended that those who would miss the point do” (Simpson, 1999, [online]). Terrance & Phillip “are the stars on the kids' favorite show” (Verdin, 1998, [online]); the entertainment they give to the *South Park* boys is equivalent to the entertainment *South Park* gives us. The duo infect the youth of South Park with their bad language and are the stimulus for Kenny's ‘fart lighting’ stunt that ends with his death. Their influential behaviour is the reason in *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* there is a stand against Terrance & Phillip (and everything

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<sup>19</sup> Box Office Profits, 2002, available from: <http://www.boxofficeprophets.com>

Canadian); the mothers are outraged that their children are swearing and using bad language, the same reason why there was outrage in the UK when *South Park* was first aired. The same kind of moral standing is demonstrated here by the parents of *South Park* residents' children to those parents of children watching *South Park*. *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* also lampoons critics of the cartoon, and shows in the movie how the Terrance & Phillip movie is not entirely to blame for the children's behavioural issues. It has been said by a *South Park* critic 'PokePark' that children watching *South Park* "might be learning from it rather than copying it" (PokePark, no date, [online]). These conflicting opinions are prevalent mostly because the cartoon tackles issues not usually dealt with in dramas let alone cartoons. It has mocked authority and politics and has made light of serious issues relating to society today. "*South Park* poked fun at issues nobody else ever dared to even look at, and made us laugh at ourselves on several occasions for our own stupid ways of thinking" (PokePark, 1998, [online]). With every difficult story line or issue that is brought to light, morals are included in the episode "and more often than not they're good ones that make a lot more sense than the normal ways of thinking" (PokePark, 1998, [online]). This also brings to light that *South Park* are usually laughing at themselves by including a cheesy moral ending at the end of a politically incorrect, rude and Carnival cartoon, however this strengthens what has been shown and heightens the humour. One example of this is where Terrance & Phillip have a row and decide not to perform anymore.<sup>20</sup> However, at the end, their friendship is rekindled and the narrator says: "And so, Terrance & Phillip got back together, proving once and for all that fame and fortune are never as important as friendship." This ending is also reinforcing the Carnival theme that things returned to pre-Carnival states once Carnival was over, and here we see Terrance & Phillip back as a performing act again.

But even though many people find *South Park* offensive, the cartoon "isn't any more or less offensive to anybody, they bash everyone equally" (PokePark, 1998, [online]). There is a disclaiming opening shot of text shown every episode "All characters and events in this show – even those based on real people – are entirely fictional. All celebrity voices are impersonated poorly. The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone."<sup>21</sup> Again, we see Parker and Stone excel in lampooning themselves. A caveat is not essential for every movie or television program including swearing, references to sex, political satire and violence. So if viewers are watching the cartoon, they have accepted and acknowledged the prior warning, and if they are so offended at the content, they can always turn off the program. As Twitchell says, "The closer to prime time – the so-called family hours – the calmer the carnival" (Twichell, 1992, p.201) which is why *South Park* is on after the watershed so it is only accessible to those people awake at this late hour, and is not aimed at a junior audience. Parker and Stone have always reiterated this point, that *South Park* is a cartoon aimed at adults even though it is about four eight year old boys. The issues tackled are aimed at a mature audience and videos and DVDs of the cartoon available to buy in shops are rated '15' certificate.

*South Park*, as we can see from the movie success, is still growing in popularity. "The school chef to whom the children regularly turn for counsel" (Lancaster, 1998, [online] is in my opinion, as near to the figure of 'Carnival' as there

