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The Uses of Parody and Satire in Contemporary American Animated Television

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Countersong

The Uses of Parody and Satire in Contemporary American Animated Television

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Countersong

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Jonas Lindkvist



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Abstract: This thesis examines how parody and satire are used in contemporary American animated television series. Through critical textual analysis, five television shows are examined. These are *Archer*, *BoJack Horseman*, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park*. The study offers theoretical background and discussion on key concepts like parody, satire, comedy, animation, television, and the sitcom genre, positioning this study against previous research and articulates a definition of parody that is used in this text. This definition states that parody is with perceived intent creating new art by reiterating and transforming a source text through the breaking of logic. The study then focuses on how parody and satire are used in depictions of American national identity in the material. Chapter 3 analyzes depictions of USA's closest neighbors in the material and highlights how American national identity is created, sustained, and deconstructed by contrasting it with its geographically closest counterparts. Chapter 4 examines the fictional realm of Equestria in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, how it is a reiterated version of real-life USA and how it uses parody to create spaces for alternative readings for a young audience. Chapter 5 analyzes the intersections of national identity and capitalism, what consequences the commodification of national identity and the myth of the American Dream have had and how that is depicted in the shows. Chapter 6 focuses on *Archer* and how the temporal fluidity and internationalism of the show influences and undermines notions of American national identity through its use of parody and satire. Chapter 7 examines the conflation of gun culture and American national identity, of the Frontier myth, western and action heroes and their parodic representations in the material. Chapter 8 takes a more general approach to how parody is used to celebrate, accept, criticize, and reject nationalism, national identity, and nation in the material. The 9th and final chapter offers a summary and concluding discussion of the results of the study.

Key words: Film studies, television studies, parody, satire, animation, sitcom, comedy, intertextuality, national identity, nationalism, America studies, *Archer*, *BoJack Horseman*, *My Little Pony*, *Rick and Morty*, *South Park*.

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Jonas Lindkvist



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Introduction

Laughter and its forms represent the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation. – Mikhail Bakhtin

Life literally abounds in comedy if you just look around you. – Mel Brooks

Unlike satire, spoofing has no serious objectives. – Pauline Kael

The first recorded use of the word *parodia* is from Aristotle's *Poetics* from 335 BC.¹ It was used to describe singers imitating other singers as a form of burlesque or counter-song.² Since then parody has changed, evolved, and adapted to new mediums and contexts. Aristotle could probably not foresee the rise and fall of the *Scary Movie* (2000-) franchise or the lasting impact of *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks 1974) but what he identified in the plays of the time has lingered to be a part of our contemporary cultural climate. This project started with a question of where all the great parody of my childhood and youth had gone. Where were the movies of the same caliber as *Silent Movie* (Brooks 1976), *Top Secret!* (Abrahams, Zucker and Zucker 1984), *Hot Shots!* (Abrahams 1991), *This Is Spinal Tap* (Reiner 1984), or *A Mighty Wind* (Guest 2003)? The outright parody films that were being made did not hold the same quality anymore and comedy films that were fantastic like Edgar Wright's Cornetto Trilogy (*Shaun of the Dead* 2004, *Hot Fuzz* 2007, *The World's End* 2013), I did not consider parodies because they all fit within their respective genres of horror, action, and science fiction comedies. After some introspection I came to the rather obvious realization that the outright parody of high quality had migrated into television generally and animated television specifically. Starting with *The Simpsons* (1989-) the surge of animated television shows that were outright parodies or used parody frequently has been extraordinary, and as long as I have been able to watch these kinds of shows I have devoured them with an insatiable appetite. It followed naturally, therefore, that this would be the focus of my research.

¹ Dentith 2000, p. 10.

² Rose 1993, pp. 7-8.

In his acceptance speech for Emerson College's Ready Wit Award 2020, *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg talked about the role of comedy in political change.³ He says that comedy contains the possibility to satirize people of power but wonders how you can shame power that feels no shame. Comedy's greatest function to Bob-Waksberg has not been to topple people of power, but to lift the disenfranchised, give them a voice in our society, to give an ordinary person the tools to handle everyday life, to reach out to others and understand them. Comedy also forces you to take a political stand, whether through action or inaction, according to Bob-Waksberg. It can change the way we view power structures and the world around us, but it can also normalize cruelty under an umbrella of wit, but as Bob-Waksberg puts it, "when you choose the joke over a person just for the sake of being funny, you are a boring person".

The quote "unlike satire, spoofing has no serious objectives" at the beginning of this chapter is collected from legendary film reviewer Pauline Kael and her review of *Cat Ballou* (Silverstein 1965). She did not care for it much. More so, she used it as an excuse to attack the genre of spoofing, often used as a synonym for parody, in general and called it a "face-saving device" that "has become a safety net for those who are unsure of their [straight dramatic] footing" and that it is "ineptitude – coyly disguised".⁴ She concludes that spoofing has no serious objectives, which resonated poorly with me. As you will find in this text, parody has often been maligned or marginalized by enthusiasts, professionals, and scholars alike. Even a film parody scholar like Dan Harries questions the subversiveness of parody by asking if we "really become 'liberated' after watching an hour and a half of *Spaceballs*?" (Brooks 1987).⁵ First of all, although *Cat Ballou* is not one of my favorite movies, I would consider it a western genre comedy and not a spoof or a parody. Secondly, although the film is silly and simple to a fault at times, it also tackles questions of gender inequality, generational trauma, acceptance of death, and the possibility of redemption. Thirdly, it does not represent parody as a genre or as a concept in any meaningful way. One of the main purposes of this research is to explore the uses of parody and to find out if they can, however unlikely, have some serious objectives.

The material I have chosen for this research are five animated television shows produced in the United States of America from 2009 to the present day, with the exception of *South Park* (1997-), but the focus of my analysis is on the parts of the

³ The Ready Wit Award "is an honor bestowed upon a person whose significant, innovative contributions to the comedic arts affects societal change in a fashion that best exemplifies the spirit of Emerson College, as expressed in our motto, 'Expression Necessary to Evolution'." <https://www.emerson.edu/academics/schools-labs-and-centers/center-comedic-arts/ready-wit-award>, retrieved 251017.

⁴ Kael 1968, p. 28, further discussion in Gehring 1999, p. 22, Frank 2012, p. 354.

⁵ Harries 2000, p. 4.

show that has been made after 2009. The television shows are popular and have many viewers and fans, and as Brett Mills concludes about popular animation, a large audience means that any progressive or subversive content will have a far-reaching effect and “the role of humour is likely to make any such novelty accepted by the majority of audiences”.⁶

The five TV shows that are included in the analysis of this dissertation are *Archer* (2009-2023), *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-2019), *Rick and Morty* (2013-), and *South Park* (1997-). When discussing examples from specific episodes, these are presented in short form where the first mention includes the season, the episode number, and the title, and subsequent mentions use the title only. So, when I reference Pinkie Pie’s party duel with Cheese Sandwich in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, I conclude that it takes place in the twelfth episode of the fourth season, which would make it S04E12 *Pinkie Pride* and any further references to the episode would be to *Pinkie Pride*.

Although the title suggests that this is a text about satire, animation, television, nationalism, and American national identity, the main focus and starting point is parody and its uses. This text is not so much concerned with the question of why we find something funny, why we laugh at a joke or something humorous, it is not so much about what humor or comedy *is* as it is concerned about what humor, comedy, or parody and satire *does*.⁷ More specifically, it is concerned with what parody and satire does.

Bob-Waksberg’s comments on the nature and potential of comedy resonate with the parts of me that are interested in the possibility of change. Comedy can be used to disrupt that which is taken for granted, it can offer new perspectives and new modes of interpretation, it can make you feel good or make you feel bad, and it can offer pleasure and pain simultaneously. For me, the subversive potential of comedy has been one of the most important aspects of why I find it so alluring, and people using comedy as a means of resistance against authority, bigotry, totalitarianism, or compulsory normalcy, are some of my personal heroes.

Political scientist Stephen Coleman points out that an ironic positioning like the one often used in parody and satire can be seen as an expression of the late modern distaste of fundamentalist certainty.⁸ The final line of Wisława Szymborska’s poem *Some Like Poetry* reads in translation “But I do not know and do not know and hold on to it, as to a saving banister” and from the moment I read it in 2005 to the person who would agree to be my life partner, it has been one of my most

⁶ Mills 2005, p. 154.

⁷ Cmp discussion in Ödmark, p. 4.

⁸ Coleman 2013, p. 383, see an interesting further discussion in Doona 2022, pp. 18-21.

important guiding principles.⁹ To not know is to be curious, and to continue not knowing is to search for possibilities and alternatives. The possibility of subversion and resistance, the distaste of absolute certainty and the beauty of uncertainty are keystones for my view on and entry point into academic study.

Parody also possesses an interdisciplinary potential. Referencing and poking fun of different source texts from different points in time and space is exclusive to neither film nor literary studies, where parody as an academic subject mainly has been developed and used. With its deconstructive and subversive potential, parody has an innate possibility to dismantle the walls that can surround different academic fields, acting as an unofficial language that can attack the official academic language.

Michel Foucault once wrote: “Perhaps we can discover a realm where originality is again possible as parodists of history and buffoons of God.” It is from a larger discussion on parody and the state of public discourse where he references Karl Marx in stating that “history repeats itself as farce” and that historical writing, culture creation, and staging is constituted by a mix of quotations, misplaced artifacts, and pure inventions.¹⁰ Momentary requirements govern what is used and quoted and what myths are constructed or reiterated. Even though it might not have been what he intended when writing this, the possibility of originality in and through parody is an inspiring starting point for the research I wanted to do with this dissertation.

Richard Dyer, as one of the foremost authorities on parody and pastiche, emphasizes that it is important because through it we can understand ourselves as historical agents and see how our view of history is shaped by the present.¹¹ In his *Pastiche* from 2008 he revalues pastiche and emphasizes its importance and value not only as a narrative or stylistic tool, but as an aesthetic choice that possesses value in and of itself. This is very much in line with what I want to do with parody in this research.

Since many texts on parody or satire or comedy or animation or television or sitcom starts with some form of disclaimer that this is not something that is usually the focus of academic research and that it actually is worth our attention, I feel

⁹ I prefer the Swedish translation “Men jag vet inte och vet inte och håller mig i det, som i ett räddande räcke” by Anders Bodegård from Szymborska 2004, but this English translation by Joanna Trzeciak from the collection *Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wisława Szymborska*, 2001, hits close enough.

¹⁰ Foucault 1986, pp. 93-94.

¹¹ Dyer 2008, p. 180.

reluctant to include one myself.¹² It is, however, necessary because it points to one of the key contributions of this research. There are still many gaps in research on parody, satire, comedy, animation, television, and sitcom respectively because they are fields that have garnered less attention than cinematic feature length live-action drama or literature or the politics of national identity to name only a few. This research builds on the previous research available and offers new interpretations primarily on parody and its uses but also contributes to research on comedy, animation, television, national identity, and their respective intersections.

I am not claiming that I was aware of the writings of Pauline Kael when growing up in the Swedish countryside, but I noticed early on that some of my favorite films at the time like the *Hot Shots!* (1991-1993) and *The Naked Gun* (1988-1994) films were not written or spoken of in the same way as more dramatic ventures in the film reviews on television and in my local newspaper, and were often left out of discourse entirely. One of the aspects this dissertation sets out to show is that spoofing, or parody, which is the term I prefer even though they are often used interchangeably, can have serious objectives and that it is worthy of academic attention. Jean Baudrillard writes about advertising in his seminal *Simulacra and Simulation* and states that advertising has seeped into all of society, but that does not mean that there is no room for complexity or ingenuity, both within and without the advertised world.¹³ The advent of meme culture is entirely reliant on copies and references but has managed to create a new language of its own, with originality and absurdity. Culture finds a way.

This research is therefore first and foremost about parody, second about the possibilities of critical perspectives and of subversion and resistance that can be found in it, third about satire, fourth about animation, fifth about television, and sixth about national identity, even though that still is a major part of the analysis. My aim is to look at what parody does in the shows I have chosen for the study. How is parody used and what effect does it have? Since the material chosen are animated television shows, I also look closer at how that influences the presentation. What does animation do for these shows, how do animated shows differ from live-action and how is this utilized? What does television do for these texts, how is a television show different from film or literature and how does it affect the representations within? Finally, what representations of national identity

¹² See for instance Stabile & Harrison 2003, p. 2 on the intersection of sitcom and cartoons, Wilkie 2020, on the lack of research on comedy, Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 7 on the lack of study in animated television and its place in American comedy tradition, Mittell 2015, pp. 3-4 on the lack of study in television narration, Dyer 2008, p. 1 on the lack of study in pastiche and parody, and of course Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* where he states that “laughter and its forms represent [...] the least scrutinized sphere of the people’s creation”.

¹³ Baudrillard 1994.

can be found, how do they align with or subvert dominant notions of national identity, and what role does parody, animation, and television have in creating those representations? Since the shows are made in the USA and since the research has a focus on American national identity, this text is focused primarily on American animation and television, its history and developments and its place and importance in contemporary society.

Methodological Discussion

This text is a critical textual analysis where I focus almost exclusively on the content of the shows I have selected and analyze them by posing to them the questions formulated in the introductory part of this dissertation. The text in textual analysis is not to be read or understood as a literal text on a page, but as an item of culture with enough coherence to be treated as a single object. Gray and Lotz uses this definition and establish that a film therefore is a text, “as is a novel, a song, a poem, a comic book, a video game, a painting, a radio program, or, for our purposes, a television program”.¹⁴ The method of critical textual analysis in television studies, according to Gray and Lotz, “grew out of and alongside semiotics with its broader interests in how a text might tell us something about the cultural system that surrounds it more generally”.¹⁵ Johan Nilsson discusses the use of film aesthetics in analyzing film satire in *American Film Satire in the 1990s: Hollywood Subversion*. He cites the film poetics of David Bordwell and the neoformalism of Kristin Thompson as reactions to the unified Grand Theories that dominated film studies in the 1980s, like Lacanian psychoanalysis, Structuralist semiotics, Post-structuralist literary theory, or Althusserian Marxism, to focus not on how the material can explain the theory, but to analyze form and style to ascertain how films work and why they look the way they do.¹⁶ Analytical study focuses on specific devices, theoretical analysis would deal with types of classification like genre, and historical analysis positions a film in a time period or across periods, and any study in poetics would likely contain all three perspectives to a different degree and with flexibility according to what the material suggests, which Nilsson argues makes it suitable for a study in satire with its formal openness and eclecticism.¹⁷ The key element which I use in my research is to let the material guide the analysis, which naturally makes it possible to conclude and

¹⁴ Gray and Lotz 2019, p. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁶ Nilsson 2013, pp. 20-22, quoting Bordwell 2008, pp. 371-372, Bordwell and Carroll 1996, p. xiii, 26, and Thompson 1988, p. 30.

¹⁷ Nilsson 2013, p. 21, quoting Bordwell 2008.

say something about Lacanian psychoanalysis or Althusserian Marxism if the material supports it. I contextualize certain aspects of the shows like the conditions of production, show creators and co-workers, consider audiences and their perspectives, or make references to paratexts outside the scope of the television episodes such as trailers, promos, merch, spin-offs, fanart etc.¹⁸ This and other aspects like it are not the main focus of the dissertation, however. That lies with critical analysis of the content of the episodes of the TV series I have chosen for the project.

Elsaesser and Buckland write about film analysis through the steps of *inventio*, *dispositio*, and *elocutio* from Aristotle via the hands of David Bordwell. *Inventio* or discovery is where a question is formulated, and a subject matter is categorized and contrasted against other subjects. *Dispositio* or composition is where ideas or arguments are selected and arranged, and *elocutio* where the manner of presentation is chosen and executed.¹⁹ Using these terms, the *inventio* stage of research started several decades ago when I first started watching parodies and cartoons like *Silent Movie*, *Airplane* (Abrahams, Zucker & Zucker 1980), *Hot Shots!*, *Police Squad* (1982), *Loaded Weapon 1* (Quintano 1993), *Tom & Jerry*, *Donald Duck*, *Professor Balthazar* (1967-1977), *Parker Lewis Can't Lose* (1990-1993), *The Raggy Dolls* (1986-1994), *The Pinchville Grand Prix* (Caprino 1975), *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Zemeckis 1988), *The Simpsons*, *The PJs* (1999-2001), and *Beavis & Butthead* (1993-2011). I had watched all or parts of the five TV shows chosen for this project before starting the research, plus a plethora of other animated TV shows with parodic or satirical content, many of which I enjoyed thoroughly and which in many cases deserve greater attention. Deciding on which shows to ultimately use came down to which shows use parody or satire in interesting and meaningful ways. At least four of the shows were selected on this basis, but there are plenty of others that would have been interesting to analyze further.

The Simpsons and *Family Guy* (1999-) were initially part of this study, but after watching and analyzing six seasons of *The Simpsons* post Jonathan Gray's *Watching with the Simpsons*, I realized that too few new things could be said about the show, something that was also true for *Family Guy*. *Futurama* (1999-), *American Dad* (2005-), *The Boondocks* (2005-2014), *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), *King of the Hill* (1997-), *Bob's Burgers* (2011-), *Gravity Falls* (2012-2016), *The Owl House* (2020-2023), *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), *The Venture Bros.* (2003-2018), *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1996), or *The Tick* (1994-1997) would all make excellent choices but either in terms of longevity, the fact that I wanted to focus more on the time after 2007-2008, or in how they use parody or satire, *Archer*, *BoJack Horseman*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park* offered the

¹⁸ For further research on paratexts, see Gray 2010 and Mittell 2015, pp. 293-294.

¹⁹ Elsaesser and Buckland 2002, pp. 6-13.

most interesting and multifaceted examples. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* was chosen on the same merits, but an aspect that makes it more interesting is that it is a show made for children, which is also true of other shows using parody like *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999-), *The Epic Tales of Captain Underpants* (2018-2019), or *Harvey Girls Forever!* (2018-2020). However, I wanted a show made for young girls specifically to see how it can create alternative spaces for that kind of audience, and it does of course add a layer of interest that the substantial academic interest in the show stems mainly from asking the question of why a male adult fan base was formed around it rather than analyzing the show on its own merits.

The process of choosing specific examples and case studies in the material to critically analyze starts by watching the show in its entirety while taking notes on scenes or episodes that warrant further scrutiny. Examples are chosen based on their closeness to and impact on the questions posed to the material. Episodes of interest have been watched again for further and more detailed analysis and if necessary, re-watched multiple times for as long as it takes to complete the analysis. It is a process of watching, analyzing, scaling down, and repeating the same process until the analysis is complete. When presenting the analysis of the chosen case studies, I make a point of whether it is representative of the series as a whole by including other examples of similar occurrences, or if it is a more singular example and therefore more of an exception to the series' overarching style, narration, or message. There is always a risk when analyzing TV shows to focus too much on a single episode and forgetting its broader context, which is why it is so important to start from a vantage point of analyzing the entire show before slowly whittling down what becomes the focus of analysis.²⁰ I think it is difficult and in the case of the shows I am interested in near impossible to analyze a TV series and boil it down to a single or even consistent position. A TV series with at least six seasons like the ones in this research change with people working on the show changing opinion, changing priorities, or just changing over time. Series contradict themselves; they are not solidified and permanent. What is possible to do is to analyze scenes, episodes, seasons and even tones or messages that permeate entire shows with the caveat that they come with exceptions.

Taste bias shape what we choose to look more closely at, which is something that is unavoidable or at least, as Jason Mittell explains when discussing his choice of material for *Complex TV*, not problematic as long as choices are presented with transparency.²¹ Ignoring taste bias could mean losing sight of key elements in television storytelling like why people watch something and why some programs work better than others. Mittell argues that we can and should look not only at how something in the context of a television narrative works, but also how it works

²⁰ Mills 2005, p. 24.

²¹ Mittell 2015, p. 207.

well, to “use evaluative criticism to strengthen our understanding of how a television program works, how viewers and fans invest themselves in a text, and what inspires them (and us) to make television a meaningful part of everyday life”.²² The purpose of this text is not to evaluate which shows are good or not, or which shows are better than others, but I would be remiss to leave out one of the main reasons why I chose these five specific shows: because they are good shows, because I like them, and because I personally believe that they have something to offer both in terms of what they say and how they say it. By acknowledging his own personal investments, Mittell emphasizes that it allows him “to go beyond asking ‘how do these programs work?’ to consider ‘how do they work so well?’”.²³ And, as Mittell also points out, even though he and I speak from a point of authority that academia grants us, it is not personal opinion that forms effective evaluation, but successful analysis and argumentation.²⁴ This perspective and the transparency that needs to accompany it allows me to not only ask the question of how parody is used in the material, but how it is used well. Using the word quality when discussing how good or bad a show is and how good or bad it is at using parody is not to be mistaken for a “quality TV” label drawing a distinctive line between regular TV shows that are bad and quality TV shows that are good, since it is a much too narrow, unflexible, and binary description of different television series. It is only meant to be read as a description of what I find appealing in a certain show or specific scene. I do not believe in quality TV as a label, neither quality shows, but I do believe in aspects of quality as descriptions of a degree of craftsmanship.

The choice to focus on national identity in this research was not made beforehand but grew during the process of analysis as a response to what the material suggested. Initially, questions of national identity were meant to be discussed in one of three or four different chapters looking at the use of parody in the shows, but as I continued, I realized that many of the issues I wanted to discuss in other chapters in some ways were connected to notions of national identity. For a more cohesive text and analysis, I decided to focus more explicitly on national identity as a lens through which I could analyze and discuss different uses of parody in the shows. Since all five shows are made in the USA the focus came to revolve around notions of American national identity, which in itself poses some interesting challenges.

The first and obvious is that the material is presented in a language that is not my mother tongue, and that the dissertation is written in a language that is not my first language. However accustomed to English speaking popular culture and the English language you are as a scholar with another first language, it constitutes a

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid, p. 225.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 208.

threshold both in terms of understanding and interpreting subtle differences in speech and writing, and in the elocutio part of my textual analysis where I communicate my results in a language that is not the one I am most comfortable with. It is an aspect that is important to remember, and it is one part of what makes me as a Swedish scholar an outsider with an outsider's perspective on American culture and society.

When it comes to the USA as a nation and American as a national identity, being a scholar from Sweden means that you do not have the lived experience of America, only the mediated version of it. This is clearly a significant drawback when trying to identify signifiers of the construction of American nationhood, because you can only compare what you find with other mediated renditions of American life. The benefit, however, and I do believe it is just that, of being on the outside of the American nation looking in is that you are in a better position to identify the naturalized and sedimented structures, signs, and connotations that can be invisible to a native audience. What might seem natural or normal to an American audience or an American scholar can be identified by a foreign scholar as something specifically American. Sometimes we do not realize what is part of a nation's building blocks until we go abroad and realize that mundane details might be slightly different in other countries, highlighting something we have never thought of as nationally specific.²⁵ What is considered "my" nationality is often overlooked as something pre-existing and natural and therefore something that is not national identity at all, which often makes it harder to identify.²⁶ Sometimes, an outside look is necessary to identify and highlight constructions of national identity that has been rendered invisible and unproblematic. After all, as Steve Reicher and Nick Hopkins states, the fact that "some cultural products are familiar to all and constitute a part of what "everybody" knows about the nation means that they are particularly powerful argumentative resources with which to ground one's construction."²⁷ What is hegemonic and deemed as common sense is seen as natural and normal and it influences and permeates everything we do even when we do not see it or do not realize it.²⁸ Sometimes it takes an outside look, from those excluded from the normal and natural, or from those simply on the outside of it. This research focuses primarily on examples that offer a critical perspective to notions of national identity. That does not mean that the shows are entirely critical, they offer plenty of examples that reaffirm the nation, national identity, and even nationalism. But I do believe that the instances of critical

²⁵ Edensor 2002, p. 51.

²⁶ Skey 2011, p. 6.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 40, direct quote from Reicher and Hopkins 2001, p. 117.

²⁸ Gramsci 1971, referenced in Gray and Lotz, p. 67.

perspective are important when discussing national identity and can help widen the scope of what that can and should contain.

Positioning is important for a contextual understanding of why research is done and from what vantage points it is produced. I would argue, however, that it is not so much about what societal categories I consider myself a part of or how I self-identify, but more about how I am defined by society, even though it is not always accurate. I use he/him pronouns and consider myself cis, but I am reluctant to accept the masculine connotations that are attached to the label male. I consider my sexuality private and reject "straight" as a correct description of it, but I am married to a woman, and we have kids together. As a PhD student in the humanities, I possess considerable educational and cultural capital, but I come from a family that had no higher education in previous generations, and it has inevitably had an impact on my academic life. What is important for my position as an academic and for this text specifically is not how I identify, it is how I am perceived by society, what privileges I am bestowed for looking and acting the way I do. And that is undoubtedly as a straight white Scandinavian well-educated middle-class cis male, with all the unquestionable privileges that come with it.