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<sup>20</sup> Episode 505

<sup>21</sup> Taken from video footage

is in *South Park*. For a start, he is around one of the main elements of Carnival, food and also is always advising the children ‘to give their women some good lovin’ tonight.’ (Lancaster, 1998, [online]). Regularly singing about sex and his exploits with women, his advice to Stan who wants to make Wendy like him more than any other guy is: “Oh, that’s easy. You just gotta find the clitoris.” Chef has a somewhat relaxed attitude to intercourse and is regularly seen in bed with various women including Principle Victoria<sup>22</sup> and talking about his exploits to the boys. Carnival was a time of particularly intense sexual activity (Burke, 1978, p.186) and Chef’s activity seems to be heightened all the time. His character appeals to men especially as they can relate his exploits to either their own or a close friend’s. Chef has added to the popularity of *South Park* due to releasing his famous ‘Chocolate Salty Balls’ song. This song is similar to those songs sung during Carnival, laden with double entendres were “not only permitted ... but were virtually obligatory” (Burke, 1978, p.186). Proof this song fits into popular culture of today is that it got to number 1 in December 1999, showing people had appreciation for this song with a genre made famous in Carnival. ‘Mr Hankey the Christmas Poo’ also released his special theme tune, and when entering a ‘Google’ search on the Internet for sites relating to ‘Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo’ the majority were mobile phone ring tones of his song, showing that *South Park*, continuing to be a popular choice in our television viewing, is also expanding into other mediums such as mobile phone ring tones. So why does this cartoon appeal to so many people? *South Park* may be accessible to a large ranging audience due to the variety of Carnival elements incorporated into every episode, such as defecation and Parker and Stone’s fascination with Rabelais’ notion of the grotesque body and the celebration of “a body which eats, digests, copulates, and defecated, but also does so in a wild, exaggerated and grotesque way” (Dentith, 1998, p.67). We can see examples of this in *South Park* on many occasions when defecation is a central part of activities within the episode.

My journey through the celebration of the grotesque body within *South Park* starts with defecation and scatology, of which there is a vast collection of examples. Thompson suggests that “the grotesque does serve to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface” (Thompson, 1972, p.59). *South Park* presents scatology not as ‘horrifying’, rather as a bodily function. The first and primary source of scatological humour comes from Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo. “Trey Parker's father created Mr. Hankey to prompt Trey to flush the toilet when he was three. If he didn't flush, guess who would come out to haunt him” (Westwood, 1998, [online]). Mr. Hankey was originally an imaginary friend of Kyle’s for him to play with at Christmas (as he doesn’t join in the regular festivities because he is Jewish) but it is soon apparent that other people can see Mr. Hankey and eventually he becomes an icon for the four children and they go to visit him in the mall, showing that he had become a part of their culture in the cartoon. Mr. Hankey became a part of our culture when ‘Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo’ music single was released in November 1998. Mr. Hankey is now becoming a regenerative force, making light of a celebration of which Kyle cannot be a part. This can be linked to Bakhtin's writing, explaining, “dung is ‘gay matter’, which degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter” (cited Dentith, p.241) so the audience is free to laugh at the scatological humour, regenerating their freedom from fear. Mr. Hankey is just one example of the extensive range of scatological devices used in *South Park*; the reason for the vast array could be taken from Bakhtin’s theory, saying that the bowels

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<sup>22</sup> Episode 502

and the phallus make up the leading roles in the grotesque image, “it is for this reason why they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration” (cited Dentith, 1995, p.226). Thus extensive use of farting and scatological humour again helps to make this cartoon popular, as Twichell states, “for adults, the allure of the vulgar is regressionary and often secretly pleasurable” (Twichell, 1992, p.52).

Another example using the grotesque body and elimination from the body can be seen in Stan. He has a girlfriend called Wendy and he “throws up every time she talks to him” (Casale, Godfroy, 2003, [online]). This shows how another main part of the grotesque body is used; here the mouth usually associated with swallowing is now demonstrating the opposite. Bakhtin, when talking about characterisation says the mouth is fulfilling “purely expressive functions” (cited Dentith, p.229). Here Stan is expressing fear through his mouth, however this elimination (in the form of vomiting) is transforming his fear into our laughter; as Bakhtin says, the vomit is a “link between body and earth and laughter unites them” (cited Dentith, p.241). Twichell makes the comment that “repetition is of course the essence of vulgarity” (Twichell, 1992, p.50) so this expectation of Stan’s vomiting as Wendy approaches is also part of the humour.

Repetition can also be seen as a huge part of the humour of *South Park* with regards to Kenny’s death. Kenny was in the first five series of *South Park* as one of the four main boys, dying in every episode except for one. In *South Park: Bigger, Longer, Uncut*, Cartman helps Kenny ascend to heaven and after that Kenny only makes guest appearances in the cartoon. Death was a major theme of Carnival, as Bakhtin notes, bringing new life or renewing “the earth’s fertility” (cited Dentith, p.234). Kenny’s graphically violent deaths take many forms, in every episode he is killed in a different way, ranging from being decapitated<sup>23</sup> to being set on fire.<sup>24</sup> Kenny’s character is one of Carnival proportions; his death in the film is a collaboration of his carnivalesque characteristics – he dies from lighting one of his farts. His multiple deaths can be seen as a form of renewal or regeneration for the next episode of *South Park*. Our laughter, when he dies, can be classified as regenerative laughter, that “gay and free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character with the joy of change and renewal” (Bakhtin, 1968, p.83). Several times when Kenny dies, rats carry off various parts of his body, consuming it as they go, and Bakhtin also comments, “grotesque images may of course present other members, organs and parts of the body (especially dismembered parts)” (cited Dentith, 1995, p.227) so Kenny’s image after death is being made even more grotesque by his limbs being separate from his body. Bakhtin makes us also aware that “the grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs” (cited Dentith, 1995, p.227) and with Kenny’s deaths, it is frequently the case that his blood and guts are shown spilling out of his body. Often Kenny’s body will remain with the boys as they continue talking or doing whatever they were before he died, to heighten his growing grotesque image.