What you come to realize when working with five different television shows that span at least six seasons each is that there are a lot of seasons, a lot of episodes, a lot of stories told, and references made. You also realize that many different perspectives are offered and made possible for academic analysis. Even after narrowing the scope to look at how parody is used and what that does in the material, there is an abundance of possible points of departure to choose from. This dissertation could easily have been filled only with examples of representations of gender, both in terms of femininity and masculinity, ethnicity, sexuality and queerness, corporality, physical disabilities, sports and athleticism, mental health, fame and star culture, fan culture, and depictions of class and generation just to name a few, and it would still contain enough material for a full study. I have chosen national identity as the starting point for my analysis, not for a lack of alternatives, but because I believe it to be one of the more interesting aspects of the usage of parody in the shows. With that said, this is a dissertation primarily about the usage of parody, and this will be the entrance point into each upcoming chapter even though they are centered around notions of national identity.

The first chapter of this study will examine the theoretical basis and background of parody and of nationalism and national identity. It will also discuss the material chosen for the study and previous research done on it and on parody in general. Further, this chapter contains background and discussion on key concepts like animation, television, genre, comedy, and satire. Chapter 2 further expands the discussion on parody, what it is and what it is contrasted against, positioning this research against previous research and articulating a definition of parody that is used in this text. This is illustrated by formalistic analysis of examples mainly from *BoJack Horseman*. Chapter 3 analyzes depictions of USA's closest neighbors in

the material and highlights how American national identity is created, sustained, and deconstructed by contrasting it with its geographically closest counterparts. Chapter 4 looks closer at the fictional realm of Equestria in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, how it is a reiterated version of real-life USA and how it uses parody to create spaces for alternative readings. Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the intersections of national identity and capitalism, what consequences the commodification of national identity and the myth of the American Dream have had and how that is represented in the shows through the use of parody and satire. Chapter 6 focuses on *Archer* and how the temporal fluidity and internationalism of the show influences and undermines notions of national identity through its use of parody and satire. Chapter 7 brandishes the guns and takes a closer look at the conflation of gun culture and American national identity, of the Frontier myth, the American gunfighter nation, western and action heroes and their parodic representations in the material. Chapter 8 takes a more general approach of how parody is used to celebrate, accept, criticize, and reject nationalism, national identity, and nation in the material. The 9th and final chapter offers a summary and concluding discussion of the results of the study.

Chapter 1 Theoretical Basis and Background of Parody

Successful parody can use the force of intertextuality to inspire a complete reevaluation and reinterpretation of anyone of the genres and consequent ideologies of television. – Jonathan Gray

Animation means to invoke life, not to imitate it. – Chuck Jones

Nothing is more important than television, and no-one more important than the people who make that television. – J.D. Salinger

To understand what parody is, it is important to understand the history and evolution of the word, and to understand what *intertextuality* is and how it works. The first recorded use of the word *parodia* comes from *Poetics* by Aristotle.²⁹ It was used to describe singers imitating other singers as a form of burlesque or counter-song.³⁰ Definitions of parody have varied from J.C. Scaliger's "the inversion of a song into something ridiculous" in 1561, to how parody can be used to describe a crazy and incoherent world by Martin Amis in 1990. Gilles Genette in 1982 defines parody as a minimal transformation of a text, and Fredric Jameson in 1983 differentiates between parody and pastiche, where parody is satirical and pastiche is without norm.³¹ Disillusioned by the permeation of capitalism in society and the connection of postmodern texts to what Adorno and Horkheimer defined as the Culture Industry, Jameson connected parody and pastiche to a postmodern society that was "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm."³² This results in a blank parody that is unable to offer true criticism because it is preoccupied with referencing itself and other texts without adding anything new or interesting, so while some parody or intertextuality can

²⁹ Dentith 2000, p. 10.

³⁰ Rose 1993, pp. 7-8.

³¹ Ibid, p. 282.

³² Jameson 2005, p. 17, Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 116.

have passion and humor, their parodic energy is absorbed by the capitalist market. Pastiche and parody, to Jameson, was “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language.”³³ Jameson promised the death of parody in a postmodern era, but as Jonathan Gray concludes, it is still alive and well today.³⁴

Academic research on parody experienced proliferation when attention was drawn to the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin was a Russian philosopher, linguist and literary scholar, active during the early 20th century. His most important work is based on analysis of literary text from Dostoyevsky and Rabelais. Bakhtin expands on, explores and contradicts thinkers like Kant, Hegel, Marx, Freud, and Saussure, and he draws inspiration from Russian formalism and from symbolists and post-symbolists, mainly Vjatjeslav Ivanov. For Bakhtin, words were never neutral building blocks, but always came with connotations, based on the preconceptions we have or have had about them. Words are “inhabited”, containing other words, texts, traditions, and genres. Before the word becomes a part of the text, it is tinged by participation in other contexts. It is a part of a conversation with previous works and meanings, a dialogue with the context in which it is formed. The word itself is therefore *dialogic*.³⁵ Since we have an understanding of the meaning of a word based on where and when it has been used previously, or on who we as users are, or in what context the word is supposed to be used, the word has a different meaning every time it is used.

The word “apple” probably makes us think of a fruit, usually red, green, or yellow in color and sweet or tart in flavor. It can be used to make apple sauce or apple pie, it has different sorts like Granny Smith, Cox Orange and Royal Gala and it is famously contrasted with oranges. But when we hear the word apple, we do not just connect it with the fruit, but with how the fruit or the word has been used in everyday life and in media representations. Apple is known as the fruit of knowledge which caused the outcast of the human race from paradise, it was shot from the head of William Tell’s son, it is the name and logo of a multi-billion dollar media conglomerate, it is poisonous in Snow White and succulent and works as a symbolic placeholder for pleasure, longing, and regret in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Verbinski 2003), and how we like “them apples” has turned from *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant 1997) quote to Internet meme vocabulary. An apple is not just an apple, like all other words it always comes imbedded with more information and connotations than their primary meaning.

Your own voice is unique, and two people never have the same exact experiences. The only way in which we can understand words and expressions is to look at how they communicate with their history and background through

³³ Jameson 2005, pp. 17-18.

³⁴ Gray 2006, p. 5.

³⁵ Bakhtin 1984a, p. 131.

dialogue, how the word is used now and how it has been used. According to Bakhtin, you cannot read literature as separate from its historic and societal context, literature always have to be analyzed with regards to the time it was written.³⁶ Bakhtin describes words not only as relations to other words, but as utterances in specific situations targeted at equally specific recipients, and to understand these utterances one must understand their path from one social context to another. Texts cannot be treated as easily observable fact, they are versatile and can be directed towards one or many recipients, but they also presuppose or recall other utterances. This complicated web of textual relations producing meaning when reading is the basis of *intertextuality*.³⁷

According to Bakhtin, all communication takes place in dialogue, either between people or between an individual and a text, a time or a place, or between texts, but a discourse can be dialogic or monologic. A dialogic discourse also allows many different voices simultaneously, a *polyphony*, unlike a monologic discourse. Dialogic discourse makes critique, change and development possible, while monologic discourse only leads to fortification and is often the voice of authority. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin formed a theory of polyphonic texts, dividing them into three categories. In the first category, there is no tension between texts, in the second category, there is direct tension between the texts, and in the third category, the relationship between voices is complex and one or more texts usually stand out as dominant or rejected.³⁸ Pastiche has usually been placed in the first category and works to emphasize the strengths of the source text, while parody is placed in the second category and works to emphasize the weaknesses of the source text.

According to Bakhtin, parodying conflict does not arise between thinking and utterance, but between contradictory forms of utterances. There is often a prevailing privileged form formulated in a canon that provides an official and authoritative language that the unofficial language of parody attacks. It decides the “official” language that parody’s “unofficial” language attacks, which creates subversiveness.³⁹ Joseph A. Dane states that the conflict between official and unofficial language is crucial in Bakhtin’s thought on parody and that “the subversive force of parody functions by opposing the social institutions which the various linguistic registers represent.”⁴⁰ He also emphasizes Bakhtin’s view on the difficulty of this, where Bakhtin tongue-in-cheek states that the “democratized” language permeating modern society makes opposition impossible, explaining the

³⁶ Bakhtin 1981, pp. 84-85.

³⁷ Bakhtin 1986, pp. 76-91, Bakhtin 1984a, p. 131.

³⁸ Bakhtin 1984a, pp. 181-204.

³⁹ Bakhtin 181–204 p. 193, see also Roth-Lindberg 1995, pp. 342-343 and 348.

⁴⁰ Dane 1988, p. 8.

marginalized status of parody in modern literature. But, as Dane also points out, because parody is so steeped in self-reflexivity, it becomes a genre in which the true form and dynamics of its system are exposed and expressed freely, with undeniably subversive effects.⁴¹

The framework for what is usually classified as great literature was developed during the Middle Ages, but simultaneously popular satirical storytelling was also formed. Bakhtin studied the works of the French 17th century writer Francois Rabelais, arguing that his obvious place in the canon of literary history is motivated in large part by the fact that he, more than perhaps any other writer at the time, lifted the importance of popular culture, blurring the lines between popular culture and fine arts.⁴² Popular comedy tradition had three common forms of expression: ritual spectacle at the marketplace, oral and written parody, and miscellaneous obscenities.⁴³ They all fall under Bakhtin's concept of *carnival*, tied to the popular festive culture connected to markets and festivals, where time can be postponed for a while and the people can laugh together and at their masters. All medieval European countries had these festivals where "people built a second life, a second world, outside officialdom".⁴⁴ Treating the ruling class with irreverence and dethroning jester kings is central to the humor of the carnival. Bakhtin writes that a common occurrence at the carnival was clowns and fools mimicking serious civil and social ceremonies and rituals like the initiation of a knight, exaggerating or making fun of the pompousness of it all.⁴⁵

Everyone was equal during the carnival. The temporary lifting of hierarchy made possible a unique language with speech and gestures tied to the marketplace. A freer and more honest language, clearly visible in the works of Rabelais. Carnavalesque expression was all about turning things on its head, about parody, travesty, ridicule, and making fun of ordinary life during a limited time. Representations of eating, drinking, secretion of bodily fluids, other sexual acts, pregnancy, mutilation, and all forms of violence were used to create a common laughter of the people, one which the ruling class could not reach or subdue.⁴⁶ The point was to punctuate pomposity, ridicule regality and criticize the clergy. To take an outsider's position looking in on the fancy world of the normative inside and laughing while farting out loud. It was the laugh/cry-emoji of the time; it was Robin blowing raspberries when Ted gets too pretentious in *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014).

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 9, see discussion in Hutcheon 2000.

⁴² Bakhtin 1984b, pp. 2-3.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 19-20, 317, 370.

The laughter of the carnival, Bakhtin states, is the laughter of the people, and the edge is directed to life itself, even against the participants in the carnival, it is happiness and acidity at the same time. It is the very ancient mockery of the Gods that survive in a new form.⁴⁷ The carnival is described in texts like the ones of Rabelais, but it was also a real event, passed on through generations by oral history. The carnival and the marketplace can be directly linked to the birth of cinema, and the attractions of moving pictures that could be seen in festive locations and marketplaces that people of the working class attended for leisure, like the nickelodeons, zoetropes and small film booths of the 19th and early 20th century. The popular, the subversive and the ridiculing were parts of the entertainment value of film from the very beginning and has stuck with it ever since then. The carnival is a concept, but it is also tied to the evolution of media history, from speech to writing to pictures to moving pictures and beyond.

Many scholars have expanded on and developed Bakhtin's theories. Starting with Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and the polyphonic storytelling, linguist and philosopher Julia Kristeva coins the term *intertextuality*. She rejected the literary tradition of causality and solely searching for historical sources and defined intertextuality as a transposition or transfer and subsequent change of one system of signs into another. She emphasizes that no literary text can be considered an isolated phenomenon but is a mosaic of quotations. For Kristeva intertextuality constituted texts that were in such radical conversation with other works that they themselves had no unified voice.⁴⁸ All texts, physical and oral, pictures or film, are created from existing discourses. No artist creates entirely original works but gathers pieces from everything that is and has been in order to collect it into a piece of work, which she refers to as a *productivity*.⁴⁹

This perspective was further developed by among others literary theorist Roland Barthes. He linked social connotations to history and ideological voices in society. According to Barthes, all production or reading of text contains a complex dialectic interaction between ideologically tainted raw material and the author's or reader's attempt to create their own history in "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture".⁵⁰ For Barthes, every text contains an inexhaustible intertextuality with no discernable origin, source, or influence, but with citations constructing a text that are "anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read", which is an extension to what Kristeva considered the text as a phenomenon was.⁵¹ When we read a literary text we are guided by a series of expectations,

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 10-12.

⁴⁸ Kristeva 1980, p. 68, cmp discussion in Butler 2020, p. 207.

⁴⁹ Kristeva 1980, p. 69, see discussion in Friis 2015, p. 148.

⁵⁰ Barthes 1977, p. 146.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 160, cmp discussion in Friis 2015, p. 148.

which are then confirmed or broken in the act of reading, but they are what make the text knowledgeable. We presume genres, traditions and ways of writing.

Jaques Derrida expanded on the notion of a fabric or mosaic of quotations or texts when he wrote that a sign is an element that references another element, whether in spoken (*phoneme*) or written (*grapheme*) discourse. This means that all elements are constituted of its relationship with other elements of the system, or of the interwoven fabric of text “produced only in the transformation of another text”.⁵² Signs like words or Bakhtin’s utterances are unavoidably entangled and thus no sign, word, or utterance can be formed independently, they are always part of their own history, context, and of their role in discourses.

G rard Genette gave further nuance to this when he defined intertextuality as one of five sub-categories of *transtextuality*, as co-presence relationship between two or more texts, often as the presence of one text within another, which includes quotations, allusions and plagiarism.⁵³ The second sub-category of transtextuality is *paratextuality*, which is described as information outside the frame of the actual text, meaning titles, notes, cover etc., but also the context of the author including earlier works. Third is *metatextuality*, which is a text that can be read as a direct commentary on another text, but it is the last two sub-categories that are of most interest in this text. *Hypertextuality* is what Genette describes as parody, travesty or pastiche specifically of a source text which he calls *hypotext*, while *architextuality* is the imitation or reference of specific forms, most commonly genre in the parody discourse.⁵⁴

Stuart Hall expanded and developed notions of dialogue and intertextuality by introducing the term *representation*. In order to process and make sense of the world around you, it is necessary to sort things you encounter into categories to better understand it and to communicate it with others.⁵⁵ When Stuart Hall talks about representation he describes it as what connects meaning and language to culture, creating meaning through language.⁵⁶ It is the link between concept and language that makes it possible to reference either the objects, persons or events in the “real” world, but also fictional worlds with fictional objects, persons and events.⁵⁷ How we interpret our surroundings depends on which concepts and which historical and cultural contexts we carry with us. These concepts create our representation of the outside world. We organize, arrange or cluster objects based on their shared similarities or differences. We can have mutual perceptions of what

⁵² Derrida 1981, p. 34.

⁵³ Genette 1997, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid, cmp discussion in Friis 2015, pp. 150-153.

⁵⁵ Skey 2011, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁶ Hall 2013, pp. 1-5.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

a chair, a table or a cat is, but also abstract or fictional elements such as war, love, or Duckburg. For Hall, meaning does not exist naturally in things, or in the world. It is constructed; it is produced. It is the result of “a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*”.⁵⁸

The way we share information or representations with each other directly and indirectly is what constitutes *discourse*, which is “a particular way of talking about... understanding [and acting in] the world that becomes stabilized through key institutional structures during certain historical periods”.⁵⁹ Hall identifies two directions within the constructionist approach to explain representations, where the *semiotic*, strongly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure is based on language and signs. Saussure defines signs as the relation between form (objects in the world) and idea (perceptions in the mind), and the meaning of specific signs changes constantly over time.⁶⁰ Barthes used Saussure’s study of signs and applied it to studies of popular culture. He read pop culture as texts, as producers of signs, meaning, and language.⁶¹ Barthes uses denotation and connotation to describe an object and the meaning we assign it. Jeans are a piece of clothing (denotation) that signals relaxed apparel (connotation).⁶² Nationalism is one example of what Barthes refers to as modern mythology, how different representations or parts of representations can merge into an overarching representation.⁶³

The *discursive* approach to representation is mainly represented by Michel Foucault, who shifts focus from language to power, concentrating on production of knowledge rather than meaning. Power is not to be understood exclusively as oppressive and associated with set individuals, institutions or states, but also as productive. In other words, power permeates our social world constituting discourses, knowledge, body, and subjectivities. Through power our social world and our discourses are redefined and changed. Discourse to Foucault was a set of utterances that provide a language to talk about, a way to represent the knowledge about, a specific subject at a specific point in history.⁶⁴ The basis of his theory came from a desire to define the rules for which stories become what Antonio Gramsci called hegemonic, accepted as meaningful and real, in a specific historical

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Skey 2011, p. 11, where he quotes Phillips and Jorgensen 2002, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Hall 2013, pp. 16-17.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 21.

⁶² Ibid, pp. 23-24, where he references Barthes 1967, pp. 91-92.

⁶³ Barthes 1972, p. 114-119, Barthes 1977, p. 33-35 where he uses the example of a French soldier saluting the flag and an Italian bag of groceries who represent national identity in different manners.

⁶⁴ Foucault 1980, p. 119.

era.⁶⁵ Dominant ideology, organization of power, and systems of belief in a specific society at a specific time often revolves around what is deemed to be “common sense”, and textual analysis is one way of investigating a text and its relationship to dominant ideology.⁶⁶ Individuals can have a degree of agency in the process of constructing meaning, but different individuals and different institutions have different degrees of agency, depending on their influence in society.⁶⁷

Knowledge according to Foucault is not something firm or solid, but fluent and contextually based. Truth is a discursive construction and different regimes of knowledge state what is true and what is false.⁶⁸ Even though discourses are changeable, Foucault emphasizes that hegemonic discourses can be so stuck in people’s minds that they can be nearly impossible to change. We construct and reconstruct discourse through discursive action which is contextual based on the conditions we have been served by hegemonic discourses.⁶⁹ Things can exist outside discourse, but it is only when we communicate about objects that we give them meaning. Therefore, all meaning is created within discourse. A table does not become a table until we address it as such, it does not perform the duties of a table (standing, having things placed upon it) until we decide it to have those qualities and subsequently form, shape, and produce it with the intent of inheriting those qualities. The table can exist outside discourse, but one cannot address its existence and function without discourse. Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language, but since all social action contain meaning, and meaning creates and influences everything that we do, our actions retain a discursive aspect.⁷⁰

Different actors in society have different sets of power, but power is created in social interaction, when we create discourse through social action. Some actors can have a greater influence than others in the creation and change of discourse, but they are not exclusively authoritarian. Media like film and television, through symbolic exercise of power, have the possibility to define, or represent, people and phenomena in or into different categories. When media reproduce events from our reality, stereotypes or archetypes present in society are reflected and enhanced.⁷¹ Hall agrees with and emphasizes the existence of hegemonic discourses but vehemently states that popular culture is not simply a tool for hegemonic

⁶⁵ Gramsci 1967.

⁶⁶ Gray and Lotz, p. 39.

⁶⁷ Gramsci 1967, pp. 19-20.

⁶⁸ Foucault 1980.

⁶⁹ Foucault 1977.

⁷⁰ Foucault 1972.

⁷¹ Hall 2003, p. 259.

structures, but can be and is often used to re-negotiate, subvert, and contradict them. Sites of popular culture like television is a venue for the struggle both for and against hegemonic discourses and Hall argues that the polysemy of texts available in popular culture means that it can contain articulations of resistance and that texts that at first glance can be said to reiterate hegemonic discourse actually may be embedded with subversive qualities.⁷² Frederik Dhaenens and Sofie van Bauwel writing on queer resistance makes the point that this enables analysis “using the popular as a means to expose the mechanisms and inconsistencies of discourses on one hand and to offer viable alternatives to the heteronormal on the other.”⁷³ According to Gray, parody is one of the oldest and potentially most powerful art forms. A successful parody can use the force of intertextuality to inspire a total reevaluation of any televisual genre and enclosed ideologies.⁷⁴

This study begins with the notion of parody and how it is used in the chosen material. Through analyzing the material, a few things became clear. There are many different ways in which parody is used. There are many different possible angles from where to approach the material. After watching the shows a few perspectives seemed to permeate the shows more than others, and when comparing those with previous research, the notion of national identity seemed like the most interesting one. One of the consequences of choosing national identity as the main perspective for analyzing the uses of parody in the material was that much of the content had a satirical edge. Not all of it, as is clear in the finished analysis, but satire became such a significant part of the study that it deserved a separate mention in the title. Before the analysis of parodic depictions of national identity in the material, however, it is necessary to describe what nationalism is, what national identity is, what constitutes their foundation and nuances, and what effects this has on the study.

Nationalism and national identity

There is extensive previous research on nationalism and national identity, its background and development throughout history and how we view it today. Anthony Giddens has been one of its most influential voices. He defines a nation state as “a set of institutional forms of governance maintaining an administrative monopoly over a territory with demarcated boundaries, its rule being sanctioned

⁷² Hall 2005, pp. 64-71.

⁷³ Dhaenens and van Bauwel 2011.

⁷⁴ Gray 2006, pp. 4 and 173.

by law and direct control of the means of internal and external violence.”⁷⁵ The nation is unquestionably the central organizing political unit of the early 21st century, but this has not always been the case.⁷⁶ History scholars like Eric J. Hobsbawm point to the fact that nations are a relatively new construction and that it is reasonable to consider it, from a historical perspective, a passing fad. He suggests that economy, science and communication are concepts that far outweigh the influence of nations and that nations as the main political structure will disappear.⁷⁷ That it in contemporary society is one of the main organizing principles for human interaction and how we view the world around us is, however, not in contention.

An alternative perspective on the development of nations is a modernistic approach, where the construction of nations is linked to the industrialization process and the rise of mass media that came in its wake. Karl W. Deutsch stresses the role of a developed communication system and working communication channels in order to form a nation based on a common culture and facilitated by a common language. A relative geographical proximity also helps, but all these things were processes that historically took a long time to develop, which emphasized the need for a common history. Deutsch emphasizes that it takes generations to form a nation.⁷⁸ For Ernest Gellner, nations and nationalism arose as a response to the needs of industrial society, with increased mobility of capital, labor force, and resources, for mass communication, mass education, common culture and central government.⁷⁹ New institutions for education, news broadcasting, and politics including political parties meant that people in charge of these institutions could shape society according to their world view, thus creating the nation via language and literacy through common dictionaries, selective history, ethnic characteristics, articulation of territory including warfare and conscription, and a national consciousness through the civil service and the mass education of the school system.⁸⁰ The state can then yield control and guidance over its citizens through laws, policies (including broadcasting), and economic incentives, forming what they perceive to be good citizens. As Michael Skey referencing Tim Edensor suggests, this could include “the opening times of public institutions and private businesses, public holidays, who may drink, work,

⁷⁵ Giddens 1985, p. 120.

⁷⁶ Sörlin 2015, p. 7.

⁷⁷ Hobsbawm 2012, p. 163.

⁷⁸ Deutsch 1953.

⁷⁹ Gellner 2006.

⁸⁰ Ibid, cmp discussion in Skey 2011, p. 13.

go to war, drive and have sex, in turn, inform the (often) highly formalized patterns of behavior that are considered suitable at a given time and place”.⁸¹

Mass media plays a pivotal role in communicating the message of a nation and its specificities shared by its people. The members of a modern nation cannot all meet, so their sense of community must come from mass media capable of uniting them around an attitude in order to create what Benedict Anderson famously dubbed an *imagined community*. A political community in a modern society cannot be experienced in full, but it can be imagined, through the use of national symbols, language, memories and myths, in order to convince the population that a national community exists.⁸² Watching television is one element of constructing a nationhood, which was true for the time of television schedules where entire communities saw the same thing at the same time, but is very much a part of it in the age of streaming as well.⁸³ Anderson’s imagined communities have, according to Andy Medhurst, two distinct weaknesses when used. It disregards other imagined communities of regional, communal, local or domestic kinds that are also collective narratives where we can project our individual existence, and it can be used to describe nations not as constructed, but as imaginary, as made up and therefore less relevant or influential.⁸⁴

I have found Michael Skey’s discussion on nationalism and national identity in *National Belonging and Everyday Life* to be useful in structuring an analysis of American national identity in the material. Skey defines a nation as “spatially defined and inhabited through the management of the physical environment, the consistent patterning of socio-spatial relations and a range of recurring material/symbolic features”, and that these elements “(re)produce the nation as somewhere that is familiar, stable and secure”.⁸⁵ According to Skey, identity claims like nationalism are not simply asserted but “articulated and negotiated in relation to other social actors and institutional arrangements.”⁸⁶ They are not mainly a choice, but a process of ongoing interaction, and different identities have varying importance for people depending on background, place, or time. There is also a significant difference between choosing an identity and having an identity forced upon you, which is often the case with national identity.⁸⁷ Skey emphasizes the need to talk about national discourses instead of nationalism as something natural, unconstructed, and unquestioned. By doing so, nations are not theorized

⁸¹ Skey 2011, ppp 19-20, quoting and referencing Edensor 2006, p. 530.

⁸² Anderson 1991, pp. 15 and 40-49.

⁸³ Morley 2004, p. 422.

⁸⁴ Medhurst 2007, p. 27, Balibar 1991, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Skey 2011, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 21-22, Billig 1995, p. 68.