Another resident of *South Park* is Timmy the disabled boy, capable only of saying his name, but in true *South Park* style is incorporated into activities concerning the main characters; he even becomes the replacement to Kenny for a short while. Timmy’s appearance is different to the uniform image of Cartman, Stan and Kyle;

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<sup>23</sup> Episode 406

<sup>24</sup> Episode 314

Timmy's body seems more grotesque with his head being even more disproportionate to the rest of his body, highlighting his disability. Timmy's eyes are also enlarged, giving the impression that they are protruding from his head and as Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque body tells us "the grotesque is only interested in protruding eyes" (cited Dentith, 1995, p.226) showing that Timmy's image would be classified as grotesque. Timmy can be seen in figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Timmy

Twitchell makes a link with the grotesque to freak shows; "you paid to stare. We still do. The screens are different and the method of payment more sophisticated, but the process is still the same" (Twitchell, 1992, p.63). In laughing at Timmy, we are openly laughing at his disability but as Thompson writes about the grotesque, "the abnormal may be funny (this is accurately reflected in the every-day usage of 'funny' to mean both 'amusing' and 'strange')..." (Thompson, 1972, p.24) so are we laughing the way Timmy looks or his disability? Timmy's disabled body, which fits and jerks in an uncontainable manner, is now a powerful force within the carnivalesque cartoon. Timmy is regularly celebrated for being disabled, and in series five a new disabled boy is introduced to the class, named Jimmy. When Kenny finally dies and does not come back to life, the boys go to a theme park to choose a new best friend to replace Kenny.<sup>25</sup> Cartman justifies his reasons for perhaps choosing Jimmy: "The great thing was that, because Jimmy's crippled, we got to go to the front of the line". Here we see the powerless becoming powerful in a rather twisted way – surely the boys should want to be friends with Timmy or Jimmy for who they are, not because their disability can be used to the boys advantage. But whatever the drive behind the friendship, we see the boys remaining friends with Timmy and Jimmy throughout the later episodes. There is, however, rivalry between the two disabled boys, which comes to a head in an episode fittingly named 'Cripple Fight' where the two battle it out.<sup>26</sup> We see Jimmy calling himself "handi-capable" in this episode, standing up for himself as someone who is using his disability to his advantage. This episode shows Parker and Stone highlighting their reaction against political correctness and making fun of themselves, showing a class with one person from every minority group that is usually discriminated against.

*South Park* parodies political correctness within the structure of the staple characters. Among the leading four boys, one is Jewish and has an adopted brother and one is 'the school fatty' (Lanchester, 1998, [online]) who comes from a single parent family. In their school class there is Timmy, who is disabled, Token who is the 'token' black boy, and their teacher Mr Garrison, who is gay. An episode dedicated to

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<sup>25</sup> Episode 606

<sup>26</sup> Episode 503



Token materialises the Carnival element of the minority having the power.<sup>27</sup> Token is being bullied at school, not because he is black, but because he is richer than everyone else. In the episode in which he stars he bursts into song in a moment of depression and sends an advert to a tabloid “extolling South Park as the next Aspen.” When the people start moving to *South Park* all of these rich people also happen to be black and there is an element of racism when the South Park residents gang up and go on a preservation march. So in response, the rich people march and when passing Chef (a black resident of South Park) they immediately think he is wealthy and ask him to join them on the march. We can see the powerless becoming powerful; the black residents are executing their right to live in *South Park* rather than moving away from the area, which could also be seen as inverting the normal practices, which was also another important element of Carnival.