⁸⁷ Skey 2011, p. 22.

as “things that exist in the world” and attention can shift to understanding how “manifold practices, symbols, texts, objects and utterances form part of a wider social discourse that (re)produces the world as a world of nations”.⁸⁸

Laurent Berlant states that the nation’s “traditional icons, its metaphors, its heroes, its rituals and narratives provide an alphabet for collective consciousness or national subjectivity; through the National Symbolic the historical nation aspires to achieve the inevitability of the status of national law, a birth-right”.⁸⁹ Skey outlines five dimensions of national discourse that are important for understanding the concept: *spatial*, *temporal*, *cultural*, *political* and *self/other*.⁹⁰

The *spatial* dimension is mainly focused on territory, what defines a territory, who can wield control over it, and how it is challenged. Sweden is defined through its land borders with Norway and Finland and its sea borders with Denmark and the other countries of the Baltic Sea. The USA is defined by the borders shared with Canada and Mexico, but also sea borders with Russia via Alaska, or Caribbean and Polynesian neighbors in proximity to US controlled territory in Puerto Rico or Guam. The territorial dimension might seem clear-cut at first but contains several nuances that is discussed further in the analysis.

The *temporal* dimension is the formation of the past influencing the present. A key aspect of nationalism is the invention of history and ancient traditions to facilitate the illusion of continuation from a glorious and distant past, from the very first formations of nation-states the creation of national histories has accompanied it.⁹¹ A glorious past “connecting ‘great’ wars, leaders, empires and inventions with contemporary social actors and processes” and shared repeated traditions strengthens the notion of the “eternal essence (and power) of the nation over time”.⁹² Examples of celebrations of the past in the present include memorial or remembrance days, religious holidays, and national day celebrations.⁹³ This forms what Medhurst refers to as the manufacturing of “the illusion of timelessness, to exude and imbue national confidence through the masquerade of unbroken continuity.”⁹⁴ We as a nation have always existed and will thus continue to exist forever, the past emboldens the present which guarantees a glorious future.

The cultural dimension constitutes symbols and symbolic systems that are used to define a nation and justify the existence of the nation but also the social norms and values that lie within its construction. One of the most important ones is a

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Berlant 1991, p. 20, Morley 2004, p. 421.

⁹⁰ Skey 2011, p. 11, drawing from Özkirimli 2005, pp. 179-190.

⁹¹ Cmp Billig 1995, pp. 25-26, 37-38 and 70, Colley 1992, and Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983.

⁹² Skey 2011, p. 25.

⁹³ Billig 1995, pp. 44-45.

⁹⁴ Medhurst 2007, p. 28.

shared language, with everything that might imply.⁹⁵ Michael Billig stresses what he refers to as *diexis*, which is the importance of small words that we take for granted within our languages, words like “we”, “our”, “this”, “here”, “the” and many others that signal a belonging and lines drawn against that which is not, and are used unproblematically and without reflection by a majority of people.⁹⁶

The political dimension is the importance for states but also other political organizations and institutions to mobilize and sustain national movements through systems of education, law, finance and territorial control etc.⁹⁷ The conflation of these systems and nationalism is often subtle or invisible as unproblematic and essential building blocks of society, but it can also take literal forms as in the mandatory pledge of allegiance in American schools, the diligent use of flags and oaths to regents in armed forces all over the world, examples of sharia law conflating judiciary systems with religion and nationalist pride, and the Swedish refusal to give up their currency krona for the euro in a referendum 2003, just to name a few.⁹⁸

And finally, what Skey dubs the Self/Other dimension are national characteristics, emotions, habits, values that makes someone part of a nation, that makes someone living in Sweden Swedish or someone living in the USA American.⁹⁹ This dimension is perhaps more so than the others flexible and based on discourse and is discussed in the individual chapters in this text, specifically what makes someone American in the public discourse and how this is emphasized and sedimented or satirized and deconstructed in the material. One need only to examine the way we describe different national teams in men’s football, full of national typification and stereotypes, to understand the permeation of this dimension. The German side is a machine, Brazil plays beautiful samba style football, Dutch footballers are arrogant, the Japanese team is quick and technical, Italy is defensively minded, Cameroon cannot defend, teams from the Balkan are moody and unstable, and so on.

The public discourse on nationalism, in the media and in society at large, and even in large parts of academia, usually concerns new or insecure nations vying for a seat at the nationalistic table, to be recognized as nations by the world and using any means necessary to fulfil that goal. When talking about nationalism the conversation often steers towards expressions of national extremism, revolutionaries using flags and anthems to rally their cause against an oppressor,

⁹⁵ Billig 1995, pp. 13-36, Stanciu 2022, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Billig 1995, pp. 93-94.

⁹⁷ Skey 2011, p. 12.

⁹⁸ There were of course many other mechanics in play for the 2003 referendum of Swedish membership in the European Monetary Union, but Swedish nationalist pride in their own currency was definitely part of the discourse surrounding the election cycle.

⁹⁹ Skey 2011, pp. 11-12.

totalitarian governments using nationalism to scapegoat a perceived enemy in order to scare their electorate into obedience, flags painted on faces and national team replicas worn to a World Cup football knockout game, or indeed the patriotic fervor of the post 9/11 American landscape to pay tribute to those who died in the attacks. The discourse is mostly about extreme expressions of nationalism, and this is precisely what Michael Billig sought to remedy with coining the phrase *banal nationalism*. His main point is to emphasize that nationalism is not necessarily an expression of extremists, but more often than not used in everyday life by ordinary citizens rarely conscious of its use. The daily reproduction of nationalism is rendered invisible and unproblematic.

Billig argues that the obviousness of nationalism must be challenged. Ideology, according to Billig, operates to make people forget that their world has been historically constructed.”¹⁰⁰ Citizens within a nation are reminded daily of their place as members of a nation and in contrast with other nations in a world built on the logic of nations. This reminding is so familiar and continual that it does not even register as such. The trivial and numerous occasions of reminding citizens of their nationality constitute the strongest influence on creating the national, it is not found in ideological statements or rhetoric, but in everyday activities and routines imbued with national flavor.¹⁰¹

Skey refers to Pierre Bourdieu in regard to the many aspects of habit, routine or precedent that we encounter during our day and do not reflect upon. Bourdieu labelled this “the field of doxa”, where everything is taken for granted or is beyond question, as opposed to “the field of opinion” where “practical questioning of [...] a particular way of living is brought about”.¹⁰² Roland Barthes uses the phrase *exnomination* to describe the same type of phenomena, when something is so taken for granted that it disappears from the description, like American gay porn becoming gay porn or men’s football becoming football.¹⁰³

Us and Them

For a shared national identity to gain political significance, it needs to be activated and specified. This usually means contrasting the national “us” against a different national “them”, emphasizing a shared commonality and history that other nations do not have. By contrasting “our” nation to “their” nation and the characteristics

¹⁰⁰ Billig 1995, pp. 6, 15 and 37.

¹⁰¹ Löfgren 1993, p. 190, Billig 1995, p. 8.

¹⁰² Skey 2011, p. 14, where he quotes Bourdieu and Nice 2006, pp. 166-168.

¹⁰³ McKee 199, p. 179 for the exnomination of American gay porn, and Duncan and Messner 1998, p. 180, and Brookes 2002, p. 129 for the exnomination of men’s football.

of that nation, “our” nation is strengthened.¹⁰⁴ Media like film and television has the power to produce or represent people and phenomena in different categories.¹⁰⁵ It has been used to reinforce notions of nationalism in many different ways but one of the most effective to secure an unjust power balance has been to emphasize the we/them dichotomy based on ethnicity with the use of national or racial stereotypes.

In a postcolonial world dominated by a white, Western sphere, the propagated image of a “we” that is white, affluent, Western, reasonable, scientific, and also male and heterosexual, is contrasted with a “them” that is black, poor, exotic, natural, spiritual, emotional, and often coded as weak and female. Europe created its self-image through the construction of “the Other” – the exotified stranger or the savage cannibal, and many of the erroneous images that exists of people in postcolonial countries comes from a long line of lazy Mexicans, unreliable Arabs, wild Africans, and exotic Asians depicted on movie screens.¹⁰⁶ The white cowboy has traditionally been depicted as good, while Native Americans, or “the Indian”, the black man, and the Arab, have been depicted as evil, including indigenous tribe cultures depicted as bloodthirsty hordes attacking, raping, and pillaging, while well-intentioned white people try to restore civilization, like white settlers and heroes in contrast with Native American savagery in western films of studio era Hollywood.¹⁰⁷ A sense of national belonging is, according to Medhurst, “strengthened through comparison with another identity demarcated as definitely elsewhere, so one way of feeling belonging in a British identity would be to feel not-French” and he stresses that it is the nearer others that “require the most stringent keeping at bay if national belonging is to be reinforced”.¹⁰⁸ Within the concept of building nation-states, states Kristeva, “the foreigner is the one who does not belong to the state in which we are, the one who does not have the same nationality”.¹⁰⁹

A common storyline to tell in order to rally citizens and voters around your political cause is to emphasize that if “we” do not do something soon, “they” will attack us and take everything that is ours. This is something that American policy makers have always used, America is always the defendant, never the aggressor.¹¹⁰ Stephen Prince shows how films like *300* (Snyder 2006) and *Troy* (Petersen 2004) are not about everyday life in ancient Greece, but actually used as explanation and

¹⁰⁴ Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993, pp. 13-16, Skey 2011, pp. 66-94.

¹⁰⁵ Hall 2003, p. 259.

¹⁰⁶ Said 1978, Stam and Spence 2009, pp. 635-637.

¹⁰⁷ Rushton and Bettinson 2010, p. 91, Wiegman 2000, pp. 156-161, Prince 2009, p. 260.

¹⁰⁸ Medhurst 2007, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Kristeva 1991, p. 96.

¹¹⁰ Billig 1995, p. 152.

defense for the American military involvement in the Middle East.¹¹¹ The hostile Persian army in *300* is an indistinct horde of depraved and primitive barbarians driven by perversions and bloodlust to destroy the Greek democracy. They are depicted as something naturally evil that is going to kill us if we do not kill them first, much like the wolf that main character Leonidas meets in the wild on his walkabout trial. The wolf is “a foul beast” and the Persians are “another foul beast”, as they are described in the film. The difference between an Anglo-American “we” and an other “they” is made into “otherness” and is used and punished by and for power.¹¹²

Creating the dichotomy of “we” versus “them” by defining what we are and what they are does not stop at creating and identifying enemies from other nations or what is perceived as nations. The creation of an enemy that is about to attack us works for terrorism or international power plays, but also when forming an internal enemy, like black and Hispanic minorities, the woke left, the biased media, trans people using bathrooms, or people talking about climate change as if it was true.¹¹³ Within the creation and recreation of nation lies power mechanics that enable certain parts of society to define themselves as different than other parts of society, and therefore more worthy of nationalistic belonging and the benefits that such a belonging might bring. Andy Medhurst summarizes this by arguing that “nation construction is also involved in the business of identifying internal others, who are seen by those subscribing to an imagination of national community wedded to closed, fixed and impermeable versions of belonging, as threatening groups that are on the inside but must on no account become of the inside.”¹¹⁴ Asian-Americans in the USA for instance are assumed to be foreign unless proven otherwise.¹¹⁵

Key, via the minds of Bourdieu and Ghassan Hage, refers to this as national cultural capital, meaning that some groups in society are made to feel more or less part of the nation.¹¹⁶ Key reflects that those whose status “is recognized without question will not only have a more settled sense of identity, and access to whatever benefits the in-group accrues, but are also able to make judgements about the status of other people.”¹¹⁷ Hage makes the point that the internal other only becomes a source of anxiety for the dominant groups in society when they perceive a threat to themselves, but as we have seen through examples in history and in present

¹¹¹ Prince 2009, pp. 290-291.

¹¹² Hill and Church Gibson 2000, p. 163.

¹¹³ Billig 1995, pp. 57 and 83-84.

¹¹⁴ Medhurst 2007, p. 29.

¹¹⁵ Key 2011, p. 30 where he references Tuan 1999, p. 110.

¹¹⁶ Key 2011, pp. 29-31, where he quotes Hage 1998, pp. 52-53.

¹¹⁷ Key 2011, p. 31.

society, these perceived threats can be minimal and have little or no bearing on actual events or everyday life.¹¹⁸ Eric Kaufmann show how white Anglo-Saxon Americans revive, construct and adapt their identities and political strategies to the evolving context of late modernity, and how they have been criticized and challenged by Hispanic and international immigration and civil rights movements and debates around multiculturalism.¹¹⁹

The film industry has played a major role in identifying and demonizing internal enemies of the nation. Depictions of violent strikes initiated by foreign (sounding) agents in American silent movies helped quell labor movements and label it as “un-American” in the public mind. The Americanization process of the early 1900s was juxtaposed against parlor Bolshevism, radicalism, and unrest and the radical voices of immigrants in particular who were deemed unfit for American nationhood were silenced, both in the life of the nation and on the screen.¹²⁰ The message from *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1916) that lingered in the American consciousness was that the Reconstruction, the era following the Civil War, was a disaster and that black people were innately lazy, violent and untrustworthy and needed to be controlled.¹²¹ In more modern times, the American trans community has been left out of what constitutes the compulsory heteronormativity of the American national norm in order to be seen as a full American citizen.¹²²

Satire is an excellent tool to criticize those in power to keep them in check, but it can of course also be utilized to wield power, especially in creating an “other” as enemy that the “we” are going to fight against. In many American conflicts, including the war of 1812 and the war against Mexico in 1846, the opposing side and the fractions vying for peace were portrayed as effeminate and humorless by satirists.¹²³ Mintz et al write about the cult of toughness and virility of the time that “appeared in the growth of aggressive nationalism (culminating in 1898 in America’s ‘Splendid Little War’ against Spain), the condemnation of sissies and stuffed shirts, and the growing popularity of aggressively masculine western novels like Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*.”¹²⁴

There is a lot of nuance and double edge to both national identity and satire. This study shows many of the different layers that are encompassed by national identity as a concept, and what possibilities exist in offering ossification or subversion of existing structures. Parody and satire can be important tools in

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 34, quoting Hage 1998, p. 19.

¹¹⁹ Skey 2011, p. 29 where e quotes Kaufmann 2004a, p. 1, and Kaufmann 2004b, p. 2.

¹²⁰ Stanciu 2022, p. 33, Schull 2016, p. 41.

¹²¹ Niderost 2016, p. 42.

¹²² Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 11.

¹²³ Winter 2011, p. 166.

¹²⁴ Mintz et al 2016, p. 4.

transforming perspectives, but another equally important aspect of this study has transformation, metamorphosis, movement, and endless possibilities as its founding pillars. The five television shows chosen for this study are all animated, and this, of course, is not a coincidence. It is time to address the flying elephant in the room.

Animation

Animation, at its foundation, is to make alive that which is not alive.¹²⁵ It is to bring life to that which does not usually move, talk, change or have a consciousness. Landing on an exact and all-encompassing definition on animation is, as Mauren Furniss puts it, “extremely difficult, if not impossible”.¹²⁶ For this text I define animation as a collective name used for creating the illusion of movement by a gradual transformation of shapes produced in sequence, and from this point forward, when I use the word animation I use it in the context of the field of film studies and moving images.

Veteran animator Preston Blair defines animation as the process of drawing and photographing a character – a person, an animal, or an inanimate object – in successive positions to create lifelike movement.¹²⁷ Blair does however not include modelling and animation with puppets or clay in his definition. Edward Small and Eugene Levinson defined animation in 1989 as “the technique of single-frame cinematography” which is true, but also quite rudimentary and leaves the reader with, in Furniss’s words, “only the most basic characteristic of the practice”.¹²⁸ It also does not refute the argument that all cinematography is, in a sense, single frame. It is filmed frame by frame, albeit automatically, and with that definition all cinematography could be described as animation.

It is an interesting thought but for practical purposes it yields little result. Instead, I want to focus on what makes animation unique, special, and interesting. To do that, I need to describe the characteristics and defining traits of animation and to show where it comes from, how it has looked, how it has developed, and what it has done throughout history, in necessarily abbreviated form. This is also important to understand where the five animated television shows that I have chosen as my material comes from, what the history and legacy of animation is and how it influences the shows. Especially since they all use animation techniques

¹²⁵ Bukatman 2012, p. 108, Sammond 2015, p. 244.

¹²⁶ Furniss 1998, p. 5.

¹²⁷ Wells 2002, pp. 3-4, where he references Blair 1994.

¹²⁸ Furniss 1998, pp. 4-5.

and idiosyncrasies and intertextual references to animation history and style in their parodies.

The diverse expressions of animation, from puppetry to stop-motion to cel animation to digitalization, means that animation as a field does not have a unifying theory. Being an animator means being a cartoonist, illustrator, fine artist, screenwriter, musician, camera operator, sound engineer, and editor all in one. Animation is an art form that is both art and craft, sometimes with a single creator, but more often, especially in contemporary animation, a collaborative effort between different specialized professions.¹²⁹ The central difference between animation and live-action film is that animation is created one frame at a time while live-action is filmed in real time, meaning that animation is an entirely constructed form, whereas live-action depicts an already existing world.¹³⁰ This means that a key element that separates animation from live-action is its limitless possibilities. The space of live action cinema is bounded, light-based and defined by highlights and shadows, while the animated space is unlimited and exciting and full of promise.¹³¹ With live-action cinema, if you want a cloud shaped in the right way, you have to wait for it to appear. With animation, you can just draw it as you want it. Animation cares little for the limits of time and space, whereas in live-action, physical attributes and the laws of nature are fixed.¹³² A Hawaiian beach or outer space or the grass in the backyard of a studio lot is equally expensive in an animated film. There is no stunt that is too dangerous or difficult, since the laws of physics, biology or chemistry are arbitrary.¹³³

When filming a live-action sequence, the camera has to move to keep the action or actor in frame, but in animation, it is the background that moves, and the movements of the “actor” can be reduced to four or eight drawings in sequence, repeated for as long as desired.¹³⁴ The ability to create action which would be impossible in a live-action film reconfigures the physical and material environment of the picture, but also the ways in which the psychological, emotional and physical terrain may be explored and expressed.¹³⁵ This makes animation especially suited for representations of memory, fantasy and dream, because it does not need to adhere to the same rules of realism that live-action cinema does.¹³⁶ Cartoons are, as Norman Klein would put it, a narrative built

¹²⁹ Wells 2002, pp. 3-4.

¹³⁰ Husbands and Ruddell 2019, p. 6.

¹³¹ Crafton 2012, p. 210.

¹³² Crafton 2012, p. 145, where he quotes first Eisenstein, then Disney animator Don Graham.

¹³³ Wells 2002, p. 16, where he quotes Roche 1999, p. 137-138.

¹³⁴ Crafton 2012, p. 168, where he quotes Bishko 2007, p. 24.

¹³⁵ Wells 2002, p. 6-7.

¹³⁶ Wells 2002, p. 49.

around the expressive possibilities of the anarchic.¹³⁷ Excessive expressions, exact or ridiculing embodiments and numerous intertextual references are easy to add in animation. That is part of the reason why it lends itself well to expressions of parody, which animators have used throughout the history of animation.¹³⁸

Much of the vocabulary of animation comes from understanding the transformation from the immobility of fine art to the free forms of motion in animation that can draw inspiration from natural scenery or previous works of art.¹³⁹ Using visual sources can place the work in a historical and cultural context which can enhance authenticity or, as Wells explains, “enable the artist to expand, modernise or subvert the source”.¹⁴⁰ Klein writes that fluid movement made transitions in character possible where bodies could be beamed off into atmospheric space, then retrieved into abstracted flatness in a single gesture.¹⁴¹ Movement in cartoons borrowed primarily from gags in live entertainment, from vaudeville performers, far more than from silent film comedy. Character animation was built around a vaudeville vocabulary that embraced physical comedy and represented the narratives of carnivalesque rather than drama, which did not change with sound technology and is characteristic of the animated short to this day.¹⁴²

Limitlessness in movement and the lack of physical laws also meant that animation from the very beginning was founded on the principle of *metamorphosis*, the change from one state to the other, one of the unique properties that have deeply informed animation and the study of it.¹⁴³ The highly malleable bodies of the animated form could easily transform into another, such as a flattened body, an animal or plant, or a tool for escaping in a chase, highlighting the specific traits for both the original and transformed form. Metamorphosis in animation challenged the way we perceived how things should look or how stories should be told, with its innate property to turn a logical plot or character development, temporal or spatial, into something else entirely.¹⁴⁴ This opened up possibilities for gags of extreme physical violence, but could also challenge perceptions of gender, ethnicity or sexuality with animated characters appearing in drag, changing genders through the transformation of masculine and feminine traits, or performing sexualities and cultural identities in an exaggerated or campy

¹³⁷ Klein 1993, p. 1.

¹³⁸ Beck 2003, p. 29.

¹³⁹ Wells 2002, p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 17-19 and 34.

¹⁴¹ Klein 1993, p. 153.

¹⁴² Klein 1993, pp. 19-21, Furniss 1998, p. 128.

¹⁴³ Husbands and Ruddell 2019, p. 8, Klein 1993, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ Wells 1998, p. 69.

manner.¹⁴⁵ The metamorphosis highlights the instability of form and body, enabling us to question aesthetic and social norms, and be more perceptive of change and alternative perspectives.¹⁴⁶ This means that, as Donald Crafton puts it, “the animated body has political, social, and cultural implications, challenging corporeal normativity, rendering the boundaries between bodies and environments (as well as between bodies and other bodies) malleable and elastic”.¹⁴⁷

In theatre, everything that is on stage needs to be placed there, rendering them to be representations of themselves rather than just something that happened to be there.¹⁴⁸ This is true for most of animation as well. There are few accidents in animation. Almost everything you see on screen has been put there on purpose, a background extra never stumbles unless he is supposed to do so, a cut-out poster of an actor is never mistaken for a ghost as has been the case with *Three Men and a Baby* (Nimoy 1987), and there is no automatic diegetic sound as there is with live action. A line of dialogue may be improvised in a sound booth, but never on set, there are no live performances, but according to Pixar animator Andrew Gordon you can manufacture a performance sometimes with more control than even an actor would.¹⁴⁹ The images on screen are invented by an act of human consciousness and intent; it is a rhetorical expression of an individual imagination and corporate cultural hegemony.¹⁵⁰

Since everything in animation is controlled and motivated, including characters, situations, narratives and designs, animation is imbued with a sense of self-aware artificiality and performativity.¹⁵¹ When Sergei Eisenstein visited the Disney Studios in 1930, he commented on the metamorphic qualities of Disney’s characters to be innately appealing, as their shapeshifting linked to human consciousness in what he theorized to be its basic, or “primordial” state, an escape to a place of wonder, made possible by the limitless possibilities of animated form.¹⁵² Not all film theorists appreciated the properties of animation, however, the plasticity of characters fascinated Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin, but disturbed Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁴⁷ Crafton 2012, p. 276, Crow 2006, p. 51.

¹⁴⁸ Mills 2005, p. 77, where he quotes from Elam 2002, p. 7.

¹⁴⁹ Crafton 2012, pp. 58-59, where he quotes Brad Bird, Don Graham, and “others” that have said the same thing and also Pixar animator Andrew Gordon from Everett 2007, p. 215.

¹⁵⁰ Lindvall and Fraser 1998, p. 122.

¹⁵¹ Crafton 2012, pp. 33-34, and Wells 2002, p. 11.

¹⁵² Furniss 1998, p. 96, where she quotes Kleiman 1988.

¹⁵³ Sammond 2015, p. 92.

According to Wells, it can be argued that historically, aesthetically and technologically, animation is an intrinsically modern form, where virtually all forms of animation have been predicated on experimentation in one form or another. The process of animation reveals popular art forms as fine art, and the transparency of construction in the process of animation is one of the unique aspects of its distinctive vocabulary.¹⁵⁴ Animated films constitute an avantgarde which prioritizes surprise, unpredictability, anti-establishment thinking, and an engagement with the ‘institution’ of art itself.¹⁵⁵ Each image, continues Wells, “offers a set of associations but equally interrogates the very principle of representation. The ‘otherness’ of animation itself announces a different model of interpretation which is abstracted from material existence and offers up the transparency of ‘ideas’.”¹⁵⁶

With animation’s performativity and ability to announce itself as its own text also naturally comes a usage and self-awareness of generic genres, traits and tropes.¹⁵⁷ Crafton points out that animation at its core bears the mark of allegory, metaphor, and irony.¹⁵⁸ Klein states that animation is guided by changes in perception more directly than any other area of mass culture, except perhaps advertising. Cartoon gags, to be read as funny, must play off the pain and embarrassment that is familiar to audiences at a specific time, and show these in terms of entertainment.¹⁵⁹ Animation as a field has, initiated by early practitioners, formed a shared set of representational tropes and practices, and a collation of ideas and jokes, that may in some cases have evolved over time, but are still prevalent even in animation in the 21st century.¹⁶⁰

A Brief History of Animation

To place the chosen material for this study contextually and historically in the field of animation, I believe it is necessary to briefly describe the history of animation. How it has evolved through technological and aesthetic advancements that changed the way we see animation and in turn how we experience the world around us. Contemporary animation like the shows in my material often displays a keen awareness of its place in history, with ample examples of references and

¹⁵⁴ Wells 2002, pp. 32 and 39.

¹⁵⁵ Wells 2002, pp. 30-31, where he quotes Sarup 1993, p. 142.

¹⁵⁶ Wells 2002, p. 31.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 66.