Carnival was a time of anti-authority and inversion, a theme that is clearly demonstrated within *South Park*. Carnival was also a time to “invert hierarchies” (Dentith, 1995, p.74) which can be seen in many instances, some of which I will make reference to within the police force in *South Park*. It is evident here that *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are using part of the same idea, that having authorities who are lame, corrupt and utterly useless is a good base for many successful storylines. “Officer Barbrady is the incompetent police officer” (Verdin, 2002, [online]) who is also illiterate. His illiteracy is exposed when he is put under pressure and he blurts it out in a press conference.<sup>28</sup> He goes back to school to learn to read and is then faced with trying to solve a case in *South Park* while being in school. Barbrady tells Cartman, “I’m allowed to deputize citizens in a time of crisis” and makes Cartman a deputy cop. Cartman is then seen on a “big wheel tricycle” dressed up as a cop stopping cars and attending to a domestic violence case, meaning Cartman is now more authoritative than the adults he questions. This therefore relates to Burke’s comment on Carnival activities, where there is a “reversal of the relations between man and man, whether age reversal, sex reversal or other inversion” (Burke, 1994, p.189) which we clearly see in this particular episode. In this episode we also see Cartman dressing up as a woman, inverting his status (from child to undercover police officer) and his sex to attract the attention of men looking for prostitutes.

Another example of the children inverting the hierarchies is when the children barricade themselves into Stan’s house with “twenty-three live infant cattle” to protest against the consumption of veal.<sup>29</sup> During the episode, it becomes evident that the boys will not give up the cows, so a negotiator is brought in to help with the situation. However, Cartman manages to manipulate the negotiator so “guns and ammo” are exchanged for the cows. The humour here is on two levels, Parker and Stone cleverly link this particular instance to the film *The Negotiator*, and included in the conversation between Glen the negotiator are several sentences taken from that film. It becomes apparent that Cartman is in control of Glen the negotiator and, soon the conversation between the two is reversed into Cartman demanding ridiculous things, which Glen repeats to the FBI agent waiting. “All we need to do in return is get a cattle-transporting semi-truck that will take the boys and the cattle to Denver International Airport, where we have a fully-gassed airplane waiting to take them all to Mexico... And they want the guy that plays Mr. Worf on "Star Trek" to drive the

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<sup>27</sup> Episode 512

<sup>28</sup> Episode 203

<sup>29</sup> Episode 605

truck. *[beat]* In full makeup.” This shows the reversal of power and in true Carnival style, the “three insane boy terrorists” as they are referred to by the field reporter, who would not usually be powerful in this situation are seen to be in control. The reversal in power between adult and child is shown by the absurdity of the demands from Cartman, and the inversion of negotiator and barricader.

Politics and political figures help *South Park* to appeal to a wider audience due to the clever nature in which they introduce the element of political satire into the cartoon. There are several aspects of political satire, which I am going to outline with reference to Carnival.

The past American presidents and present president are often ridiculed; an example of this is in an episode when Jimmy is doing his very first comedy sketch for Cartman.<sup>30</sup> “You know, sometimes people ask me, “Are you angry at God for making disabled people?” I say, “No, I think the world is better with puh-President Bush.”” This quotation is a reference to the incompetence of Bush within the American government. Parker and Stone are using political satire as a method of overturning authority and relating this to Carnival practices, “insult was licensed” (Burke, 1994, p.198). Another example of an American president being mocked is when Cartman’s mum wants to have an abortion in her fortieth trimester.<sup>31</sup> She manages with every day that passes to sleep with evermore White House residents, and on the fifth day, she is seen in bed with President Clinton. This is making direct reference to the Monica Lewinsky affair, where he denied sleeping with her. This could also be seen as a statement of woman’s sexuality being used to overthrow conventional forms of authority, thus linking to the inversion of power in Carnival. The woman here is being powerful by getting her own way by sleeping with the president.<sup>32</sup>

Parker and Stone are committed to showing what the viewer wants to see and three weeks after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Parker and Stone aimed to make light of this tragedy by making an episode, entitled ‘Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants’ in which Osama bin Laden stars.<sup>33</sup> His outward appearance is exact to how he is seen to be on television, however, his manner within the cartoon is drugged and not entirely coherent. As the climax of the episode, we see “a magnifying glass pop up over bin Laden's genitals, then another, then another... nine in all, and the penis is finally visible. A sign pops up... “Tiny, ain't it?”” By showing him with a small penis, it is degrading him and taking away his sexuality as a male, therefore taking away his power. The death of bin Laden in this episode is giving the viewer a sense of release, and is showing bin Laden as insignificant; we have seen him in a different light, meaning our view of him has been changed for a while, a carnivalesque release after the tragedies concerning September 11<sup>th</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Episode 503

<sup>31</sup> Episode 202

<sup>32</sup> Bill Clinton is also ridiculed in an episode when he is threatened by Cartman with videotapes of him and Marisa Tomei in episode 314. With regards to the media interest in the Monica Lewinsky affair at this time, this episode is trying again to bring to the forefront instances of shame and embarrassment on the government. The powerless (the people with the video tape) are becoming powerful in aiming to degrade the president and undermine his authority. Stan’s Uncle Jimbo says “Boy, we really got the President by the balls” showing that he has incriminating evidence that could lead to the downfall of Clinton.