¹⁵⁸ Crafton 2012, p. 20.

¹⁵⁹ Klein 1993, p. 107.

¹⁶⁰ Sammond 2015, p. 113.

parodies of earlier works and styles from animation history. This is a short history of animation, by necessity it leaves most of animation history out and focuses on the parts that are most important for the chosen material, which inevitably means a greater focus on American animation history.

Film animation has been categorized by scholars into three primary eras, albeit with great overlap, the *cinematic*, *televisual* and *digital* eras.¹⁶¹ I would argue that we should add the *pioneer* era, which starts in 1892 and stretches to the birth of the animation industry which can roughly be placed in 1920. It includes inventors, illustrators, sketch artists, and vaudeville artists working diligently alone on time-consuming projects that would yield groundbreaking short films preserved for posterity. Though animation has many precursors in cave paintings, shadow play, flip-books, cut-outs, comics, cartoons, illustrations, and inventions like the Magic Lantern and the Zoetrope, the starting point for animation as a specific medium came with Émile Reynaud, who invented a device called a praxinoscope that used a large drum with mirrors and lights that enabled him to show sequenced images on a large screen in front of an audience. He premiered this invention in France in 1892 which means that the first screened film, *Pauvre Pierrot*, could be described as the first animated film of all time. Usually, however, that moniker is given to *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces* by lightning artist and film producer John Stuart Blackton in 1906. He also made the immensely popular *The Haunted Hotel* (Blackton 1907), the earliest example of a technique that is called pixilation, but more commonly referred to as stop-motion animation.

French caricaturist and illustrator Émile Cohl made *Fantasmagorie* (Cohl 1908), considered to be the first fully animated film ever produced. It is a stream of consciousness animation depicting characters drawn with simple lines placed in situations like being seated behind a woman with a big hat at the theatre. Cohl pioneered using drawn animation where he laid pieces of paper on an illuminated workspace and tracing figures to then make small changes for the next piece of paper and the next after that, an exhaustingly time-consuming job that nevertheless influenced industry standards for animation studios. During the 1910s, lightning sketch artist and illustrator Winsor McCay infused personality into animation, where characters in movies like *Little Nemo* (McCay 1911), *How a Mosquito Operates* (McCay 1912), and *Gertie, the Dinosaur* (McCay 1914) had a mind and a will of their own, they were not simply caricatures drawn for the sake of technical demonstration, but displayed personality traits that were previously unheard of in animation. Character personality and technological innovation in puppet stop-motion was something that Polish animation filmmaker Władysław Starewicz infused in works like the 12-minute long *Mest' kinomatograficheskogo operatora* (*The Cameraman's Revenge*, Starewicz 1912). It is a satirical take on domestic life in contemporary Russia, where a married couple of beetles are unfaithful to each

¹⁶¹ Stabile and Harrison 2003, pp. 2-3.

other and where the husband is eventually outed by a rival who happens to be a cameraman.

In 19th century France, artists and illustrators developed ways of illustrating people by establishing a sort of alphabet of the simplest and most efficient ways to illustrate emotional expressions, gestures, movements, symbolisms, but also caricatures that would quickly tell if the person in question belonged to a certain gender, a certain class, a certain occupation, a certain nationality or ethnicity. These shortcuts in illustrations allowed the creators to establish a report with the audience that enabled a lot of information in minimal space.¹⁶² The drawn or modelled images of animation enabled a form of constructed or created character that real life photography did not.¹⁶³ Distinctive physical characteristics, often exaggerated for comedic effect to emphasize the distinctive qualities of a specific group, based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, body type, color, national origin, religion and any urban or rural trait, was one of the defining traits of illustrations and vaudeville and it became one of the defining features of animation.¹⁶⁴

Vaudeville theater had been around for a long time, starting in France in the 1860s and gaining larger crowds in America in the 1880s with a peak in popularity at the turn of the 20th century. Even though competition from the motion picture industry and other factors eventually led to the downfall of vaudeville, the shows drew large crowds well into the 1920s and 1930s in America. Vaudeville were shows with entertainment mainly catering to working-class audiences, often with low entrance fees and with a focus on spectacle, sentimentality, entertainment and comedy, or raunchy eroticism. It used the caricature shorthand popularized in Britain and France to create live caricatures and stereotypes of gender, class, occupation, nationality and ethnicity. In vaudeville, acts based fully on “Irish”, or “Dutch” (usually German) national characteristics were common, but the most popular and culturally dominant vaudeville show of the era in the USA was arguably the blackface minstrel show.¹⁶⁵

The minstrel show usually followed the same format, where an interlocutor talked to the audience while a minstrel talked only to him. The minstrel asked naïve questions and started mischief, somewhat in the vein of a ventriloquist dummy. The interlocutor was always white; the minstrel was always black and more often than not a white actor in blackface. The role of the minstrel was to protest and revolt against social norms within the constraints of his room of action, which was very limited. He sulked and cried, he was lazy and afraid of the dark but joyful and musical, he incited mischief and was sly and inventive. His

¹⁶² Ajanovic 2009, pp. 107-123, Klein 1993, p. 12.

¹⁶³ Lindvall and Fraser 1998, p. 122, Kotlarz 1983, p. 21.

¹⁶⁴ Lindvall and Fraser 1998, pp. 122-124.

¹⁶⁵ Crafton 2012, where he quotes Lewis 2003, p. 317.

appearance consisted of big eyes and a big mouth with clothes that signaled an ambition of upwards class mobility but were juxtaposed to mimic a child's idea of a rich person, where the white gloves became the most common calling card. The gloves, according to Nicholas Sammond, "mark a satire of upward mobility and bourgeois racial tolerance, simultaneously a sign of class resentment and racial animus".¹⁶⁶ Certain characters or characteristics that was present within the black community were extracted, exaggerated, and made to represent the entire culture and the entire black population.¹⁶⁷

When animation transitioned from pioneers working alone in their chamber to an industry of cartoon studios in the 1920s, larger staff and assembly-line style production meant an increase in specialization and output. The proliferation of animation studios was closely linked to the emergence of major film studios in Hollywood that distributed their works.¹⁶⁸ Realizing how popular animated shorts were to a cinema-going audience, the major studios doubled down on their commitment to animation, creating or absorbing animation studios to churn out a steady flow of seven-minute animated cartoons as a regular and natural part of the cinema program, ushering in the *cinematic* era of animation which roughly stretches from 1920 to 1963.

The first animated superstar, Felix the Cat, was born at Pat Sullivan Studios and constituted the mold in which most subsequent stars were cast. Felix was an instigator of mischief, a rascal who liked to drink and dance, and did not want to work. He had large eyes, a big mouth, black skin, was afraid of the dark, and liked to whistle a happy tune. Felix the Cat and the other animated stars that were formed after him such as Oswald the Rabbit, Flip the Frog, Coco the Clown, Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid, and Mickey Mouse were all based on the minstrel character from the vaudeville shows, and the part of the interlocutor was the animator.¹⁶⁹ Sammond even writes with Mickey Mouse as an example that he, with his white gloves, big eyes and mouth, personality, movement, and power structure, was not just based on a minstrel, he *was* a minstrel.¹⁷⁰ The song that Mickey in his breakout film *Steamboat Willie* (Iwerks and Disney 1928) plays to on instruments and animals, is *Turkey in the Straw*, a folk song made famous by its use in minstrel shows and other renditions containing explicitly racist lyrics. The minstrel show played an important part in the intersection between ethnicity and class. The minstrel body is connected to the concept of labor and the fear and lack of it. The black body functioned as "lazy" and the minstrel was a placeholder for that

¹⁶⁶ Sammond 2015, pp. 25-26.

¹⁶⁷ Graver 1997, p. 226, Crafton 2012, p. 34.

¹⁶⁸ Furniss 1998, p. 111.

¹⁶⁹ Klein 1993, p. 192, Sammond 2015, p. 27 and 142.

¹⁷⁰ Sammond 2015, p. 5.

sentiment, giving other subjugated ethnicities like the Irish and the Italian, connected to the frustrations of working people in relation to sometimes unattainable American ideals of individualism and self-making, a temporary relief in its framing of a fantasy of otherness and reinforced racial hierarchy.¹⁷¹ The cartoon not only allowed caricature and exaggeration, satire and ridicule, but abetted, profited, and fed of them, and the representations of ethnicity in minstrel shows and animations came to replace real life images of black bodies and characters and played a great part in defining the socio-historical bodies they display.¹⁷²

The line figure from the pioneer era of animation was replaced by the “rubber-hose” character that could be stretched infinitely for comedic effect, a change where Ub Iwerks at Disney was instrumental.¹⁷³ A key factor in the rise of Disney specifically and the popularity of animation in general was the introduction of sound to cinema. Sound is an often-overlooked part of animation because focus tends to be on the visuals, but sound is an integral part of the success of animation. From songs and music to dialogue, effects and silence, sound is one of the key foundations of building an animated film. There is no natural diegetic sound in animation, as there is in live-action film. Every sound, from the smallest effects to thematic score, must be constructed in accordance with story and visuals.¹⁷⁴ This means a lot of work, but also a natural self-consciousness of sounds, how they are created, what they sound like but also what they should not sound like. The compulsory construction of soundscapes gives animation some advantages over live-action films, such as a greater freedom of choosing illogical sounds for comedic or dramatic effect and creating a flux and tempo that is not possible in synchronized film.¹⁷⁵ *Steamboat Willie* was the first sound synchronized animated short film in general distribution, and the tight synchronization of sound, combined with loveable characters and funny gags, made *Steamboat Willie* a global success and Mickey a superstar.¹⁷⁶

In the early 1930s Disney Studios changed focus from gags to story, focusing on drama and narrative, story and character over the exuberance and inherent plasticity of the form.¹⁷⁷ Technicolor animation was introduced with *Flowers and*

¹⁷¹ Sammond 2015, p. 24.

¹⁷² Lindvall and Fraser 1998, p. 122, Crafton 2012, p. 35, Graver 1997, p. 229.

¹⁷³ Klein 1993, p. 11.

¹⁷⁴ Wells 2002, pp. 12 and 61, Klein 1993, p. 8-11, see also Sartin 1998, p. 67, for a more thorough description on the importance of music in the early Disney and Warner Bros. short films.

¹⁷⁵ Klein 1993, p. 26.

¹⁷⁶ Furniss 1998, pp. 92-94. *Plane Crazy* (1928) was Mickey’s first appearance in a Disney short, but it was sound synchronized afterwards and released after *Steamboat Willie*.

¹⁷⁷ Furniss 1998, p. 64, Stabile and Harrison 2003, p. 5, where they quote Bendazzi 1994.

Trees (Gillett 1932) and a deal of one-year exclusive rights to the technique gave Disney a head start against its competitors. *Three Little Pigs* (Gillett 1933) was the first example of three identical characters given distinct personalities through identity markers such as clothes, movement and voices. It introduced the concept of acting to animation and is considered the most successful one-reel animation of all time.¹⁷⁸ The tools for more advanced storytelling were in place, leading up to the first American animated feature in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Cottrell, Hand & Jackson 1937). During the 1930s Disney Studios developed the infrastructure and aesthetics that would make it so powerful in the industry, including the proliferation of merchandizing, which was an unprecedented phenomenon in the field.¹⁷⁹

The only true competitor of Disney in the late 1920s and 1930s was Fleischer Studios, run by brothers Max and Dave Fleischer. Their most successful characters were Betty Boop and Popeye, but popularity began with the *Out of the Inkwell* series in the 1920s, where Ko-Ko the Clown interacted with the hand of the artist. Where Disney focused on allegorical structure, with organic caricatures referring back to nature, films by the Fleischer Studios looked more like modern art constructions focusing more on mise-en-scène and individual gags than story.¹⁸⁰ Fleischer films stretched the possibilities of the rubber-hosing technique and the Fleischer style became synonymous with round figures bouncing in constant motion, with metamorphosis of inanimate objects an important part of its content.

Emerging as the new competitor to Disney in the late 1930s America was Warner Bros. Animation (WBA) and the roster of Looney Tunes cartoons, including Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, Daffy Duck and the tandem team of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner.¹⁸¹ The atomic unit of the cartoon for WBA was not the shot or the motivated character, but the gag.¹⁸² The chase became the central aspect of storytelling and with the chase and the gag came breakneck speed, which made temporal and comedic timing essential, both in animation and in sound and sound synchronization. Legendary animators like Chuck Jones and Fred “Tex” Avery made the chase cartoon the standard of the animated short film industry, subverting the moral message that normally goes with fables in the process.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Crafton 2012, p. 37, where he quotes Chuck Jones from Furniss 2005, pp. 184, and 217.

¹⁷⁹ Furniss 1998, pp. 92-95, Disney held the exclusive copyright for Technicolor animation one year after the release of *Flowers and Trees*, giving them a head start against their competitors, see Simensky 1998, pp. 172-192.

¹⁸⁰ Klein 1993, p. 76.

¹⁸¹ Furniss 1998, p. 127.

¹⁸² Klein 1993, p. 10.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 177.

Tempo, timing, and humor were perhaps the most important aspects of the WBA emergence, but satire and parody loaded with pop culture references also became a staple of the WBA and later MGM animated films. Caricature and parody were used as a form of resistance to the Hollywood system and its industrial machinery, not to formulate a political message but to make a statement about what kind of art and what kind of artists garnered aesthetic appraisal and financial incentives, where animation studios and animation workers were considerably underpaid and underappreciated compared to the other parts of Hollywood.¹⁸⁴ The animators at WBA often satirized Disney characters and stories and their sentimentality and artfulness, and despite being contractually obliged to reference Warner Bros. films and stars, WBA referenced a cross-section of all major studios in its films.¹⁸⁵ For a time, WBA and MGM surpassed Disney in quality and popularity, and Bugs Bunny (wearing the white gloves of the minstrel) surpassed Mickey Mouse as the most popular animated character.¹⁸⁶

The *televisual* era of animation (1963-1989) was initiated in 1948 with the antitrust case *United States v. Paramount Pictures Inc.* which ruled that film studios were no longer allowed to exercise vertical integration, meaning that they were no longer allowed to control production, distribution, and exhibition of films. All major motion film studios relinquished control over cinemas all over the USA and thereby lost control over what was to be shown in cinemas. Since the major studios no longer could control the screening schedule, there was no more room for the animated part of the program, leading to all animation studios connected to major film studios shutting down, reforming and shifting focus towards television and advertising.¹⁸⁷ Without the financial backing of a major Hollywood studio, television animation had a limited budget to work with, and lots of time slots to fill in the relatively new medium. Ready for the challenge of creating more with less was the tandem team of Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, with a focus of quantity over quality compared to the golden age of Hollywood studio animation. *The Flintstones* (1960-66) was the first animated series to air during primetime and it cemented Hanna-Barbera Studios as the leading brand in television animation.¹⁸⁸

In the televisual era of animation, focus shifted from animation itself to visual joke-making and creating characters as representations of certain ideas, bringing back the personality animation from Winsor McCay's first shorts. Another crucial difference was the shift from, as Wells puts it "the notion of a soundtrack as a set of aural signifiers [...] to a model more in line with radio, and the primacy of the

¹⁸⁴ Crafton 2012, p. 119.

¹⁸⁵ Waltz 1998, p. 63, Crafton 2012, p. 104.

¹⁸⁶ Putterman 1998, p. 34.

¹⁸⁷ Furniss 1998, pp. 215 and 223.

¹⁸⁸ Furniss 1998, pp. 220, 226 and 244-245.

voice as a determining factor in the suggestion of movement and action”.¹⁸⁹ Wells argues that the new aesthetic necessitated by low budget, rapid tempo and the censorship of prime-time television, was a return to the origins of animation, focusing on its versatility and variety. Hanna-Barbera concentrated on producing simple forms in both line and form, as a colorized version of the earliest forms of animation from Cohl and McCay, and as a contrast to the lush style and storytelling of Disney studios.¹⁹⁰

Animation has often been made synonymous with cartoons and categorized as children’s entertainment, in no small part due to the influence of Disney on the genre.¹⁹¹ Wells describes the dominating influence of Disney on world-wide animation as an interpellation, where all other animation always has to relate to it, whether it references it or not.¹⁹² In the television era of animation, many independent and influential animators gained attention and recognition, often with a conscious rejection of or resistance to the Disney aesthetic and corporation. United Productions of America (UPA), the National Film Board of Canada, Leeds Animation Workshop with animator Joanna Quinn, and independent animators of the American counter-culture movement dominated the independent animation scene in the Anglo-Saxon world during the televisual era.¹⁹³ In Eastern Europe, Jiri Trnka and Jan Svankmajer in the Czech Republic, the Zagreb School of Animation with Dusan Vukotić, and Soviet animators like Yuri Norstein and Francesca Yarbusova made aesthetically and politically important short films depicting everyday life and criticizing authoritarian rule.¹⁹⁴

Japanese animation, or anime, is the only true international competitor of American animation today and it has had great influence both aesthetically and thematically on American television animation.¹⁹⁵ Post-war manga artists created a new drawing style known as *gekiga* where *Astro Boy* (1963-1966) debuted in 1963 and was created by the godfather of Japanese animation, Osamu Tezuka. It became the foundation that other anime shows were built on and one of many stylistic innovations that Tezuka created was the Fleischer inspired large eyes on characters, which would become one of the defining traits of anime. *Akira* (Ôtomo, 1988) pushed the boundaries of animated storytelling further. A dystopian story about the clash between two members of a biker gang in Neo-Tokyo thirty years after Tokyo was destroyed in World War III, *Akira* is dark, psychologically

¹⁸⁹ Wells 2003, p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 19.

¹⁹¹ Ajanovic 2009, p. 91 and 95.

¹⁹² Wells 2003, p. 17-19 and 34.

¹⁹³ Wells 2003, pp. 59, 65-66, Furniss 1998, pp. 177-181 and 317-318.

¹⁹⁴ Furniss 1998, pp. 189-190, 298-304, 307, Wells 2003, p. 23.

¹⁹⁵ Winge 2008, pp. 47-49, Galbraith et al 2015, Napier 2005.

challenging, narratively complex, and poses questions and imagery of human bodies, telekinetic powers, and technology that had hardly ever been present in animation. Its worldwide success showed that animation directed at a grown-up audience showing detailed and gruesome violence in a dystopian tone and asking psychological and philosophical questions that puts high demand on an attentive audience was financially viable.

The release of *Akira* in America in 1989 was one of six reasons why it was a seminal year for animation and signaled the start of a new era that we are still in today, the *digital* era of animation. The release of *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker 1989) ushered in a new era of commercial success for the Disney franchise, popularly dubbed “the Disney renaissance”. Before 1989 the total output of animated features in the world was between one and three a year. After the turn of the millennium, every single major animation studio could turn out one or two animated features each year. The sheer number of animated features has exploded in the last two decades and the Disney renaissance played a big part in making that happen.

Aardman studios proved with *Creature Comforts* (Park 1989) and *A Grand Day Out* (Park 1989) that clay animation and stop-motion animation could reach a world-wide audience and compete with digital animation in the 2000s. Among its successors was Laika Entertainment with films like *Coraline* (Selick 2009) and *ParaNorman* (Butler and Fell 2012), and the Academy Award-winning animated feature Guillermo del Toro’s *Pinocchio* (del Toro and Gustafson 2022).

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (Zemeckis 1988) won three Academy Awards in 1989 and uses groundbreaking techniques in combining animation with live action to expand the world and elevate the narration of the film. The technique had been used earlier but never with such exquisite craftsmanship for such a seamless result, and it is only in the last decade that the hybrid form of animation and live action has caught up, including animated effects in almost every major box office success over the last fifteen years, which *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* foreshadowed.

The most significant development in animation since 1989, however, is the proliferation of digital animation. *Tin Toy* (Lasseter 1988) won the Academy Award as the first digitally animated short film ever at the ceremony in 1989. The award legitimized computer animation as an artistic medium and caught the interest of Disney who agreed to work together on the creation of the first fully digital feature film which would become *Toy Story* (Lasseter 1995), yielding the greatest box office of the year and proving without a doubt the commercial and artistic possibilities of computer animation. In the thirty years since *Toy Story*, Pixar Studios has established itself as the absolute frontrunner of the animation industry. Advanced computer software and hardware with faster processors, larger storage capacity, and increased real-time rendering have enabled animators to create and manipulate images digitally with significant reductions in time and cost without loss in quality.

Animator Chris McDonnell who worked on *BoJack Horseman* describes that in the past two decades, animation technology has made tremendous strides, no longer reliant on the arduous process of pencil drawings on paper, inking onto celluloid, painting with cel paint and painstakingly photographing each frame onto film atop a background painting. With the use of drawing tablets and monitors, hand-drawn animation can be storyboarded and animated directly on a computer and scenes can be instantly reviewed and changed, and digital file transfer has eradicated the need for physical shipping.¹⁹⁶ This transformation in the production, distribution and consumption of animation has played a crucial role in the overall growth and development of the animation industry.

Animation history started with the pioneer era with individual artists and inventors who painstakingly worked to produce short films showing what the medium was capable of. The cinematic era ushered in animation as an industry with specialized occupations and a steady production pace tied to the emerging major film studios of Hollywood. It has often been referred to as the golden age of animation due to the quality that studio financing and extreme working hours enabled. The simple lines of the pioneer era were replaced by lush style and storytelling of Disney and the tempo of the chase and irreverence of the parodies of WBA and MGM. The end of Hollywood studio vertical integration meant the end of studio animation, and the televisual era was a return to the simpler forms of pioneer animation. With smaller budgets than the studio system and more time to fill, dialogue and referential humor became even more important. Independent animation and counterculture soared, often with Disney as its main antagonist or source of inspiration. The development of animation history is reflected in the style, techniques, and references of contemporary American television animation, and an understanding of its origins is essential to place it historically and contextually.

Foundational cornerstones of animation such as transformation, metamorphosis, elasticity, movement, tempo, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, subversion, and endless possibilities have guided animation history. In the fourth era of animation, the digital era, the proliferation of animation both in terms of styles, techniques, thematic nuance and complexity, not to mention sheer quantity, has exploded. Parody and satire have always been well suited for the artifice and self-consciousness of animation, but in 1989, this was about to take on new meaning. The sixth and for this study most important innovation from 1989 is not primarily the advent of digital animation. When writing about contemporary animated parody, especially in television shows, there is simply no way around *The Simpsons*.

¹⁹⁶ McDonnell 2018, p. 177.

The Simpsons

Since *The Simpsons* premiered on American television in 1989 animation as an art form has experienced something of a revolution. The show inspired innumerable other shows directed at an adult audience depicting taboo subjects like sexual content and violence, but also a surplus of pop culture references and self-reflexive storytelling. With an increase in the consumption of popular culture, we as an audience become more aware of its content, structures, and norms. According to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright media today generally addresses the audience as someone who understands codes and conventions about representation and simulation where the different layers and hidden meanings an image contains can be made apparent, including the references, the context and the intertextuality they possess.¹⁹⁷ Simon Dentith writes that there has been a profound change in societies dominated by the influence of mass media where increased consumption, expectations and assimilation of moving pictures influences its content, and John Docker suggests that a turn away from the prioritizing of high culture have made it easier to understand the role of parody in popular culture.¹⁹⁸ The success of *The Simpsons* shows how we as an audience have become accustomed to parody as an artform, and how well-established the desire for that audience is to see criticism, satire, and ridicule.¹⁹⁹

Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland argue that film and television of today contain a higher degree of self-awareness, playfulness and even references to common film theoretical concepts. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White writes that the movie landscape of today is full of reflexive and self-aware film and that the audience today has consumed so many films that they have no problem accepting stories about both stories and storytelling. Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis claims that *artistic reflexivity*, which they describe as the process where texts expose their own production, authorship, intertextual references, textual processes or their reception, through self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, meta fiction and anti-illusionism, can be described as a trend, or even as a norm.

One aspect of artistic reflexivity in television is the concept of *televisuality*, which is when the camera attracts attention to its techniques, to the medium of television itself, and those techniques like camera angles and framing, sound effects, lighting etcetera can be used to generate humor.²⁰⁰ Gray argues that no other TV program was more important than *The Simpsons* for creating the

¹⁹⁷ Sturken and Cartwright 2009, p. 316, cmp Rose 1993, pp. 202-205, Hutcheon 2000, p. 19, and Dentith 2000, p. 161.

¹⁹⁸ Dentith 2000, p. 157, Docker 1994, p. 126.

¹⁹⁹ Gray 2006, p. 7.