<sup>33</sup> Episode 509

“Trends are what the majority happens to like at the time” (PokePark, 2002, [online]), so with regards to *South Park*, Saddam Hussein is another favourite political figure to mock. Parker, as quoted in an interview said: “Now, we've gotta do a whole thing about Iraq and Saddam, 'cause Saddam's always been a big part of "South Park." In the movie, he was the big character. So we're going to do a big thing with him in the season premiere” (Parker, 2003, [online]). He is associated in the movie and in many episodes as the boyfriend of Satan. This is not the first time though that Saddam has been undermined as a powerful leader. “In November 1990, an ad for a T-shirt appeared in a magazine. The image was a camel; superimposed on the camel’s rump is the face of the Iraqi leader” (Goldberg, 1992, p.1). Goldberg goes on to explain how “homosexuality [is] thus linked to bestiality” (Goldberg, 1992, p.1) and in *South Park*, Saddam is once again shown to be with an inhuman being, Satan. Parker and Stone are lampooning Saddam, by showing him as homosexual, they are being outwardly homophobic; by making this loathsome man gay, they are making a statement that the biggest possible insult is to compromise his sexuality. Like Osama bin Laden, his sexuality has been challenged, making the character less masculine and therefore less powerful. In the film, Satan and Saddam are in bed together watching TV talking about the possible war that is about to happen on earth. Soon, Saddam starts masturbating under the sheets and says to Satan, “Yeah! Yeah! Man, I'm gettin' so hot! Let's fuck!” Carnival takes delight in highlighting sexuality; so seeing the bare chests of Saddam while they are in bed and watching them as they explore their sexualities and feelings for each other is celebrating their sexual differences. Looking closely at Satan’s bare chest, Parker and Stone have also exaggerated Satan’s sexual image by making his muscle tone in his chest look like a huge penis. This image can be seen in figure 4.



Figure 4. Satan

This is very carnivalesque, as the phallus was a celebrated entity in Carnival, as Bakhtin notes; disproportionate phalli would be “carried through the streets” (cited Burke, 1994, p.187). Saddam also produces two huge dildos from the bed sheets later in the film, trying to tempt Satan to have sex with him, which again is bringing to light the celebration of the sexual organs in times of Carnival.

With regards to the popularity of *South Park* I contest that it is mainly due to the unique way in which it openly mocks political figures, makes jokes about minority groups and openly celebrates anti-authoritarian behaviour. It is a ground-breaking cartoon that has stirred up much controversy but has never intended to offend viewers with the content; Parker and Stone have been more upfront in tackling issues from which other forms of media have perhaps shied away, so in my opinion, *South Park*’s innovation with regards to themes and script writing has helped with its success as well as it including elements of Bakhtin’s Carnival.

## Conclusion

From the analyses of the two cartoons I have chosen to look at, it is clear that there are elements of both Carnival influence and innovative humour in *The Simpsons* and *South Park*. My aim of this dissertation was to argue that the cartoons are successful due to Mikhail Bakhtin's aspects he identified being present, and through close research of the cartoons and viewer's opinions, I feel that Carnival is a large part of their success.

*The Simpsons* has been running for 13 years and people find the almost predictable content satisfying. At the end of every episode, things will return to how they were before; one member of the family will experience a conflict or some kind of challenge, which will resolve in the final few minutes of the program. It is rare for *The Simpsons* to leave the viewer in a state of shock or uncertainty regarding the welfare of the characters. With *South Park*, even though the characters move through their lives with conflict and obstacles they have to overcome, it is not always clear at the end of the show whether things will be back to normal next episode; the only near certainty is that Kenny will be back in the next episode, ready to die again.