²⁰⁰ Butler 2020, pp. 44 and 201, where he references Caldwell 1995.

televisual space for the boom in TV satire that followed, offering a text rich with references and allusions to film and television history and with every new season adding to the rich and complex internal storytelling and hyperdiegesis.²⁰¹ Butler emphasizes *The Simpsons*' use of self-reflexivity and intertextuality which is something that Jeffrey Weinstock describes as seminal for a show like *South Park* with its hyper-awareness of itself as an animated television show.²⁰²

Gray explains that since *The Simpsons* often bases its humor on the interaction with other genres, audiences laughing are also made to contemplate or even change opinion and understanding of genres and conventions. Movie trailers starring characters like Rainier Wolfcastle, Lionel Lutz advertisements, Kent Brockman's news shows, Krusty the Clown's product placement and sponsorship deals, they all exaggerate or skew existing tropes, genres, and conventions and thereby teach the audience a form of media literacy and critical thinking by highlighting their construction and it places existing social and cultural politics in a state of flux making them malleable.²⁰³ Most of all, Gray emphasizes, the show highlights and parodies the generic formula of the situation comedy.²⁰⁴

The tenets of American middle-class ideology like Christian religion, the family, the work ethic, and the conflicts that arise from its hypocrisy or the impossibility to realize them, echoing large parts of American humor tradition, have been central throughout sitcom history.²⁰⁵ This has yielded a double-edged phenomenon where representations of (heterosexual and Anglo-Saxon) American middle-class ideology have been mocked and satirized, but simultaneously through its constant and uninterrupted recycling have been cemented as the hegemonic norm of what an American family looks like and should look like. Gray quotes Raúl Sánchez Saura who writes that *The Simpsons* and animated shows that followed it "exposed a cynical sense of humor and pointed out the faults of Western society" such as religion and politics, "while ridiculing any attempts to change them", which is a common description of these kinds of TV shows, that they contribute nothing and change nothing, much in the vein of Baudrillard's and Jameson's view of parody as blank, blind, and empty.²⁰⁶ There is even an argument that entertainment and enjoyment like the sitcom and the animated sitcom are tools by the governing forces to subdue their constituents, much like the view of the medieval carnival as a safety valve for authorities against frustrated citizens.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Gray 2006, p. 25, Stabile and Harrison 2009, p. 9.

²⁰² Butler 2020, p. 197, Weinstock 2008, p. 88.

²⁰³ Gournelos 2009, p. 19.

²⁰⁴ Gray 2006, Gray and Lotz 2019, p. 134.

²⁰⁵ Butler 2020, p. 229.

²⁰⁶ Rivers 2024, where she quotes Sanchez Saura 2019, p. 292.

²⁰⁷ Mills 2005, p. 142, Bakhtin 1984a, prologue xviii.

Other scholars writes that *The Simpsons* is an iconic parody that offers a clear and distinct critique of among other things contemporary American consumer capitalism.²⁰⁸ Gray describes how the world of the family sitcom looked before *The Simpsons* when he writes that “the common denominators in all these stories were a perfect family, a spacious house, a perfect lawn, a supportive and safe community, no real financial concerns, and nothing more threatening than a bad kid at school or a brief problem at the office.”²⁰⁹ There is plenty of research showing that the sitcom as a genre often has contained a combination of consumer society and daydream.²¹⁰ What *The Simpsons* did was to parody and satirize the conservative family structure and its dominant position in American society while at the same time showing a family who did love each other and functioned in their own way as an alternative to the norm.²¹¹

The Simpsons has often been described as the epitome of postmodern culture, and it was instrumental in demonstrating the possibilities of self-reflexivity and intertextuality, mixing intellectual and high-brow art references with pop culture and kitsch in a manner and density that was unheard of in American television up to that point. It was an approach that appeared brand new for a television audience that was not used to those kinds of demands and the rapid tempo that the references were delivered in.²¹² The non-linear narration that *The Simpsons* spearheaded and other animated television shows benefited from is one of the things that make them more subversive.²¹³ It was a show that flaunted its knowledge of and love/hate relationship towards traditional comedy in general and the sitcom genre in particular, using common traits and tropes from the genre sometimes to poke fun at them, but sometimes to signal their place in a comedic tradition.²¹⁴

This is something that the shows I have looked at for this text have adapted and use to great extent in their body of work. To perform an analysis of the material and to understand a discussion about the material, it is essential to understand their role as television shows, as comedy shows, and the relationships they have with concepts of genre in general and the genre of sitcom in particular. This is something that is not only reflected in the material and influences the way it is produced and presented, but also central in and for the use of self-reflexivity, parody, and satire in all five shows. Robert Stam argues that television can be even more suited than film for parodic activity since television is a medium that in Mary

²⁰⁸ See for example Cherniavsky 1999, and Henry 2012.

²⁰⁹ Gray 2012, p. 5.

²¹⁰ Gray 2012, p. 5, Grote 1983, Jones 1992, Marc 1989, Taylor 1989, Tueth 2005.

²¹¹ Miller 2020, p. 64.

²¹² Furniss 2016, p. 354.

²¹³ Tueth 2005, p. 143.

²¹⁴ Mills 2005, p. 28.

Anne Doane's words excels in using its inert potential for fragmentation, manipulation and the subjective recreation of information, thus making it a perfect breeding ground for the creation of swift cultural parody.²¹⁵ To fully understand the shows and how they use parody, it is necessary to further discuss key concepts like television, comedy, genre, sitcom, and the role that satire has played for American national identity historically.

Television

There has for a very long time existed a lingering assumption that television narration in general and comedic television narration in particular are simplistic.²¹⁶ Research on television has tended to focus more on norms and standards of the medium, not as much on the number of TV shows that transgress those standards. Television, just like comedy and laughter, has been considered low art and distinctly less important than film and especially literature, and the combination of television and humor leaves what Mills describes as "one of the most maligned cultural forms".²¹⁷

Television studies grew from art and literary studies, film studies and screen theory, media studies and cultural studies via studies of rhetoric, linguistic and semiotic studies.²¹⁸ It took a long time to establish itself as an academic discipline partly due to the ephemerality of scheduled TV, making it difficult to analyze TV series properly and to read analyses without the possibility to watch what was analyzed. Only with VCR and the possibility to record TV shows came the possibility to perform advanced and thorough analyses.²¹⁹ Butler states that research on television, specifically feminist research on soaps, but also in general, tends to focus on industry, audience, the rigidity of genre or episode form, narration, and representation, while other aspects of film analysis are overlooked.²²⁰

According to Jason Mittell there has been a significant shift in narrative complexity on mainstream commercial American television from somewhere around the turn of the millennium. The changes have often been framed as a move towards more literary or cinematic television narration, but Mittell argues that there is no need to draw parallels to other art forms to describe the changes. One

²¹⁵ Doane 2006, p. 253, Stam 1992, p. 264, cmp discussion in Harries 2000, p. 20.

²¹⁶ Mittell 2015, p. 4.

²¹⁷ Mills 2005, pp. 153 and 155.

²¹⁸ Gray and Lotz 2019, pp. 32-38.

²¹⁹ Ibid, p. 32.

²²⁰ Butler 2010, pp. 26-28.

of the key differences is a shift in perception to viewing a television show as a cumulative narrative rather than a resetting to an equilibrium at the end of each episode. New technologies did not cause narrative complexity in TV storytelling, but they enabled and encouraged changes in industry and viewership that promoted innovation. Stylistic choices like subjective narration or jumbled chronology, blurred lines between serial and episodic storytelling, and the way we consume TV series with concepts like binge watching and online discussion forums and the explosion of fan culture all changed drastically during the first fifteen years of the 2000s. Viewing pleasure can be derived not only from following a plot, but from finding out how the show manages to weave something together, a meta reflexive operational aesthetic that answers the question of “how did they do that?” and to share that with other viewers.²²¹

A television serial, according to Mittell, “creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time”, meaning that the main elements of a serial narrative consist of characters, events, story world and temporality.²²² Serial television is distinguished by a longer time frame, and one of the consequences is that villainous, morally questionable, or unsympathetic characters are more common and receives more elaboration than in episodic television because “narrative events accumulate in characters’ memories and experiences”.²²³ The more we know about a character, emphasizes Mittell, “through revelations of backstory, relationships, and interior thoughts, the more likely that we will come to regard them as an ally in our journey through the storyworld.”²²⁴ He aptly titles the section of antiheroes in serialized television “lengthy interactions with hideous men” and describes the antihero as a narrative focal point “whose behavior and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance.”²²⁵ For Mittell there is no other contemporary medium that can create highly elaborated characters of greater accumulation or depth than the long-running American television drama.²²⁶

If indeed such a shift as Mittell describes in *Complex TV* has occurred, the shows in this research are all made after the shift. The exception is *South Park*, which first aired in 1997, but since the main focus here is on 2009 and after, the bulk of the episodes were made in the era of complex TV as defined by Mittell. The four shows made for an adult audience certainly fit within the definition of complex narration and a self-aware and knowledgeable exhibition of comedy, television,

²²¹ Mittell 2015, pp. 2-4, 7, 18, 36, and 42-43.

²²² Ibid, pp. 10 and 22.

²²³ Ibid, pp. 133 and 142.

²²⁴ Ibid, p. 144.

²²⁵ Ibid, pp. 142-143.

²²⁶ Mittell 2015, p. 133, referencing Pearson 2007, p. 56.

and sitcom tropes and tradition. As we find out, however, this is also true for the least narratively complex show, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. How the shows use tropes and references to filmmaking, television, comedy, and sitcom and what they do with it, specifically through parody, but also to a lesser extent through pastiche, bricolage, satire, or poetry, is one of the key elements of this study and is discussed at length in the analysis.

Sitcom Evolution

The material for this study works in traditions of animation and television, which influences its content and the way it uses references and parody. There is, however, another important tradition that the five animated television shows are part of, and it constitutes a more complicated relationship. In a sense, all five shows are half-hour comedy shows with recurring characters and narrative consistency, albeit with certain caveats. This places them in the context and tradition of the sitcom, and even though I will not go so far as to label them all (or even any of them) sitcoms, the context and tradition and how that is put to use in the shows are important aspects to fully understand their uses of parody and satire.

Since the decline of the western in the 1950s, the sitcom has been the dominant force in tv ratings in America.²²⁷ This has changed from the turn of the millennium, but in the age of streaming the sitcom is still a financial and popular juggernaut, with shows like *Two and a Half Men* (2003-2015), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) and its spinoff *Young Sheldon* (2017-2024) ranking among the most popular TV shows of its age, even though fantasy shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), competition formats like *Survivor* (2000-) and *American Idol* (2002-), and more recently sports broadcasts like NBC's *Sunday Night Football* (2006-) rank higher in the Nielsen ratings.²²⁸ The popularity of the sitcom has contributed to it becoming one of the least scrutinized art forms. Popularization devalues, as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out, and despite its popularity, the half-hour narrative comedy is more often than not seen as unimportant by academics, critics, and general audiences alike, treated as "only sitcom".²²⁹ Sitcom is often used as a derogatory word describing a lesser form of comedy or entertainment, and industry veterans often use "half-hour comedies" instead of "sitcom" because of these connotations.²³⁰

²²⁷ Mills 2005, pp. 4-5, and Hamamoto 1989, p. 1.

²²⁸ Schneider 2024, Butler 2020, pp. 90-91.

²²⁹ Bourdieu 1993, p. 114, Butler 2020, p. 3, Mills 2005, p. 3.

²³⁰ Butler 2020, p. 23.

Jeremy Butler defines the sitcom material he studies as “...all half-hour comedies that base their humor in narrative situations” and separates it from non-narrative gag comedy that stacks jokes or pratfalls on top of each other without much narrative connection between them.²³¹ For Mills, the foundational definition of a sitcom is “a form of programming which foregrounds its comic intent”, but this does not distinguish it from sketch shows or new satires like Butler’s definition.²³²

The history of sitcom predates even the invention of television in that many of the staples we associate with and use to define sitcoms were invented in the radio days of the 1920s-1940s. The 30-minute time frame, the commercial break in the middle of the episode, the procedural plot, the laugh track, and the catchphrase were all established during this era.²³³

I Love Lucy (1951-1957) was the first major original genre setting TV sitcom, and its importance for the TV comedy genre cannot be overstated. The show used the structures and staples of radio comedy cementing them as mainstays of the genre and invented several of its own, many of which became recognizable tropes and defining traits for what was to become the sitcom.²³⁴ One such innovation, unique to the medium, was the three-camera or multicamera set-up. By using three cameras at once, the show was able to catch different actions that happened simultaneously, including reaction shots and shots filmed with different framing and blocking.²³⁵ This meant that scenes did not need to be repeated to catch all angles of a shot or a scene, creating greater space for spontaneity and a more authentic audience reaction. The multicamera mode creates an illusion of watching something live together with a studio audience, who contributes laughter and other reactionary sounds to the proceedings.²³⁶ The studio audience enhanced the sense of liveness, of show and spectacle, as it had done on radio comedy shows, and the multicamera set-up was essential in translating that sense of presence and comic timing to television as a medium.

The tradition of the laugh track is, according to Mills, the clearest indication of the sitcom genre actively acknowledging their audience in a manner that no other genre does, and throughout its history, at least in terms of its classical form, the studio laughter has been an integral part and perhaps the most recognizable and easily definable part of the sitcom.²³⁷ As sitcom shows evolved and multiplied, a

²³¹ Ibid, pp. 2-3, cursive in original.

²³² Mills 2009, p. 49.

²³³ Butler 2020, pp. 59-62.

²³⁴ Ibid, p. 14 and 66.

²³⁵ Mills 2005, pp. 39-40.

²³⁶ Butler 2020, p. 29.

²³⁷ Mills 2005, pp. 14-16, 38, and 135.

distinct difference was made between multicamera shows, often filmed in front of a live studio audience, and single camera shows which had the benefit of higher mobility in settings and camera set-ups. A single camera sitcom could film anywhere and from any perspective, while a multicamera sitcom had a standard setup of stages where action and comedy were performed. The multicamera mode and aesthetics can therefore be said to be inspired by theater with more focus on *mise-en-scène*, where the laugh track underlines the artificial nature of the genre, while single camera mode and aesthetics are more inspired by cinema with a stronger focus on cinematography, editing and special effects.²³⁸ This also means that multicamera shows focus more on capturing comic performances by its actors on the soundstage, while single camera shows can elicit humor from both performances and camera technique, allowing a broader spectrum of comedic possibilities.²³⁹

A core defining trait for all television, but perhaps for sitcom in particular, is its distinct narrative structure and storytelling. For Butler, there are two absolute and unshakable premises for what constitutes sitcom storytelling, without which it could not be considered sitcom. It must have a repeatable premise, and the individual episodes must be segmented to allow for commercial breaks.²⁴⁰ Add the fact that all sitcom narrative structure must be filtered through a comedic mode, and you have its basic foundation.²⁴¹ Sitcom is built on well-established and repeatable tropes in character and narrative, such as a big lie or secret, a misunderstanding, a surefire scheme, a deadline, role reversal, fish out of water or odd coupling to name a few.²⁴²

The comedy format has changed in the last thirty years, where the dominance of the classic multicamera sitcom from the early 1970s to the early 1990s has gone and will probably never be seen again. For Mills, the audience as the fourth wall is essential for the definition of classical sitcom and one of the key differences between shows from 2005 and from 2024, where a new and more diverse smorgasbord of half-hour comedies has seen the light of day.²⁴³ Instead of the “zero-degree style” conventions of simply filming actors delivering their lines, which signified much of the sitcoms of the time, TV comedies are able to take bigger risks and use more norm-breaking cinematography, narration, editing, references and a larger poetic license while simultaneously providing

²³⁸ Butler 2020, pp. 24 and 39, Mills, p. 50.

²³⁹ Butler 2020, p. 43.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁴¹ Mills 2005, p. 37.

²⁴² Butler 2020, p. 27 where he uses the list of sitcom predicaments and character mixes from Smith 2009, pp. 26-36.

²⁴³ Mills 2005, p. 38.

entertainment for an intended audience.²⁴⁴ Streaming consumption without commercial breaks has led to comedic storytelling that does not need an act structure or mini cliffhangers before each commercial break. To a higher degree, it requires that you watch the episodes of a show in order, as opposed to the traditional sitcom, which has led to increased serialization and a less strict narrative structure.²⁴⁵

Based on works by Robin Akker, Timotheus Vermeulen, and Alison Gibbons, Lucy Rivers describes the new type of comedy shows like some of the ones used in this text as *metamodernism*, as the oscillation between modern earnestness and postmodern cynicism, where the metamodern irony springs from a source of desire instead of apathy.²⁴⁶ If comedy shows and sitcom started out from a point of sincerity and shows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* among others parodied and deconstructed that sincerity in what Rivers describes as postmodern irony, the new shows mix parody and skepticism with sincerity and emotions to create a space “where humor, irony, apathy, and desire coexist”.²⁴⁷ Metamodern sitcoms, explains Rivers, “possess a warmth and sincerity that was missing in the slick, ironic series of the 1990s and which link to a sincere quest for meaning”.²⁴⁸

Of the five TV shows I have chosen for this study, four should be considered as comedies regarding genre, *Archer*, *BoJack Horseman*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park*. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* contains a lot of jokes and instances of comedy, but I would argue that it should primarily be considered an adventure show. The four comedies are dominantly humorous, but all of them have episodes or sequences that are dark, serious, or even tragic. *BoJack Horseman* takes the balancing act between comedy and tragedy to new heights, raising doubts over whether it should be defined as a comedy at all. It contains undeniable elements of both drama and comedy, perhaps not in equal measure but as major parts of the show’s narration, so a fruitful definition might be drama-comedy, or dramedy.²⁴⁹ *Archer*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park* are undeniably comedies, albeit with occasional darker tones. If the shows are predominantly comedies and have approximately half-hour runtimes, does that make them sitcoms? There are definitely arguments that animated TV shows with complex narration can be defined as sitcoms due to their episode structure and plot development, outside of

²⁴⁴ Butler 2020, p. 90.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 222-228.

²⁴⁶ Rivers 2024, p. 124, where she quotes van den Akker and Vermeulen 2010, p. 4, and van den Akker et al 2017, p. 6.

²⁴⁷ Rivers 2024, p. 124.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 125, where she references Rustad and Schwind 2017, p. 131.

²⁴⁹ The term sadcom has also been used to describe the combination of comedy and tragedy in half-hour shows like *BoJack Horseman*, see Sawallisch 2021.

their humorous tone, like the video essay from Slate arguing that animated shows like *Rick and Morty* and *BoJack Horseman* follow the same sitcom structure as its predecessors.²⁵⁰ Although certain episodes of the animated comedy shows definitely follow the classical sitcom narrative structure, they contain other elements that signal their distance from the definition, and many episodes of the shows work far outside the frames of classical sitcom narration.

Mills emphasizes that one of the most important traits for sitcom is its relationship to liveness, to appear as a live experience signaling its relationship to a live audience, most commonly but not exclusively connected to the concept of the laugh track.²⁵¹ The laugh track as a concept is not limited to laughter, it contains all audience reaction even though laughter is most common and its defining trait. Comedy shows can of course be considered sitcoms even with the lack of a laugh track or a live studio audience, but I agree that a sense of liveness is one of the most important defining traits for a sitcom, and the animated TV shows I use for this text do not have that sense of liveness. I would argue that at least *Archer*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park* should be defined as comedy shows, not sitcoms, with *BoJack Horseman* a drama comedy or dramedy and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* an adventure show. With that said, defining and describing sitcom and its history is essential to understanding the background of the shows, but also the way they self-consciously use sitcom tropes and norms for humorous effect, either through using classical tropes or by reiterating them just to break the rules or make fun of them. The temporal flexibility of *Archer*, the genre-conscious narrative breakdowns of *Rick and Morty*, Kenny's many deaths in *South Park*, the tense relationship between BoJack's real life and his sitcom persona from the 90s in *BoJack Horseman*, and the norm-breaking antics of Discord in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, are all examples of a consciousness of the sitcom genre and the shows' place in relation to it.

Comedy and Satire

One way of challenging fixed meanings, one that has proven to be one of the most popular and effective, is through the means of humor and satire. In the classic definition of humor theory there are three theories that constitute the most common views of comedy; superiority theory, where humor is derived from feeling above someone else, laughing at them; relief theory, where a taboo subject is addressed and punctuated; and incongruity theory, where the audience expects one thing, but

²⁵⁰ "The Hidden Sitcom Formula", *Slate* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvHRAy4YdbA>, 2016, retrieved 2025-10-17.

²⁵¹ Mills 2005, p. 50.

comedy ensues when the other thing happens.²⁵² When talking about comedy TV shows, a distinction can also be made between jokes and humor, where jokes are specific instances of eliciting laughter while humor is a tone that permeates the show as text, meaning that a TV show can be viewed as a comedy even though sometimes great parts of it are not funny or humorous.²⁵³

Scholars have argued that humor always has a potential for transgression since humor in itself deals with the crossing of borders, be it taste, decorum or expectations.²⁵⁴ Satire can, according to Dustin Griffin, function to “persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous”, it can according to Linda Morris rely on humor “to expose both human and institutional failures”, and in the words of Leonard Freeman, satire can work to critique “the tyranny of unquestioned authority”.²⁵⁵ Marginalized groups often turn to irony and satire as a counter-discourse and from that become a “discursive community”, from which they can then challenge hegemonic power.²⁵⁶ Elliott argues that satire attacks through indirection to protect itself from censorship and repression.²⁵⁷ Jay Magill describes how ironic insights can be used as a counterweight to dominant culture and politics that have been rendered invisible and natural in any given society and he emphasizes the legitimacy that individuals have to challenge those power structures.²⁵⁸ Robert Hariman argues that parody and satire can work as a symbolic leveler in that it aids citizens in diminishing the differences between them and political elites and enables them to find community in the connection with one another in doing so.²⁵⁹ This can come in the form of satirizing or critiquing dominant structures. It can also be done by appropriating and exaggerating the language of prejudice and stereotypes for comical and critical effect.²⁶⁰

Bakhtin said that “by comically playing with politics, one can gain a greater sense of ownership over it and, in turn, feel more empowered to engage it”. For Bakhtin, using humor to reflect, analyze and ridicule social norms was a “necessary device warding of the entrenchment of any norm into becoming wholly

²⁵² Butler 2020, pp. 4-11.

²⁵³ Mills 2005, p. 16.

²⁵⁴ Gray et al 2009, p. 10, referencing Neale and Krutnik 1990, p. 91, and Powell, 1988, p. 103, Critchley 2002, Gray 2006, Stallybrass, 1986.

²⁵⁵ Griffin 1994, p. 1, Morris 2007, p. 377, Freedman 2009, p. 166.

²⁵⁶ Hutcheon 1991, p. 89.

²⁵⁷ Elliott 1960, pp. 263-264, Griffin 1994, p. 139.

²⁵⁸ Magill 2007, p. 58, quoted in Warner 2011, p. 64.

²⁵⁹ Hariman 2008, Day 2011, see discussion in Doona 2016, pp. 14-16.

²⁶⁰ Coughlin 2003, pp. 304-311, Haggins 2009, p. 240, quoting Schulman 1995, p. 439.

acceptable and beyond rebuke.”²⁶¹ All laughter produce “anti-rites”, as Simon Critchley building on the works of Mary Douglas names them, that “mock, parody or deride ritual practices of a given society”.²⁶² If “all humor plays with social norms”, as Gray puts it, “all humor carries the potential for reflection on, or even criticism of, those norms.”²⁶³ Griffin points out that although satire can be used and is often used for moral outrage, anger, and critique, it is important to not lose sight of its more playful side and how the comedy of satire is used, something that in his opinion has not been sufficiently researched.²⁶⁴

For comedy to be effective according to Andy Medhurst, it must “construct, consolidate and call upon a framework of references shared by both producer and consumer, performer and audience, text and public” which in terms of nationality could mean a national audience but could just as well mean a group in society that is critical towards nationalism or nation as a concept. Comedy is an invitation to temporarily belong to something, and its fleeting nature is one of the key aspects of what makes it so attractive, it is in Medhurst’s words “a short cut to community.”²⁶⁵ He makes the point that even though the specifically English humor that he addresses in his text is not unique in the sense that there are no other nationally specific examples of the same kind of humor, it is necessary to have an understanding of English culture in order to understand the humor, where it comes from and what it relates to. This is the nationally specific humor that he acknowledges. He also argues that an understanding of what England or Englishness is or can be needs to address the influence of popular comedy to a much higher degree than it does now.²⁶⁶

Medhurst concludes by stating that he does not think that there is such a thing as a singular English national sense of humor, but that humor on the other hand is crucial in the English sense of nation. He lifts popular comedy as something specifically important for the sense of nation, which is something that has been academically neglected. When describing what Englishness is or what English comedy is, Medhurst consciously cannot formulate it, but he can provide a number of examples of what he himself considers English, including comedy. The examples he writes about are all part of the mosaic that makes up Englishness and English comedy, but in different ways, and the full picture is not complete without them and there are plenty more examples apart from them. He stresses the changeability of nation and how we view it, what is considered English today can

²⁶¹ Bakhtin 1984a, p. 123.

²⁶² Critchley 2002, building on anti-rituals from Douglas 2002 (original from 1975).

²⁶³ Gray et al 2009, p. 9.

²⁶⁴ Griffin 1994, p. 84.

²⁶⁵ Medhurst 2007, pp. 19-21.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 206.

in some cases be what was considered English a hundred years ago or even last week, but it is never the same and it is always in motion.²⁶⁷

American Satire

Alongside the formalistic, structural, and content-based definitions of sitcoms, it is undeniably an Anglo-American genre.²⁶⁸ In the sense that it was invented in America and that almost all internationally successful sitcoms, with some British exceptions, have been American, but also because it is intrinsically connected to American society, history and tradition. Other sitcom traditions may have developed their own style and form to some degree, but they are tied to their American predecessors.²⁶⁹

American humor has a rich and diverse history, and it is interesting to look closer at some of its defining features and how different authorities and dominant comedic modes can be and have been challenged by other forms of comedy. Examples of satire directed at the American nation has been around as long as there has been a nation. As English author DH Lawrence famously remarked on the freedom that is so often associated with Americanness:

This is the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why, I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch the moment he shows he is not one of them.²⁷⁰

Like animated TV shows parody the popular traits of television, American humorists and satirists used the popular expressions of their time, like the best-selling fictions parodied by the likes of Mark Twain and Sinclair Lewis, offering “alternatives to sentimental fictions and dime-store novels that reinforced traditional values or provided escape in melodramatic scenarios”, and thereby transcending the limitations of their own marketplace through the use of irony and incongruity.²⁷¹ *South Park* and *The Simpsons* have been described as shows with a direct lineage from Mark Twain, for its humor, its protagonist with an

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 209.

²⁶⁸ Mills 2005, p. 60.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 26-66.

²⁷⁰ Lawrence 1923, quoted in Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 6.

²⁷¹ Kaine Ezell 2016, pp. 5 and 118.

entrepreneurial spirit, and its subversive content including relationships over race boundaries.²⁷²

Constance Rourke was an American scholar and intellectual in the early 20th century specialized in popular culture and its importance and she said that “the art of the common people might be as ‘good’ for humanity as recognized masterpieces, and that the critic could spur democratic reform”.²⁷³ In her influential book from 1931 she described American humor as nomadic and unfinished, just like the American nation, and that they both need constant reinforcement and repeating that they in fact exist.²⁷⁴ American artist Grant Wood made paintings in the 1930s that used self-conscious artifice, exaggeration, and comic subversion to question normative assumptions of taste, value, nature, and gender and sexuality. His form of queer parody highlighted the “fundamentally invented terms of American character and history” and his view on humor was that it should be used to expose and deflate “America’s follies”.²⁷⁵

Sitcoms are an important part of how television and its content is used by cultures to present themselves to other cultures, in the case of sitcom, how American culture presents itself to the rest of the world.²⁷⁶ Butler argues that three major themes in sitcoms have influenced and are influenced by American society: family, gender, and race. The family norm in sitcoms echoes the image of an American family solidified in the public consciousness in the wake of World War II of a father, a mother, and two or more children, the (heterosexual and Anglo-Saxon) nuclear family, which in sitcom terms translates to what Butler describes as “a bumbling dad, a reliable mom, and three children”.²⁷⁷ The domestic sitcom that emerged in the 1950s served to institute a particular myth about the nuclear family in popular culture. Even today, when politicians and policymakers describe the “traditional” family, their descriptions are invariably a pastiche composed of characteristics from a number of different domestic sitcoms, the most flagrant and infamous example perhaps when George Bush Sr established that the American family should be more like the Waltons than the Simpsons.²⁷⁸

First, the traditional family includes a male dad, a female mom, and, ideally, a son and daughter. They are white, middle class and live in the suburbs rather than

²⁷² Gray 2012, p. 7.

²⁷³ Rourke 2004, Rubin 1980.

²⁷⁴ Rourke 2004, p. xxiii, Doss 2018, p. 30.

²⁷⁵ Doss 2018.

²⁷⁶ Mills 2005, p. 10.

²⁷⁷ Butler 2020, pp. 96-97.

²⁷⁸ Furniss 2016, p. 355, the reference to the Waltons is from the show of the same name, *The Waltons* (1972-1981) about a family in rural Virginia during the Great Depression and World War II.

the city or country. African Americans, immigrants of all ethnicities and races, and LGBTQ+ people mainly do not exist within this vision. The father is the “breadwinner”, the mom stays at home, the sons are strong, and the daughters are good. Within this kinship arrangement, the sexual division of labor is absolute, women’s unpaid labor is taken for granted, and paternal authoritarianism guarantees the reproduction of strong “moral” values.²⁷⁹ The family featured on domestic sitcoms is remote from violence, conflict, and the realms of labor and politics. These families were never homeless, hungry, victims of sexual abuse, discontent, or in any way unhappy. It might be more accurate to say that producers wanted the live-action format to be free of controversy in order not to alienate any portion of the mass broadcast audience they sought to deliver to advertisers.²⁸⁰

In a sitcom, immediacy is imperative. Introducing a character to an audience requires swift reading and recognition in order to expedite storytelling, just like in early comics and animation. John Alberti states that “all cartoon drawings rely on coded signifiers of demographic identity.”²⁸¹ Shortcuts and archetypes, and of course also stereotypes, make it easier for an audience to quickly understand who a character is supposed to be and create expectations of what they will do.²⁸² Sitcom has a dual tension between the norms of the genre and the need to deliberately disrupt such norms. Since comedy is often derived from disruptions of realism, an audience must also simultaneously accept the show’s realism and its breaking of it, sometimes creating a conflict between how people, groups, events or organizations are used in specific gags and scenes and how they are represented in the narrative as a whole.²⁸³ Offence has always played an important part in sitcom, the art of puncturing balloons, poking fun at rigid structures, and making audiences uncomfortable has always been keystones in the shaping of the genre.²⁸⁴ But there is no doubt that stereotypical representations and discriminatory practices have been rampant in television in general and the sitcom in particular, and the legacy of that and of the same structures in the foundation of the animation industry is important to remember when talking about modern animated comedy shows.²⁸⁵

Animated sitcoms manage to address topics not considered conventional comedic material. *The Simpsons* and its successors changed the way domestic

²⁷⁹ Stabile and Harrison 2003, p. 7.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, pp. 7-8, 8 where they use *Daria*, *The PJs* and *The Simpsons* as examples of animated TV-shows.

²⁸¹ Alberti 2009, p. 15, Wells 2009, pp. 5 and 18.

²⁸² Mills 2005, p. 7.

²⁸³ Ibid, p. 36.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 144-145.

²⁸⁵ Butler 2020, p. 163, quoting Gray 1995.

sitcoms were told, with a plot centered around a minor domestic conflict which is resolved neatly at the end of the episode, enabling sitcoms to once again comment on and break away from their own banality. What attracted viewers to *The Simpsons*, according to Stabile and Harrison, was its ability to breathe new life into the near-exhausted genre of domestic sitcoms, playing with or destroying existing narrative conventions in the process.²⁸⁶ Where the family sitcom of the 1950s and 1960s on throughout the 1980s sought to avoid controversy, animated sitcoms of the 1990s made a point of seeking it out.²⁸⁷ For Kaine Ezell, the postmodern qualities of animated TV shows is what enables them to critique the dominant culture because they do it from within, as part of the system.²⁸⁸ He argues that American animated TV shows continue a tradition of American humor and satire from Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, Kurt Vonnegut, Richard Pryor and into our days.²⁸⁹

Contemporary American television animation is impossible to encompass fully within one study; there simply are too many examples available for an analysis to be totally comprehensive. What is possible, however, is to make an informed selection of television shows that are representative for contemporary American animation, and for the ways it uses parody and satire.

Material

The material chosen for this research consists of five television shows spanning from 1997 to present day. Three of the shows have concluded while two still produce new material, but for this research the end point needed to be the calendar year of 2024 in order to complete the analysis in time. Five television shows yield a lot of material for a single academic study. Tallying all of them as of the end of 2024, they constitute 62 seasons, 857 episodes, and close to 20,000 minutes of television to analyze. There are a few reasons for choosing a wider variety of series instead of focusing on just one or two, the most important being that it enables me to a higher degree to draw general conclusions of the state of animated parody today. One show says a lot about that show, but not necessarily a lot about its context in terms of genre or development and its place in the industry and compared to other shows. By comparing and contrasting five different shows, I hope to be able to speak to similarities and how and why they occur, but also what

²⁸⁶ Stabile and Harrison 2003, where they point out that *Family Guy* has pushed this even further.

²⁸⁷ Furniss 2016, p. 354.

²⁸⁸ Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 119.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. viii.

separates the shows and what makes each and every one of them unique. The shows are:

Archer (2009-2023), created by Adam Reed, produced by Floyd County Productions, FX Productions, Fox Television Animation and Radical Axis, main distribution by FX Network and from 2017 FXX Network. It ran for 144 episodes over 14 seasons with the last episode S14E09 Into the Cold with a 64-minute runtime being the only episode straying significantly from the 22-minute median time of the other episodes.

BoJack Horseman (2014-2020), created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg with Lisa Hanawalt as the animation director, produced by Tornante Company, Boxer vs Raptor, and ShadowMachine, distributed by Netflix. It ran for 6 seasons with 12 episodes in each of the first 5 seasons and 16 episodes in the 6th and final season, which was divided into two parts when it aired. There is also a Christmas special episode which was released between seasons one and two, bringing the total number of episodes to 77, each episode being between 25-27 minutes long.

My little Pony: Friendship is Magic (2010-2020), produced by Allspark Animation, distributed by Discovery Family which is co-owned by The Cartoon Network and Hasbro Entertainment, respectively owned by Warner Bros. and Hasbro. The show ran for 9 seasons with 26 episodes in each except the third season which contained 13 episodes, yielding a total of 221 episodes ranging between 22 to 23 minutes each, and the feature film *My Little Pony: The Movie* (Thiessen 2017) that runs 99 minutes and takes place between season 7 and 8.

Rick and Morty (2013-), created by Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland, produced by Williams Street, Harmonious Claptrap and Justin Roiland's Solo Vanity Card Productions!, distributed by Adult Swim. The show is still running with 7 seasons containing 71 episodes of 22-23 minutes each as of the end of 2024, 11 in the first season and 10 each in the following 6. Season 8 will be shown during 2025, and it was renewed for seasons 9-12 in 2024.

South Park (1997-), created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, produced by Comedy Central, Braniff, Comedy Partners, and South Park Studios, main distributor Comedy Central. Seven specials in later years have been distributed by Paramount+. The show started in 1997 and is still going although later seasons have been divided between six-episode regular seasons and specials delving into specific issues. Separating regular episodes and specials yields an output of 25 seasons containing 321 episodes with a median length of 22 minutes, with nine specials averaging 51 minutes and the feature film *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* from 1999.

Archer is a spy parody that centers around the international spy agency ISIS and its top agent Sterling Archer (voiced by H. Jon Benjamin), who labels himself with some objective accuracy as the world's greatest spy, while at the same time being a high-functioning alcoholic, relentless womanizer, incurable narcissist and egomaniac, who usually makes life for those surrounding him very difficult. In the

first six and final four seasons the agency is usually tasked with missions from the highest bidder that take them all over the world in order to protect important or wealthy people, retrieve dangerous technical gadgets or weapons, or neutralize threats to international safety. Season seven sees the agency set up in Los Angeles as private detectives with assignments in the movie industry, and seasons 8-10 are thematic meanderings of Archer's subconscious as he is in a coma, season eight in 1920s Los Angeles, season nine in 1930s Polynesia, and season ten in retro-futuristic space.

Over the course of the series' run, Sterling Archer and seven other characters make up the main core, appearing in all or nearly all episodes of the show. Sterling's mother Malory Archer (Jessica Walter) owns the agency and rules it with a martini-grasping iron fist. She is fiscally and ideologically right-wing or at least self-serving, rejecting any and all authority that is not her own and reveling in degrading any religion, ethnicity, class, nationality, organization, or human being that she deems beneath her. Malory leaves the show before its 13th season due to the passing of voice-actor Jessica Walter. Lana Kane (Aisha Tyler) is a highly competent field agent and starts the show as Archer's ex-girlfriend, during the show they share an on-again/off-again relationship which among other things results in their daughter AbbyJean. Lana takes over the agency when Malory leaves. At the beginning of the show, Lana is in a relationship with the agency's accountant Cyril Figgis (Chris Parnell), who starts as a boring, albeit well-endowed, counterpoint of stability to Archer's recklessness, but quickly evolves into a sex-addicted bumbling field agent who never escapes being the main target for Archer's ridicule.

Pam Poovey (Amber Nash) starts out as the frumpy and slightly overweight HR representative of the agency, but as we learn more of her past lives we realize that not only has she competed in an underground fight club ring and raced street cars with the Yakuza, she inhabits almost superhuman strength, resilience, appetite, and shamelessness which makes her a field agent on the same level as Archer and Lana and which lands her a polyamorous primary in Swiss super-agent Alessia in the final season. The agency's secretary Cheryl Tunt (Judy Greer) starts out as ditzy, lazy and clueless, but soon adds traits like immense wealth as one of two heirs to the Tunt fortune, hypersexuality with violent overtones specifically tied to a desire to be strangled, overt racism and classism stretched to extremes for comic effect, and often recalcitrant and irrational behavior combined with straight-up insanity. Ray Gillette (Adam Reed) is an analyst, field agent, bomb expert and a former Olympic bronze medalist in the giant slalom. He is openly gay with a background in hillbilly Appalachia and often uses sarcastic snide remarks against his colleagues, especially Archer whose recklessness causes Ray's legs to be paralyzed, only to be replaced with bionic legs later in the show. The person responsible for that operation is in-house doctor and mad scientist Algernon Krieger (Lucky Yates), who experiments on everything he can get his hands on,

including human and animal bodies, weaponry, robotics, artificial intelligence, and mind-altering substances. All eight main characters of *Archer* are, albeit to different degrees, amoral and egotistic human beings, but they nevertheless find ways to work and live together throughout the run of the show.

BoJack Horseman takes place mainly in Los Angeles and the Hollywood industry and it is centered around the titular character, BoJack Horseman (voiced by Will Arnett), who starred in a famous TV sitcom called *Horsin' Around*. In the *BoJack Horseman* universe, it premiered in 1987 and ran for nine seasons with a big audience but with terrible reviews. BoJack is an anthropomorphized horse who, when the show starts, is an alcoholic has-been, even though he lives well on the residuals from the show. The main cast includes BoJack's agent Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris) who at the start of the show is also his lover. She is an anthropomorphized cat who is driven, hardworking, and always finds solutions for her clients, more than for herself. Diane Nguyen (Alison Brie) is a human who is commissioned to write BoJack's autobiography, since she has previously written a biography about Secretariat the racehorse. She is dating Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins), who is an anthropomorphized dog also famous for a sitcom from the 90s, *Mr. Peanutbutter's House*, which was a direct rip-off of BoJack's show. He is BoJack's opposite in that he is positive, easy-going, loves people, loves partying, likes everything, and that everything always seems to work out for him. The final member of the main cast is Todd Chavez (Aaron Paul), who sleeps on BoJack's couch in his Beverly Hills mansion when the show starts. Todd is a young, goofy, loveable human with no real direction in life at the beginning, instead filling his time with what is referred to as "wacky shenanigans".

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic centers around a group of ponies in the small town of Ponyville in the land of Equestria and their adventures as they discover more about the magic of friendship. The series starts with unicorn Twilight Sparkle (voiced by Tara Strong) arriving in Ponyville from her studies at the capitol Canterlot with a specific task from the ruler of Equestria, Princess Celestia, to find new friends. With the help of her dragon assistant Spike (Cathy Weseluck), she meets five new friends and the six ponies, commonly referred to as The Mane Six, and a slew of other characters go on adventures, enjoy everyday setbacks and resolutions, and learn important lessons about friendship. The other members of The Mane Six are Applejack (Ashleigh Ball), a reliant and honest earth pony running an apple farm; Pinkie Pie (Andrea Libman), an exuberant and joyful earth pony who throws parties and bakes cupcakes; Rarity (Tabitha St. Germain), a unicorn fashion designer who is refined and high-class in matters of taste and decorum; Rainbow Dash (Ashleigh Ball), a Pegasus who is a speed racer with a fierce competitive streak and is responsible for controlling the clouds and the weather of Ponyville; and finally Fluttershy (Andrea Libman), a Pegasus who takes care of all manners of animals and wild creatures despite her shy demeanor.

The first iteration of *My Little Pony* was launched in 1986 as a bi-product and amplifier of merchandizing. Toy company Hasbro produced the show and others like *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983-1985), *Transformers* (1984-1987), and *G.I. Joe* (1985-1986) with the expressed intent to sell more toys, which came with harsh criticism from parts of the audience, but mainly from critics. The feminine coded *My Little Pony* was treated with even more disdain than its masculine coded counterparts and has been described as “the trashiest, most saccharine, most despicable products of the children’s television industry”.²⁹⁰ *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is the fourth generation of *My Little Pony* TV shows and as its predecessors it had a clear and expressed commercial intent, but by employing and highlighting Lauren Faust as creator and showrunner gave her a creative license to make a television show with more complexity, larger focus on details, more pop cultural references and smartness, which would be attractive even for an older audience.²⁹¹

Unlike the other four shows in this research that are directed at an adult audience, the intended audience for *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is girls between the ages of 3 to 6 or 4 to 8 depending on the source, and despite the enormous growth in adult audience and fans during the show’s run, the majority of viewers still belong to the originally intended audience.²⁹² Lauren Faust, who previously had worked on the hit show *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2004) and developed *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends* (2004-2009), came in to *My Little Pony* with the expressed intention to make quality entertainment for girls, and to emphasize that there are many different ways to be a girl, that they are “complicated human beings, and they can be brave, strong, kind and independent – but they can also be uncertain, awkward, silly, arrogant or stubborn.”²⁹³

The success of the show is attributed mainly to three key elements, the look, the humor, and the characters.²⁹⁴ The style and look of the show is heavily influenced by manga and anime, with character designs based on kawaii cuteness with big heads and big eyes, but with realistic face movements for greater variations in expression. The color palette is pink, purple, and yellow, but Faust made a point of avoiding the overly bright, oversaturated, garish pink that dominated animation for little girls at the time, instead landing on a light pastel tone with sharp contours in characters and set design. The characters are cute, but also designed from the same basic template, only differing in color, hair style, eyes, and the cutie marks

²⁹⁰ Johnson 2013, p. 146.

²⁹¹ Robertson 2014.

²⁹² Johnson 2013, pp. 135-156.

²⁹³ Gilbert 2015, see Kirkland 2010, pp. 9-24, for an analysis of the girl power politics in *The Powerpuff Girls*.

²⁹⁴ Gilbert 2015, Robertson 2014, p. 28.

on the flank that is unique for each character, which lends itself well for the production of fan art for the show. Once you have learned to draw the basic template of a pony, you can pretty much draw all of them, making it easy to create your own characters.²⁹⁵

The show also has an elaborate hyperdiegesis, world-building with many places, characters, and phenomena that sometimes are just mentioned in passing, making it easier for the fans to fill those gaps on their own. The humor of the show is often complex for a children's television show, with plenty of pop culture references using bricolage, parody, and meta storytelling. It also displays an awareness and knowledge of film history and film tropes in terms of genre, cinematography, music, and narration, and it mirrors expectations a grown audience might have. The complexity of humor also goes hand in hand with the complexity of the characters of the show, specifically written to have strengths but also distinct weaknesses but still help each other out when it is needed. They develop over time as they learn new things, and the attention to detail and the complexity in character building makes it easy to identify with any of the Mane Six.

Rick and Morty is originally a *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis 1985, 1989, 1990) parody, with Rick Sanchez playing the part of Doc and Morty Smith the part of Marty, (both voiced by Justin Roiland seasons 1-6). Rick is the mad scientist, and Morty is his 14-year-old grandson who tags along on his adventures. Rick's daughter and Morty's mother Beth Smith (Sarah Chalke) is a veterinarian, her husband Jerry Smith (Chris Parnell) is a failed salesman, their daughter and Morty's older sister Summer (Spencer Grammer) is a rebellious teen focused on being popular at school. The show uses the unlimited possibilities of science fiction, interdimensionality, and animation to send the main characters on different adventures on Earth or throughout the galaxies. It is a show that revels in the usage of pop cultural references and meta humor, especially prevalent in the many examples of film and television tropes, both for parodic or satirical purposes and for narrational direction, where tropes and genre hallmarks often guide the story forward.

Rick may be one of the protagonists of the show, but he is not a hero. He exhibits or even flaunts morally and ethically dubious opinions and methods and he always puts himself and what he has to gain first, except for a very few occasions. He can best be described as an antihero, a term that has become more popular with the proliferation of more complex protagonists that have moral and ethical flexibility and even villainous streaks, like Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), or Thomas Shelby in *Peaky Blinders* (2013-2022). Just like these antiheroes, Rick is a straight white male, and just like these antiheroes he has contracted a fan following that chooses to look beyond any

²⁹⁵ Merchandize related to the show included blank ponies for personal design, where you could draw your own pony to fit it to your own personality, see Shreve 2012, p. 24.

character complexity and nuance and simply worship him as a hero, flaws and all.²⁹⁶ One of the show's creators and the voice of both Rick and Morty, Justin Roiland, was fired from the show before the seventh season due to criminal allegations and behavior in social media, and his parts were recast with voice actors Ian Cardoni as Rick and Harry Belden as Morty. In 2024, a spinoff show *Rick & Morty: The Anime* (2024-) premiered with ten episodes of its first season, but it will not be a part of this analysis.

South Park centers around four 10-year-old boys, Stan, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny, in the small mountain town of South Park, Colorado. Of the main characters, Stan Marsh (voiced by Parker) is the all-American boy who plays quarterback in the football team and is in love with classmate Wendy Testaburger. His family consists of bullying older sister Shelly, life weary grandfather Marvin, mother Sharon, and father Randy who increasingly throughout the show is given more room to overreact to and go along with trends and societal phenomena. Stan's best friend Kyle Broflovski (voiced by Stone) is part of the only Jewish family in town, which is a recurring theme and plot point, where Kyle often deals with questions of religion, but is also the character with the keenest sense of morality and criticism of what he deems to be mass idiocy in town. His family consists of father Gerald, mother Sheila, and his adopted Canadian brother Ike. Eric Cartman (Parker) is the troublemaker and instigator of the group, and many plot points start with Cartman wanting something or being unsatisfied by something. He is an only child to mother Liane, who usually gives him whatever he wants, and he has an insatiable appetite for food, drinks, snacks, pop and trash culture, and oscillates between quiet bigotry and prejudice to outright evil dictatorship if given the chance, always yearning for the taste of authority. Kenny McCormick (Stone) is the fourth main character and for a very long time his defining traits were that he was poor, that we could not hear what he said because he always hid under his orange anorak, and that he died in every episode only to appear in the next episode without any further explanation. His family, who play a less prominent role than the other boys' families, consists of mother Carol, father Stuart, older brother Kevin and younger sister Karen. Several other recurring characters play important roles for specific episodes or seasonal arcs, but like *The Simpsons*, they are too many to list individually in an introduction. The show has never shied away from controversy, often leaning into harsh criticism and satire of what they perceive to be authority figures in society, ranging from political, religious, and business leaders to celebrities, spokespeople, and representatives of trends and phenomena.

²⁹⁶ For more in-depth analysis on the antihero in contemporary television narration, see Mittell 2015, pp. 142-143.

Previous Research on the Material

Previous research on the five shows that I have chosen for this study varies from abundant to scarce, but there are examples concerning all shows. For *Archer*, Matt Sienkiewicz's chapter in *Taboo Comedy* illustrates how the show uses concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis while simultaneously explicitly referencing Freudian ideas making it an ideal example to illustrate the repression and expression of taboo in comedy.²⁹⁷ Randell-Moon/Randell uses *Archer* as an example of the aesthetics and style of modern television animation and its purposeful use of visual gags and easter eggs.²⁹⁸ Boumaron highlights the role of costume design in animation using *Archer* as one example.²⁹⁹ Moreno-Ortiz takes a computational approach to compare narrative structures in *Friends* (1994-2004) and *Archer* and finds that *Archer* uses a more varied emotional language and more linguistically distinct characters³⁰⁰ that suggest complex character development and with its more satirical tone subverts traditional gender norms more dynamically than the more conventional *Friends*.

Rick and Morty has been the subject of study from various perspectives, including the role of media and technology, the show's dark, absurdist, and surreal humor, its scientific and biological merits, its philosophy, its narrative techniques, its toxic fandom, its atheism and nihilism, and the show's environmental parody and its implications for stopping global warming.³⁰¹

BoJack Horseman has also been noticed in several academic works, including examples positioning the show as quality television, dramedy, sadcom, the end of postmodernism and representative of metamodernism, highlighting its LA setting, its anthropomorphism, its polyphony, its depiction of trauma and mental health,

²⁹⁷ Sienkiewicz 2016.

²⁹⁸ Randell-Moon and Randell 2013.

²⁹⁹ Boumaron 2018.

³⁰⁰ Moreno-Ortiz 2024, pp. 79-100.