With regards to Twichell's quotation to which I referred in chapter one, "the closer to the prime...the calmer the carnival" (Twichell, 1992, p.201), which is what I have argued with regards to *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, I feel that there is not much scope for *The Simpsons* to expand with regards to the level of their humour. The audience for *The Simpsons* is generally at a lower age, therefore carnivalesque devices such as swearing and excessive violence cannot be included in the cartoon. Also, they are confined to working within their viewer expectations. Many people hold *The Simpsons* in high regard and I am sure that if the show were to gradually include more and more elements of Carnival, such as more defecation, more scatology and more violence, people would react the same way as they did to *South Park*. So it is expected that *The Simpsons* will continue to produce a high quality family cartoon with humour on many levels that can be enjoyed by people of all ages, and those who can appreciate the parody within the show. Those people who are not so tuned in with the humour can still enjoy the cartoon on a different level.

Both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* include parody, incongruity and role inversion, which are all very strongly related to our innate sense of comedy entertainment. "Hence carnival as a whole represents a union of entertaining elements that have a powerful combined effect on the viewer" (Anderson, 2003, [personal communication]), which of course leads to higher loyalty and ratings, which we can see especially with these two cartoons.

*South Park* includes more elements of Carnival that I outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, using the formula that more is more, cramming as much defecation, scatology, swearing, violence and sex into every episode. The cartoon is pushing the boundaries of that is acceptable and sometimes they get it wrong, overstep the mark, and learn from that. It is not, they state, Parker and Stone's intention to offend, but it is evident from the outcry from viewers that they have questioned or challenged some people's morals in place of this anarchic cartoon. However *South Park's* creators are always looking for inspiration for their cartoon and as I have mentioned in chapter two, the recent events of the 'War Against Iraq'

have given Parker and Stone more ideas with regards to new and innovative ideas for future episodes. The characters within *South Park* grow older and move on through life, gaining more experience as they mature and move through their schooling, bringing us the sense that one day there will be nothing more for Parker and Stone to show us. Their resources of farting jokes and scatology are finite and there will be a day where there is no longer a demand for the four boys to entertain us, though history shows us that Carnival is eternal. However, you could argue that there is also the thought that the anarchic, chaotic worlds presented in *The Simpsons* and *South Park* actually enable the shows to keep running for longer. Since ‘anything goes’ to a greater extent than more conventional shows, there's a very strong business case for using the possibilities of the Carnival genre to extend the creative process over significantly larger numbers of episodes without becoming stale.

In contrast, in *The Simpsons* the family and those in Springfield will always be in the same capsule of time, reliving day after day while the world ages around them: the period in Springfield never changes, people remain the same age, they look the same and death and births are rare. But this formula is a good one if the series can be produced with the same general pattern for the episodes, including the themes that are popular at the time, sending up the government and political issues that are prevalent. With *The Simpsons* it is clear that this formula *does* work as the cartoon is still being made thirteen years after it was first screened; there is still a demand for the Simpson family to be entertaining us. This shows if there is still a demand, the audience is not becoming bored with the cartoon, as the situation of the family never changes is it easier to dip in and out when you please, whereas with *South Park* the scenarios change, meaning that some explanation is needed if viewing a later episode or series of the cartoon.

With this one element of the two cartoons in mind, it is clear that *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are successful for different reasons but they still manage to include areas of Carnival within the shows, whether it is the themes of Carnival or the general overview of the cartoon. I think it would be unfair to class one cartoon as more carnivalesque than the other as they are so different in their approach to what they show and how they show it, but as a general rule *The Simpsons* is a display of the dysfunctional family, working around every day conflicts; at the end of every episode, things will be back to how they were at the beginning and changes are infrequent. Change is frequent within *South Park* and the whole level of the cartoon is aimed at a more mature audience giving it motivation to be more radical in the approach to cartoon making. They use the themes of scatology, violence, swearing and degradation and taking these to an astronomical level, and making the cartoon one of excess in every sense is part of the success for *South Park*. Both cartoons reflect extensively on the society in which we live and the themes change according to the time; focus is concentrated on specific cultural occurrences and things that are relevant in society at that time. The two cartoons can be seen as a manifestation of popular culture and a statement of political and social rebellion, as well as rebelling against official authority. These cartoons – *The Simpsons* and *South Park* – are not just surface-level trivia, but have subtle and deep historical and cultural roots.

# Appendix One

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Figure 1. image of Homer Simpson available from:

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Figure 2. image of Montgomery Burns available from:

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Figure 3. image of Timmy available from:

<http://www.spscriptorium.com/SPBios/SouthParkBiosIndex.htm>

Figure 4. image of Satan available from:

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