³⁰¹ For the role of media and technology in *Rick and Morty*, see Eldem and Nayir 2021, Holland 2021, Maxwell 2021, and Kakade 2024. For the show's dark, absurdist and surreal humor, see Koltun 2018, Sobaih, 2023, and Poschinger and Shannon 2024. For its scientific and biological merits, see Gómez 2020 and Wright-Watts 2023. For the show's use of philosophy, see Abesamis and Yuen 2019 and Navarria 2025. For its narrative techniques, see Muniowski 2020, Hosnae 2020, and Evangelista 2019. Further study into the show's atheism and nihilism can be found in Scott 2020, Miranda 2017, Bosman 2022, Genovesi 2024, and Holm and Donian 2024. For the show's environmental parody and its implications for stopping global warming, see Hellmann 2024.

its sparse use of profanity, and its depiction of asexuality.³⁰² Bradley Simpson describes the different ways *BoJack Horseman* uses storytelling devices to balance comedy and tragedy and to establish and subvert expectations, including sections on the common use of parody, satire, and self-reflexivity in the show.³⁰³ Chris McDonnell's *BoJack Horseman: The Art Before the Horse* has been a great source of information on the history and development of the show, and most notably, perhaps, is the anthology edited by Harriet Earle titled *Aren't You BoJack Horseman?: Critical Essays on the Netflix Series* including texts on masculinity, feminism, anthropomorphism, mental illness, place, celebrity, art and memory among other things.³⁰⁴

There has been extensive academic interest in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, more so than for most television shows. The focus has, however, rarely been on the qualities or even content of the show, but rather on the male adult fan base that the show accrued in its first season, and which grew larger and became a wide-spread phenomenon: the *brony* fandom.³⁰⁵ Brony is an amalgamation of bro and pony and it is used to describe the surprisingly large number of male followers aged 15-35 that started following the show and engage in the fan culture surrounding it. What started as an ironic appropriation of the show on online forum 4chan evolved into genuine appreciation and engagement that magnified when participants realized how much attention they got and how wide-spread well-made fan art could become. The brony phenomenon supercharged the exposure and engagement with fan culture and soon conventions dedicated solely to the show, something that is only possible to do with the absolute top layer of popular fan

³⁰² For further study into *BoJack Horseman* as quality television, see Falvey 2020, Hemingway 2021, and Terrone 2022. For genre definitions of the show, see Checcaglini 2017, Sawallich 2021, Sánchez Saura 2019, and Amer 2023. The study in *BoJack Horseman*'s LA setting can be found in Schmuck 2018. For its anthropomorphism, see Cochran 2021. For its polyphony, see Belov 2024. Different aspects of trauma and mental health in the show can be found in Meléndrez Cruz 2024, Borin 2019, Barrish 2021, Sing 2021, Ortega Castillo 2023, and Dewald 2024. For its sparse use of profanity, see Grobelna 2023. Finally, for the show's depiction of asexuality, see Sinwell 2021, Girard 2022, and Kurowicka 2022.

³⁰³ Simpson 2020.

³⁰⁴ McDonnell 2018, Earle 2024.

³⁰⁵ Valiente and Rasmusson 2015, p. 88-97, Crome 2016, Bailey and Harvey 2017, p. 325-342, Plante et al 2018, pp. 206-220, Veale 2013, Robertson 2014, pp. 21-37, Hunting and Hains 2019, pp. 542-557, Amon 2016, pp. 89-104, Ellis 2015, pp. 298-314, Gilbert 2015, Kirkland 2017, pp. 89-115, Shreve 2012, pp. 22-26, Perea 2015, pp. 189-204, Licari-Guillaume 2019, Hunting and Hains 2022, pp. 138-151, Kirkland 2020, pp. 87-104, Miller 2018, pp. 327-345, Johnson 2013, pp. 135-156, Hautakangas 2015, pp. 111-118, Heljakka 2015, pp. 99-109, Jones 2015, pp. 119-125, Burdfield 2015, pp. 119-125.

cultures, could be arranged.³⁰⁶ Between 2012 and 2019, annual BronyCons drew enormous crowds with producers, voice actors, and other crew members from the show making appearances. Fan artists like video creators and musicians making pony related music became famous within their own rights, turning their non-canonical work into canon by proxy because of their entanglement with the fan culture.³⁰⁷

The ferocity with which the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* fan culture emerged, combined with an expressed will from producers and actors on the show like Lauren Faust and Tara Parker, who voices Twilight Sparkle, to interact with fans and fan events, yielded an interesting effect on the show itself. As the seasons accumulated, more and more nods to the fan culture could be seen in small references and easter eggs, character inclusions, and even plot narration.³⁰⁸ In the pilot episode an error in animation turned one of the background characters squint-eyed, which when fans discovered it turned her into a big favorite. Fan fiction was created around the character with an extensive background story and when enough material had been accrued, the creators of the show decided to include her in more and more episodes and eventually give her a speaking role in the show, something that was not intended at the beginning. The character was dubbed Derpy Hooves and even though the showrunners tried to change her name to Ditzzy Doo and Muffin due to the somewhat problematic connections to disabilities, the name stuck in the fan base. She was consciously used as a *Where's Waldo* easter egg for viewers to try and spot in episodes to elicit further fan interaction. A character with no name simply referred to as Time Turner was styled after Matt Smith's rendition of the Doctor in the rebooted *Doctor Who* (2005-) television series, and fans quickly named him Doctor Whooves, which became his official name in the series. These characters and the way the show handled the fan service were not appreciated by the entire fan base, though. Derpy, Doctor Whooves, and many more fan favorites were given center stage in the celebratory 100th episode of the series, S05E09 *Slice of Life*, which received heavy criticism from some parts of the fandom while simultaneously yielding an impressive episode rating on IMDB. The brony fandom as co-creators of the show, albeit in a small capacity, is the scope of its inclusion in this text since it focuses on the intended audience of the show rather than the most vociferous, but it is worth addressing some things about fandom in general and the *My Little Pony* fandom specifically.

Modern fan culture and the study of it have grown exponentially over the last decades facilitated by technological advancements such as the Internet, computer

³⁰⁶ One of the most thorough depictions of the brony phenomenon and *My Little Pony* fandom can be found in a YouTube video: Nicholson, Jenny, *The Last Bronycon: a Fandom Autopsy*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fVOF2PiHnc>, retrieved 2025-10-17.

³⁰⁷ Shreve 2012, pp. 23-24.

³⁰⁸ Veale 2013, Johnson 2013.

art and animation, and social media communications. The proliferation of fiction created by fans including slash fiction where illustrations of romantic relationships are embellished or invented with a basis in the source text are now common companions of television shows and their fan base and has since its inception been mostly performed by female fans.³⁰⁹ According to Mittell, television is more suited for the development of academic fan studies with its expanded storytelling, characters, and hyperdiegesis, and the combination of television and online culture has exacerbated this.³¹⁰ *My Little Pony* and its fandom is an interesting example of gendered fandom and in many cases an enhanced representation of how fandom works. The appeal of fandom is not hard to understand. It is a participatory culture that uses cultural texts and materials that others often have deemed unimportant or worthless and create communities around them with shared inside jokes, references, and social events where you can meet like-minded people, and it can be a way to enhance your experience of the source text, but it can also be alluring even if you are not a fan in the first place.³¹¹

Newspaper and online articles on *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* reveal a persistent desire to pathologize fans, which is something that is not unique for this show.³¹² Fandom is often seen as a way to try to compensate for a supposed personal lack of independence, community, identity, agency, power, or recognition.³¹³ Fans are fans because they are perceived to lack something, be it maturity or a normative view on society that they try to compensate for. This position is in constant re-negotiation, but these prejudiced opinions still loom large over the field of fan studies, especially when applied to texts directed at fan culture that consists mostly of women or girls.³¹⁴ Performing research on fan cultures is increasingly challenging due to its convergence and diverse output, and context of specific fan cultures is important to understand their mechanisms.³¹⁵ Power hierarchies permeates fan cultures where fans police one another to decide what is good and bad fan art or what is acceptable and unacceptable fan behavior, demarcating their own good, interesting, and worthwhile fandom to an “other” fandom that is stereotyped and devalued as lesser, unimportant, and wrong, and

³⁰⁹ Hellekson and Busse 2014, pp. 75-81, Jenkins 1992, pp. 185-223, Larsen and Zubernis 2013.

³¹⁰ Mittell 2015, pp. 127-128.

³¹¹ See for instance Jenkins 1992, Larsen and Zubernis 2012, Zubernis and Larsen 2012, Scott 2019.

³¹² Gilbert 2015.

³¹³ Jensen 1992, pp. 9-26, Gilbert 2015.

³¹⁴ Scott 2013, p. x-xii.

³¹⁵ See extensive discussion on the importance of context in fan culture studies in Chan 2025.

these demarcations are often drawn along gender lines.³¹⁶ Fandom is often a gendered proposition, with factions and hierarchies divided such that female fans and feminized practices like fan fiction, video editing or “vidding”, or overtly emotional displays of attachment, are kept separate, less valued, or outright ridiculed.³¹⁷ The term “fangirl” is still used as a derogatory term synonymous with a fan who is unprofessional and ignorant.³¹⁸

Female fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* have expressed that “[t]he problem has nothing to do with grown men liking a children’s cartoon and everything to do with their usurping of a safe space for young girls and distorting it into a hypersexual and toxic environment for these younger fans.”³¹⁹ The policing and toxicity of the brony fan culture is not something unique, geek culture accommodates notions of hyper masculinity and subservient masculinity.³²⁰ It can be found in many other fandoms, including *Rick and Morty* and *South Park*, where the toxic masculinity of their respective fan cultures is arguably more proliferated than in the *My Little Pony* fandom. The events of the 2014-2015 #gamergate controversy and subsequent developments have shown how masculinized fandom spaces can be deliberately organized to silence people based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and political opinions, including harassing and ostracizing female actors, gamers and game developers.³²¹

The extreme focus from media and academia on the adult male fan base of the show stems from the gendered hierarchization of fan cultures, where the cultural consumption of a white heterosexual male audience is rendered more important and impactful. This was true of the exclusively male literary societies of the early 20th century, that could be described as a precursor to fan culture, as it is of modern-day fan culture. Their status and the possibility of co-creation are in large part enabled by this and it makes them collaborative, powerful, and desirable viewers.³²² When *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* was first released, it was universally panned due to its poor flash animation, commercial motivation, and hyper feminine gendering.³²³ Only with an adult male audience did it garner major

³¹⁶ Gilbert 2015, see discussion on fan engagement in the Marvel Cinematic Universe in Chan 2025.

³¹⁷ Scott, 2019, Larsen and Zubernis 2012, pp. 8-12, Gilbert 2015, 6:7, Busse, 2013, pp. 73-91, Murray 2004, pp. 7-28, Johnson 2007, pp. 285-300, Stanfill 2013, pp. 117-134, Click 2009.

³¹⁸ Veale 2013.

³¹⁹ Gilbert 2015, Robertson 2014, p. 23.

³²⁰ Kendall 1999, pp. 260-283.

³²¹ Johnson-Woods 2007, pp. 37-55, Burgess and Green 2018, p. 120, Evangelista 2019, Scott 2020.

³²² Kendall 1999.

³²³ Johnson 2013.

attention, illustrating how if a girl chooses a television series aimed at boys she trades up, meaning that a boy choosing a show aimed at girls trades down. The largest section of fans are still girls aged 3-8, the intended audience.³²⁴ That audience is, however, not loud, not active on social media, and they generally do not co-operate with or create material for the show's public fandom spaces. They can buy products through their parents and discuss the show with their friends, but they do not organize. Adult female fans of the show refer to themselves as bronies, lady bronies, or pegasisters. They are interpellated with the brony phenomenon and its dominance over the fan culture. In the feature documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Malaquais 2012), female fans are present in two out of the ninety-minute runtime, and then only to confirm that female fans of the show actually also exist.

Throughout film and television history it has been taken for granted that women can watch and identify with stories with a male protagonist, while men cannot watch and identify with stories with a female protagonist. The male viewer is seen as neutral and children's programming aimed at boys is made synonymous with being aimed at a general audience, while children's programming aimed at girls is only considered for girls, heavily influencing notions of quality, potential investments, and value within those series. Anne Gilbert makes the point that "[a] cartoon only meant to appeal to girls ages three to six does not merit a large investment of care, complexity, or capital".³²⁵

Audience perspective is important to understand contemporary television culture and an audience is necessary for parody to be understood as parody. It is a part of this study, most significantly in the chapter on parody for a young audience in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, but in a critical textual analysis like this study, it does not take central stage. That is reserved for the content of the shows, even though the audience understanding said content is important. The fifth and final TV show in this study has historically had the largest audience, and one of the most diverse. Academic interest in it has been so significant, it necessitates a separate discussion.

Previous Research on *South Park*

Although there is previous research available on the four TV shows mentioned, it pales in comparison to the amount of academic texts that have been written about *South Park*. Besides *The Simpsons* it has been the most popular study object in modern animated television, yielding five seminal anthologies or monographies and at least 25 peer reviewed journal articles, but when looking at the academic

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Gilbert 2015.

output on *South Park* it is clear that interest has faded dramatically since the period between 2007 and 2012 when most works on the series were published. *South Park* is on the surface a show about four boys in a small mountain town, but as Gournelos writes it is more about South Park as “an American town in the contemporary United States, and more significantly, the identity of South Park residents within the contemporary political landscape and mediascape of the United States.”³²⁶ Kaine Ezell states that *South Park*’s willingness to satirize and criticize representatives of different religious, cultural, and political entities is one of the key factors of why it has become such a phenomenon.³²⁷ Dubinsky defines *South Park* as a show that does not tell its audience “what to think but what to think about”.³²⁸

South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone have repeatedly refused to accept political labels to the right or to the left citing themselves as equal opportunity offenders.³²⁹ Many critics and academics that analyze shows like *South Park* fail to take into consideration the entirety of the text. Analyzing a single episode or a single character without putting them into context risks missing a bigger picture, just as focusing on a single theme or political position.³³⁰ Gournelos points out of *South Park* that “[i]f viewers are loyal, that is if they watch many different episodes over the course of the show’s history, the one unifying theme that emerges is an oppositional ontology that critiques dominant media discourse in order to promote a more self-reflexive and aggressively critical (if slightly cynical) approach to politics.”³³¹ He states that the only ideology that the *South Park* creators adhere to is a self-conscious desire to destabilize existing rhetoric, the more reified the better. They include political views that belong to conservatives, neo-conservatives, libertarians, liberal, or neo-liberal ideologies, but they do not prefer one over the other.³³² This is used in S20E09 *Not Funny* when Kyle’s father Gerald explains why he is trolling online by saying:

I’m a satirist, I challenge people’s views by being edgy. And sometimes people interpret it as hate. But it’s not hate. It’s pointing out the hypocrisies in society.

It hits rather close to what the show usually does, and it is a self-conscious explanation and jab at their own pretention because Gerald expands his motivation

³²⁶ Gournelos 2009, p. 143.

³²⁷ Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 10.

³²⁸ Dubinsky, p. 115.

³²⁹ Komsa 2018, Cogan 2008, p. 219, Wagstaffe 2024.

³³⁰ Gournelos 2009, p. 193.

³³¹ Ibid, p. 193.

³³² Ibid, p. 222.

further to become entangled in self-indulging righteousness. Gournelos also makes the point that analyzing shows like *South Park* should not be limited to trying to decipher what the creator's original intention was or what the immediate fan reaction has been, but to analyze content and context "through a visual and narrative commitment to cultural critique".³³³

Political definitions of *South Park* include the popular term *South Park* Republicans and the role of *South Park* imagery in the alt-right movement.³³⁴ Jasbir Puar calls *South Park* a minor cultural artifact only important through the implications of its representational praxis and approaches.³³⁵ Sarah Wagstaffe calls *South Park* (and *Archer*) shows that lash out at anyone and everyone, punching down in order to gain a large following and turn a huge profit.³³⁶ David Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile recommends that "cultural studies shouldn't take *South Park* satire too serious, or not take it serious at all".³³⁷ Daniel Frim refers to *South Park* as "pseudo-satire" meaning that the show sometimes uses what we know as satire but at other times "depict real-world referents in inverted, incongruous, or arbitrary ways", suggesting a satirical storytelling more based on randomness and chance than a clear and thought-out message, and the layers of questions, references, and irony make it difficult to give any absolute answers to what the show actually wants to say. When everything is uncertain, contradictory, and twisted around, according to Frim no definitive interpretations are possible.³³⁸ Stephen Groening calls *South Park* post-ideological, meaning that it refrains from committing to any particular ideology. He writes that a lack of commitment "has particular appeal in a society rhetorically dominated by the micropolitics of identity, which call attention to an overwhelming list of injustices" and that for *South Park* and its viewers, "cynicism, manifesting as irony and ironic detachment, justifies withdrawal from political action."³³⁹ Matt Becker suggests that *South Park* works as an on-screen manifestation of the lack of political ideals of Generation X and Jolene Armstrong argues that it is *South Park*'s constant unwillingness to choose a political side that makes it so successful as a postmodern parody, where the creators never give answers, they just ask questions.³⁴⁰ While

³³³ Ibid, p. 102.

³³⁴ Coleman 2008, Anderson 2005, Becker 2008, Groening 2008.

³³⁵ Puar 2007.

³³⁶ Wagstaffe 2024, p. 199.

³³⁷ Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile 2017, p. 65, italics in original.

³³⁸ Frim 2014, pp. 162-163 and 166.

³³⁹ Groening 2008, p. 114.

³⁴⁰ Armstrong 2008, pp. 147-148, see further discussion on these kinds of views on *South Park* in Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 144.

this accurately describes parts of both show and fans, it far from paints the whole picture.

I argue that *South Park* commits ideologically all the time, but it does so to an issue that is interesting for them at the moment. This means that they cannot be placed in a definitive and comprehensive ideological domicile, but it does not mean that the show lacks ideological commitments. Quite the opposite, *South Park* takes numerous stands during its run, but the position and target is not the same every time, critique is directed in many if not all directions and it sometimes also changes during the run of the show. This does not make it post-ideological; it makes it fluid. When Butters is sent to a “Pray the Gay Away” camp in S11E02 *Cartman Sucks*, he and other kids at the camp are shamed through the means of Christianity to believe there is something wrong with them and that they need to be cured, causing every one of them, including the straight Butters who says that he was not confused until everyone started telling him that he was confused, to feel bad about themselves and at least three kids to commit suicide. It is an episode that definitely takes a stand against religion, Christianity, and forcing views onto others, but it is also vehemently pro-gay and pro-bi and propagates a world where kids should be allowed to be who they are because that is what will make them feel better. The show also has several episodes that take a clear stand for free speech by highlighting the dangers and hypocrisy involved in trying to contain it. Criticizing puritan Americans claiming to speak for children when trying to ban curse words in *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, Muslim extremists threatening violent responses to depictions of the Prophet Muhammed (S10E03-04, S14E05-06), political correctness for gentrifying language (S19E01-10), and corporate overlords like Disney (S13E01, S14E06, S16E14, S23E02, *The Pandemic Special*), Amazon (S22E09-10), or Facebook (S21E04), or state representatives from the USA (too many to list) or China (S23E02, *The Pandemic Special*) using means of coercion and violence to silence dissenting views.

There is a tendency among critics and academics writing about the show to assign *South Park* content as good or bad and suggest what the show should do, not to describe what it does.³⁴¹ In her chapter in *A Decade of Dark Humor*, Viveca Greene makes a distinction between stable and unstable irony. Stable irony is “irony that conjures an effective counternarrative and oppositional politics”. *South Park*’s irony of instability, according to Greene, “subjects the very idea of political engagement to the critique of enlightened false consciousness” while stable irony offers stronger challenges to power structures since it is specifically directed and does not ridicule all causes and commitments, thereby telling “a story not of seeming infinite negativity but of possibility.”³⁴² *South Park* uses unstable irony, which means that it does not take a stand for something, it just takes a stand against

³⁴¹ Cmp for instance Brooks and Snelling 2018.

³⁴² Greene 2011, pp. 133-134.

something, as opposed to stable irony. Greene argues that since there is no counternarrative in the chosen episode S07E04 *I'm a Little Bit Country* and therefore no political stance, “[i]nstead of leading viewers to think beyond political labels, the episode merely ossifies them.”³⁴³

I would argue that this is not the case, the episode in question takes a clear political stance for America as a common ground for the fighting parties to rally around and the nation as a community, albeit through Cartman preaching the benefits and historical precedence of American hypocrisy in saying one thing and doing another and that this is a good thing. It is quite a political stance to take, albeit not necessarily a negative one. Quoted from *I'm a Little Bit Country*, Cartman says: “The founding fathers want you to know that we can disagree all we want as long as we agree that America kicks ass”. Pro-America is one example of a “stable ideological foothold” that Greene suggests the episode specifically and the show generally denies its audience. Greene makes the distinction between unstable irony (*South Park*) and stable irony (*The Colbert Report*, 2005-2014) but veers dangerously close to the position of *South Park* as empty, cowardly, and bad irony lacking political significance vs *The Colbert Report* as important, courageous, and good irony, with real world stakes and consequences.³⁴⁴ Landing on “America is great because it is hypocritical” is not ossifying political labels, it is satirizing the hypocrisy and inhumanity of American foreign policy while simultaneously taking a stance for America as a nation and for the freedom of debate that should always be allowed to exist there.

An animated series has a greater possibility of retaining a large gallery of side characters, who are in no need of extra pay or benefits. With voice actors being able to voice several different characters, temporary or recurring, the number of characters is basically unlimited, at least in terms of economic limitations. This gives the series a greater chance of providing its supporting characters with depth, nuance and development.³⁴⁵ Animated TV shows usually take a long time to produce, but *South Park* has since its inception been extremely fast in producing new episodes, with a turnaround time of one week. The crude animation of its original run has been retained throughout its many seasons even when increases in staff would make it possible to give the show a glossier and more polished feel in the time it takes to make an episode. It is now a matter of style more than necessity and it can be argued that the lack of visual complexity highlights the artifice of the characters and that viewers therefore can recognize typification shortcuts better and more easily read the satirical message.³⁴⁶ Due to its incredibly short time frame

³⁴³ Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 122-129.

³⁴⁵ Voice actor Harry Archer from *The Simpsons* quoted in Pinsky 2007.

³⁴⁶ Komsa 2018, Cogan 2008, p. 27.

in production, *South Park* has the potential to subvert historical accounts before they become history. In Kaine Ezell's words, animated shows like *South Park* "destabilize the collective myths endorsed by dominant ideology, thus allowing the shows to step in with their own respective critiques".³⁴⁷ *South Park* often satirizes famous agents for good causes, sometimes by contrasting them with other causes they care little of, sometimes just to spoof their moral righteousness.³⁴⁸

Just weeks after 9/11, *South Park* aired S05E09 *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants* in which they address the events and the fear that permeated American society in the aftermath. By using humorous events to show the fear, creators Parker and Stone "seek a connection with their audience that uses laughter to assuage fear by exaggerating the lengths to which a distraught public will go to feel a sense of safety – many audiences probably laugh at the jokes because they realize that their hysteria might be exaggerated."³⁴⁹ The episode questions American patriotism and the notion that the US is the greatest country in the world, that one third of the people on earth hate Americans because they do not realize that one third of the world's population hate them. Noteworthy is that it is Stan and Kyle that possess a self-evident sense of American greatness, and that they falter in their convictions at the end of the episode when they actually meet people from other countries subjected to American foreign policy.³⁵⁰ Greene suggests that one of *South Park*'s most consistent targets is discourse itself.³⁵¹ While there is some truth to that, I would argue that ossification and sedimentation are, to a much higher degree, some of *South Park*'s most consistent targets.

Gournelos states that conservative or reactionary readings of *South Park* stem from the show's use of irony as too subtle or too polysemic, but it is not always misinterpretations of irony or a lack of understanding that can yield readings of "reactionary viewpoints" in *South Park*.³⁵² The position on trans athletes in S23E07 *Board Girls* is one such example. As this research shows, however, *South Park* provides many examples that offer political resistance and subversion.³⁵³ Within the framework and system of mainstream media and television sitcom with its limitations, tropes, and discourses, shows like *South Park* can produce dissonance by accurately citing or performing dominant structures and

³⁴⁷ Kaine Ezell, pp. 50-51.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 63.

³⁵⁰ Kaine Ezell, p. 65, Gournelos 2009, pp. 213-214.

³⁵¹ Greene 2011, p. 127.

³⁵² Gournelos 2009, p. 19.

³⁵³ Ibid, p. 26.

dichotomies, amplifying, and using them to destabilize their harmony.³⁵⁴ Transgressive shows question the validity of the logic of hegemony, point out limits and flaws of it, and amplify logical inconsistencies and contradictions to cause them to fracture and give way to alternative or repressed voices.³⁵⁵

Considering the many media and audience reactions to *South Park* and its content over the years, very few episodes have led to legal consequences or threats of violence.³⁵⁶ Christian religious groups have protested episodes of *South Park*, demanding that they should not be shown on television, but they are still available to stream in 2025, and Stone and Parker have themselves stated that there has not been that much protest or public outrage against *South Park*.³⁵⁷ The only episodes unavailable for a streaming audience at the time of writing are the ones that depict the Prophet Muhammed or deal with the aftermath of the publications in Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten and its subsequent discussions on censorship and free speech. It is only S05E03 *Super Best Friends* that contains a depiction of Muhammed, with Muhammed as one part of a superhero team-up of icons from different religions. The other four episodes, S10E03-04 *Cartoon Wars I* and *Cartoon Wars II* and S14E05-06 *200* and *201*, simply address the problem and the issues that arise from censorship at the hands of threats of terrorism. They ask genuinely interesting questions on where the line should be drawn not only regarding depictions of Muhammed, but also regarding discussing Muhammed as a phenomenon and on religion and interpretations of Islam. Not only were depictions of the Prophet Muhammed censored in the episodes, the Prophet's name and closing monologues on the nature of free speech were also bleeped by Comedy Central in *201* against the wishes of Parker and Stone. The Muhammed controversy is one of the most well-researched aspects of academic work on *South Park* and since I have little to add to this previous research, it does not have any major further part in this study.

The five TV shows chosen for this study are, of course, not the only examples of parody that have yielded academic interest. There is a significant output of research on the history and specificity of parody, and how it has been used in all parts of the world. The next segment focuses on different aspects of the uses of parody in different nations and cultures.

³⁵⁴ Gournelos 2009, p. 9, Haraway 1993, p. 17, Butler 1993, p. 122 and 237, Stam 1989, p. 173.

³⁵⁵ Gournelos 2009, p. 29.

³⁵⁶ Johnson-Woods 2007, pp. 24-33.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 83-84.

Previous Research on Parody

That parody is important, that it can be used in many different ways, and that it has been a staple of the film industry since its very inception is made very clear when you look at some of the research that has been done on uses of parody all over the world and throughout film history. Parodies of the Victorian melodrama like *Why Girls Leave Home* (Potter 1909) and a parody film of Danish *Løvejagten* (Larsen 1907) called *Lejonjakten* (1908) made by student groups at Lund University show that parody was a major part of the film industry from its very inception.³⁵⁸

Brazilian science fiction movies and Brazilian parodies of the 1970s and 1980s, often with erotic elements or undertones, like the *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) spoof *Bacalhau* (Stuart 1976) or *O Segredo da Múmia* (Cardoso 1982) directed its polemic edge towards Brazilian *chanchada* film, American popular culture, and specifically the relationship between them and the extreme influence of Hollywood films in Brazil as a commentary of American political influence in Brazil at the time.³⁵⁹ An alternative to or even protest against American cultural hegemony is the Spanish *Torrente: El Brazo Tonto de la Ley* (Segura 1998) featuring a parodic inversion of the American super-cop.³⁶⁰ Many older parodies like the Brazilian examples are hard to find today. Other examples like *Satsujin kyo jidai* (*Age of Assassins*, Okamoto 1967) with its fusion of spy-genre elements and “surrealistic feeling of anarchic fun and an almost total lack of causal logic” are not available at all on DVD or streaming.³⁶¹ New readings of older films with a better understanding of the mechanics of parody can yield different analytical results, like Steven Marsh’s suggestion that *¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!* (Berlanga 1952) through its parodic operations of temporal mimicry subvert dominant groups’ claims of knowledge.³⁶²

The immense popularity of the parody films of Cem Yilmaz in Turkey has not stopped him from incorporating sociocultural and political critique in films like *Arif V 216* (Baruönü 2018) using a pastiche of the past to comment on present day Turkey.³⁶³ A film like *Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin 2002) is an example of Asian American film using parody and metafiction to join the mainstream while retaining an oppositional element.³⁶⁴ Cuban films in the end of the 1980s like *¡Plaff! (o*

³⁵⁸ Mayer 2006, pp. 575-593.

³⁵⁹ Shaw 2003, Vieira and Stam 1985, Stam 1997, Johnson et al 1995, Suppia 2008, Ginway 2004.

³⁶⁰ Jordan 2002.

³⁶¹ Herbert 2010, pp. 369-371.

³⁶² Marsh 2004.

³⁶³ Örsler 2020.

³⁶⁴ Hillenbrand 2008.

demasiado miedo a la vida) (Tabío 1988) questioned ideologies and structures that had previously been treated as truth and deconstructed old values and create new ones via a recycling process of pastiche and parody.³⁶⁵ Taiwanese idol dramas like *Zhong Ji Yi Ban* (*KO One* 2005-2013), *Zhong Ji Yi Ban 3* (*KO One Re-Act* 2013) and *Yuan Lai Shi Mei Nan* (*Fabulous Boys* 2013-) use parody to criticize dominant modes of Taiwanese television, highlighting the relationship between author and audience.³⁶⁶ *Galaxy Quest* (Parisot 1999) parodies *Star Trek* from films to television series to the fan culture surrounding the franchise and it is an early example that offers parody of both source text and paratexts.³⁶⁷ *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (Kasdan 2007) highlights the importance of musical parody in combination with other film elements when it parodies musical biopics as a genre, but also the music industry at large.³⁶⁸ Australian TV miniseries *We Can Be Heroes* (Lilley 2005), renamed *The Nominees* for release in the US and the UK, uses parody to satirize hegemonic Australian national imagery that appropriates Aboriginal culture and signs for its own ends.³⁶⁹

Vietnamese and Vietnamese American comedy has a long-standing tradition of cross-dressing performance, and comedian and performer Be Map is one example of an artist using drag to parody the boundaries of nation and help to re-define and re-create the definitions of Vietnamese national identity.³⁷⁰ In Hindi cinema, comedy and masculinity are often closely intertwined in its use of parody as in *Love Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega* (Nivas 2001) and the connections between masculinity and action films in Bollywood is parodied in the films of Salman Khan including *Dabangg* (*The Thug*, Kashyap 2010) and its sequels.³⁷¹ The town of Malegaon in Western India has developed an independent film industry based on local creativity and minimal infrastructure consisting mainly of parodies of Hindi and Hollywood films.³⁷² In Tamil cinema, *Thamizh Padam* (Amudhan 2010) is an example of parody used to criticize the mass-hero's image and advocate a narrative representationalism guided by the script and story of the film's creators.³⁷³

Other cultural expressions than film and television have used parody for subversion and resistance. An American study showed that exposure to parody images of thin-ideal celebrity posts yielded greater body satisfaction than exposure

³⁶⁵ Baron 2011.

³⁶⁶ Wang 2016.

³⁶⁷ Edwards 2007.

³⁶⁸ Spirou 2014.

³⁶⁹ Bode 2009.

³⁷⁰ Duong 2011.

³⁷¹ Banerjee 2023, Shandilya 2014.

³⁷² Tiwary 2015.

³⁷³ Nakassis 2019.

to the original images.³⁷⁴ Indonesian playwright Nano Riantiarno parodied mythical stories in plays like *Konglomerat Buriswara* (1987) and *Semar Gugat* (1995) in order to politically criticize the Suharto-led New Order regime, who banned and censored many of his works.³⁷⁵ South African rap-rave group Die Antwoord uses parody to critique racial, class, and gender configurations in emerging “new Afrikaner” identities.³⁷⁶ Chinese youtuber Hu Ge became famous overnight for his *Yige Mantou Yinfa de Xue'an* (*Murders Brought About by a Wheat Bun*) parodying *Wu ji* (*The Promise*, Chen 2005) and his production poses questions of authorship in Chinese cultural production while simultaneously offering ideological ambiguity by juxtaposing Chinese revolutionary relics with Hollywood blockbusters.³⁷⁷ The young online community in China negotiate these social changes and questions of identity and memory through participatory culture and production like the practice of *egao*, which is a form of online parody.³⁷⁸ The *machinima* technique of using 3-D computer graphics often lifted from video games to create new scenes have become one of the most wide-spread expressions of parody (including the use in fan videos) in the age of streaming.³⁷⁹

Parody can play a pivotal role in enabling audiences to look at themselves self-critically and self-ironically in matters such as national identity. It can also inject new perspectives into stale and sedimented genres.³⁸⁰ Peruvian comedy shows have pushed boundaries for what can be shown to the public, including parodic representations of stereotypes, including the very popular “negro mama” stereotype, that shift, undermine, or fortify existing mediated structures.³⁸¹ Pornographic parody is one of the most common iterations of parody, where heterosexual pornographic films created by professional pornographic film studios hyper-articulate notions of heteronormativity and patriarchy whereas slash fiction created by fans has the potential to subvert these power structures by queering traditional masculine texts.³⁸² Parody can, however, also be used to preserve authoritarian structures and regimes by enabling fragmentation and detachment in audience identification as with Serbian fake news site Njuz.net.³⁸³ It can also help forge a reductive legacy of an important cultural movement as *Black Dynamite*

³⁷⁴ Slater et al 2019.

³⁷⁵ Anwar 2019.

³⁷⁶ Bekker 2020.

³⁷⁷ Xiao Liu 2010.

³⁷⁸ Zou 2020.

³⁷⁹ Ito 2011.

³⁸⁰ Lalo 2008.

³⁸¹ Mosquera Rosado 2019.

³⁸² Booth 2014, Slade 2012.

³⁸³ Petrović 2015.

(Sanders 2009) did with blaxploitation films.³⁸⁴ Parody and music in parody films can of course also be used in the sedimentation of ethnic stereotypes, as in the *Villi Pohjola (Wild North)* trilogy (Tarkas 1955-1963) and *Speedy Gonzales, noin seitsemän veljeksien poika (Speedy Gonzales, Son of About Seven Brothers)*, (Kokkonen 1970), Finnish parodies of American westerns generally and source texts like *Bonanza* (1959-1973) and *Rawhide* (1959-1965) specifically.³⁸⁵

This section attempted to give a general summation of research on the different uses of parody in various nations and cultures all over the world. To circle back to the material of the study, it is necessary in order to analyze the uses of parody to gain a greater understanding of what parody is. More specifically, how it is defined within this study, and how it is used in analyzing the material. In order to do that, I enlist the help of BoJack Horseman and his compatriots in the show to explain further the nuances and definitions of parody and its neighboring concepts.

³⁸⁴ Lawrence 2019.

³⁸⁵ Kärjä 2014.

Chapter 2 *BoJack Horseman* and the Borders of Parody

The discussion of parody is bedevilled by disputes over definition. – Simon Dentith

It is fascinating to me, the critiques about humor by people who have no sense of humor. – Matt Groening

Phrasing. Boom! – Pam Poovey

As I stated in the introduction, the first recorded use of the word *parodia* is from Aristotle's *Poetics* from 335 BC, where it was used to describe singers imitating other singers as a form of burlesque or counter-song. In the Oxford Dictionary parody is defined as “a literary composition modelled on and imitating another work, esp. a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect”, which is then extended to “similar imitations” in other artistic fields like film. This chapter discusses the different definitions of parody that exists and formulates the definition that I use in this research, using illuminating examples from *BoJack Horseman* in order to explain its purpose and function.

There is no legal definition of parody written within US copyright law, its definition and use has instead been formed through its use in different court cases over time.³⁸⁶ A distillation of cases in parody law, such as the Supreme Court case against 2 Live Crew for the use of Roy Orbison's *Oh, Pretty Woman* in their 1994 song *Pretty Woman*, constitutes that a parody in a legal sense is defined as “a new, copyrightable work based on a previously copyrighted work” where the source text is recognizable, the reiteration is reasonable and critical or commentary of the style or subject matter of the source text, and “is not likely to invade the market

³⁸⁶ Jaques 2019.

for the previous work.”³⁸⁷ American law is more concerned with the financial aspects of parody and not with the moral rights of the offended, meaning that a parodist is less likely to experience legal boundaries in the US. Parodies and caricatures are allowed, but not their commercial exploitation.³⁸⁸

In American copyright law, the concept of fair use is what guides court rulings on parody and copyright disputes. Three types of works are protected under the fair use doctrine; comment or criticism (including parody), education, and news reporting.³⁸⁹ There are four factors that decide the relevance of fair use; the purpose and character of the use (does it add something new, is it transformative), the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole, and the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work.³⁹⁰ For a parody to be legally classified as a parody under the fair use act, it must be understood as a parody by an audience, but US law has been bad at distinguishing between different audiences with different perspectives.³⁹¹ The legal definition of who the audience consists of is a “reasonable person”, but who that person is supposed to be is not specified sufficiently and does not take into consideration that different people view parodies in different ways. In EU law, parodies are allowed if they at least make people smile, but once again the reasonable person who needs to find something funny is not further defined in terms of background, identity, previous knowledge or experience, or just comedic taste, and how many people is needed to deem something as funny for a reasonable person has never been tried or decided in a court room.³⁹²

A parody cannot in a legal copyright sense use a source text to comment on another text or phenomenon. Therefore, in the legal definition used in parody cases, parody must have a polemic edge towards its source text. For Sabrine Jaques, this and the fact that works can be parodied but not their authors, limits the definition of what parody is and creates what she calls “an unnatural distinction between parody and satire”.³⁹³ Parody does not need to be humorous or made with comedic intent in order to be classified as a parody.³⁹⁴

South Park creators Matt Stone and Trey Parker were sued for their 2008 episode S12E04 *Canada on Strike* in which Butters performs the viral *What What*

³⁸⁷ Cuartero et al 2015.

³⁸⁸ Jaques 2019, pp. 114-115 and 193-194.

³⁸⁹ Chiger 2013, p. 5.

³⁹⁰ Chiger 2013, p. 6, Cuartero et al 2015, p. 66, Lai 2018, Serilla 2017.

³⁹¹ Jaques 2019, Little 2015.

³⁹² Jaques 2019, pp. 96-99 and 175-195, Little 2015, and Cuartero et al 2015, p. 71.

³⁹³ Jaques 2019, p. 28 and 36.

³⁹⁴ Cuartero et al 2015, p. 66.

(*In the Butt*) video dressed as a teddy bear, an astronaut, and a daisy.³⁹⁵ In June 2012 the US Court of Appeals affirmed the ruling in the District Court to grant *South Park*'s motion to dismiss before even beginning the discovery process. The victory in the *Brownmark Films v. Comedy Partners* case means that parodying artists in the same situation will not be subjected to expensive litigation costs after the discovery stage in order to defend their fair use.³⁹⁶

Definitions of Parody

There have been many scholars of parody, pastiche, intertextuality and reference art through the ages, but most of them have discarded the dictionary definition of the time and instead formulated a definition of their own. For the purposes of this text, I have decided to highlight the works of five parody scholars who are arguably the most influential in the modern discourse on parody. One of the main purposes of this chapter is to formulate, in discussion with previous research on parody, my own definition and explain the different aspects of the phrasing.

Margaret A. Rose is a historian whose work *Parody//Meta-Fiction* from 1979 was a milestone for the field. The revised and expanded edition *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern* from 1993 is also used here. According to Rose, parody has traditionally been defined either through its etymology or through its historic and linguistic development as a concept, its usage as a rhetorical tool, its attitude towards the parodied source text, its effect on the audience, or how textual structure in parody is not only a particular technique, but the very mode of production.³⁹⁷ Rose defines parody as the critical quotation of performed literary language with comic effect, and she emphasizes that parody can be more than just entertainment and that even though it necessarily uses references and genres with existing and often strict frames, it can be used to transform or break them. Parody creates allusions to source texts and its agents, but also to the "relationship between the text, or discourse, and its social context".³⁹⁸ She also emphasizes that parody is not restricted to literary studies and literary norms.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁵ Chiger 2013, p. 1.

³⁹⁶ Chiger 2013, p. 12.

³⁹⁷ Rose 1993, p. 17.

³⁹⁸ Rose 1979, p. 44.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

Much of the discussion on parody has been about drawing up strict divisions between for instance parody, pastiche, satire and travesty.⁴⁰⁰ Since words change meaning and definition over time and space, it is difficult to determine a definition of parody with any finality. The Greek word *parodia* contains so much more than what we see in the word parody today.⁴⁰¹ Dan Harries suggests that instead of searching for an absolute definition, we should look at parody as a process that changes and adapts according to its place in history. Any text can receive a parodical do-over, and it is the development process that makes that flexibility possible.⁴⁰² Harries argues that parody can be defined through its specific formalistic and structural characteristics displaying parodic activity. He defines parody as the process of recontextualizing a source or source text through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, in order to create a new text.⁴⁰³

Richard Dyer's *Pastiche* from 2007 is central to the understanding of pastiche and parody in relation to film. Dyer defines pastiche as an imitation presenting itself as such, containing the combination of elements from other sources. Pastiche is a kind of imitation that you are meant to know is an imitation, and pastiche is concerned with imitation in art.⁴⁰⁴ One of the key aspects of pastiche according to Dyer is that it questions the status of the original.⁴⁰⁵ Through pastiche, we can understand ourselves as historical agents and see how our view of history is shaped by the present.⁴⁰⁶ Dyer argues that in general, parody is a piece of art that is separated from the source text it is supposed to parody, and the attitude is unfriendly, while pastiche incorporates the source text as a part of the new piece.⁴⁰⁷ Dyer also distinguishes between parody and pastiche in that a parody is always read as a parody, while a pastiche depends on the perception of the audience.⁴⁰⁸ A parody mocks, ridicules, satirizes, and pokes fun at its source text, while a pastiche

⁴⁰⁰ Cmp Dentith 2000, p. 6, where he writes that "The discussion of parody is bedevilled by disputes over definition, a fruitless form of argument unless there are matters of substance at stake."

⁴⁰¹ Cmp discussion in Dentith 2000, pp. 9-11.

⁴⁰² Harries 2000, pp. 5-6.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, p. 6.

⁴⁰⁴ Dyer 2007, pp. 1-6.

⁴⁰⁵ Sturken and Cartwright 2009, p. 328.

⁴⁰⁶ Dyer 2007, p. 180.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 46-47.

⁴⁰⁸ Dyer 2007, p. 24, Rose 1993, pp. 68-69.

does not.⁴⁰⁹ A parody works against its source text, while a pastiche does not necessarily do that.⁴¹⁰

Gary Soul Morson is another scholar who argues that parody must have a polemic edge towards its source text, where it must evoke or indicate another utterance and be antithetical towards its target, it must have a higher semantic authority than the original.⁴¹¹ Francis Jameson, like Dyer, also means that parody must be deriding, which separates it from the pastiche but this is something that Linda Hutcheon objects to in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* from 1988, where she singles out examples from the world of architecture.⁴¹² Hutcheon have produced extensive works on postmodernism, irony, and parody, and *A Theory of Parody* published 1985 and revised in 2000 expanded the critical discussion on parody. Hutcheon argues that it is wrong to define parody based solely on polemic aspects, since many parodic works lack a polemic sting. The Greek word *para* that is the etymological root of parody can mean against, but it can also mean “next to” or “parallel”, suggesting harmony or intimacy rather than contrast. To Hutcheon, parody is intercommunication, not a display of opposites and contrasts.⁴¹³ Hutcheon defines parody as repetition with difference, implying a critical distance usually signaled by ironic inversion, and she emphasizes that it is not necessarily comical and not always at the expense of the parodied text.⁴¹⁴ It can be serious criticism, but it can also be a playful, genial mockery of codifiable forms and for Hutcheon it is recognized from its repetition with a critical distance, which marks its difference rather than similarity. Parody changes with culture and its forms, its relations to its “targets” and its intentions differ when moving through time and space.⁴¹⁵

Simon Dentith includes the word polemic in his definition of parody in his *Parody: The New Critical Idiom* from 2000, even though he emphasizes that the degree of polemics can fluctuate wildly, and that the polemics can be directed towards the outer world instead of the source text.⁴¹⁶ Dentith’s definition states that parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice.⁴¹⁷ Animation historian Maureen Furniss argues that a parody “entails a critique of established

⁴⁰⁹Dyer 2007, p. 40..

⁴¹⁰ Dyer 2007, p. 40, Rose 1993, p. 72.

⁴¹¹ Morson 1989, p. 67.

⁴¹² Hutcheon 1988, Dentith 2000, pp. 156-157.

⁴¹³ Hutcheon 2000, p. 32.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Hutcheon 2000, pp. xi, 6, 15, and 32.

⁴¹⁶ Dentith 2000, pp. 9 and 17.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, p. 9.

expectations, while satire is more specifically focused on social criticism". Parody for Furniss tends to be seen as ideologically neutral (a view that can be questioned) while satire is generally overtly politicized.⁴¹⁸ I argue that there are plenty of examples of parody that subverts or distorts the source text without ridiculing it, just as there are plenty of examples of parody that are not comedic, which is something that I expand on in this chapter. The comic effect does not have to stem from a conflict with the source text but can also as an example derive from a turn that signals self-criticism or be entirely critical or parodic without necessarily being funny.

Defining Parody

Since postmodern usage and definitions have developed the complex and creative sides of parody, there is less risk today overlooking or diminishing the many functions of parody.⁴¹⁹ Some critics and theorists argue that parody cannot be defined through specific formalistic and structural characteristics showing parodical activity. Naturally, as in all academic fields, discussion about definitions has led to conflicts and criticisms. Hutcheon has criticized Rose for equating parody with self-reference and mixing parody and satire, while Rose has criticized Hutcheon for among other things neglecting the comic effects of parody.⁴²⁰ Dentith criticizes Rose for generalizing to broadly from a narrow scope of material.⁴²¹ Harries criticizes everyone for focusing too hard on how differences work in parody, missing out on how similarities work.⁴²² The discussions about how parody should be defined is one of the reasons why Dentith does not want to define parody too precisely and absolutely. To him, the discussion of parody is "bedevilled by disputes over definition, a fruitless form of argument unless there are matters of substance at stake – of genuine differences of cultural politics, for example."⁴²³ He continues to point out that "parodic forms do not lend themselves to hard-and-fast distinctions, but are better understood as a continuum or spectrum of formal possibilities."⁴²⁴ I agree with this sentiment in that there is little to be gained in searching for the one true accurate comprehensive definition of the word parody. I do not believe such an exact definition can exist or at least be useful in

⁴¹⁸ Furniss 2016, p. 128.

⁴¹⁹ Rose 1993, p. 278.

⁴²⁰ Hutcheon 2000, p. 20.

⁴²¹ Dentith 2000, pp. 15-16.

⁴²² Harries 2000, p. 8.

⁴²³ Dentith 2000, p. 6.

⁴²⁴ Ibid, p. 156.

all forms, since parody is contextual. Not only do parodies create new textual configurations and modifications to existing canons, but they also create new ways of looking at texts by developing and nurturing strategies for critical consumption by the audience.⁴²⁵

Certain parody works as meta fiction and by parodying a source text, the parody displays its fictionality so that it works simultaneously as fiction and fiction about fiction.⁴²⁶ Robert Phiddian argues that parody questions the very foundation of creation and authorship.⁴²⁷ Dentith claims that Rose and Phiddian make valid points for the specific texts that they chose to analyze, but not necessarily for all parodic texts.⁴²⁸ Parody should be understood, he and Hutcheon states, as a coded discourse. In that context, parody is one of many linguistic interactions.⁴²⁹ Depending on art form, genre, position in time and place, author and audience, the definition of parody will change accordingly. This is not a bad thing, not something to be contested or fought, it is in the nature of a broad concept that it can be used in different manners depending on where it is applied. The purpose here is not to evaluate whether previous scholars are correct in their analysis of works within their field (which is mainly literature). It is instead whether it is possible to apply their theories or part of their theories to moving images, specifically film and television. What is possible to do, instead of focusing on an absolute and correct definition of parody, is to clarify the definition and usage of the word and concept in the text where it is discussed. What do I mean when I use the word parody in this text, how do I define it and what does that mean for the analysis and the text? This is what I examine in this chapter.

So, what is parody? Short answer: parody is with perceived intent creating new art by reiterating and transforming a source text through the breaking of logic. For the long answer it is necessary to break down each one of the building blocks of that short and comprehensive statement. Firstly, it is imperative to differentiate between the theoretical definition of a concept and the practical use of it. Joseph Dane said that “definitions of parody and various theories of parody should be regarded as useful tools only, as working hypotheses toward a history of parody” and that “[e]ach will fail when confronted with particular texts and with their particular literary and cultural contexts”, which I wholeheartedly agree with.⁴³⁰ My definition of parody is a theoretical construct that when measured against practical examples always becomes a question of arbitrariness, argument and

⁴²⁵ Harries 2000, p. 7.

⁴²⁶ Dentith 2000, pp. 14-15, Rose 1993, p. 91-98.

⁴²⁷ Phiddian 1995, pp. 13-14.

⁴²⁸ Dentith 2000, pp. 15-16.

⁴²⁹ Dentith 2000, p. 2, Hutcheon 2000, p. 16.

⁴³⁰ Dane 1988, p. 1.

discussion. I do, however, think that there is a purpose, even a necessity, in having a working definition of parody for further analysis.

The short phrase above is the theoretical definition I use in my research, and by that, I mean that it is the definition of what parody always is. If an example does not meet the criteria put forth in that statement, it is not parody. This is why the statement is short, broad, and bland. It needs to cover all examples of parody, at least in the field of film studies.⁴³¹ There are plenty of characteristics common to film parody, characteristics that are often used and that can even be said to be defining traits of the term. Parody is often humorous, parody often pokes fun of its source texts, parody is often ironic, satirical, ridiculing, subversive, but not always. The focus should not be on what parody is, but what parody does and can do, but to understand what it does and can do, it is still important to define what I mean when I use the term parody. What is important is not to focus on the why of the author, why something was created, but rather the why of the material at hand. In other words, which representations, designs and formations can be found in the material and what roles do they play? My intention for this text is not to focus on what parody is and how it is depicted, but rather how it is used and what effects this has on the content of the material.

Second, we can address the word art in that statement. I am using Dyer's definition of art which he emphasizes does not imply value, but that "cultural production" is too broad, and "text" for Dyer is too literary. His definition instead suggests that art "is something that is made and of stuff, and it does something".⁴³² So when I say that parody is a piece of art, I mean that it is made and of stuff, and that it does something. I do, however, retain the use of "source text" when talking about what the parody refers to. I understand the point Dyer makes about text being too literary, and I agree that the focus of parody research has historically been too focused on literary text, but when I refer to a source text here, I mean it in the broadest sense, in the same way Dyer and I use the word art. I only consider "source text" as more practical to use than "piece of art" when considering what parody references. Using examples from *BoJack Horseman*, this chapter examines if and how parody breaks its internal logic, if it is necessarily humorous or polemic, if it unlike satire it needs to reference a source text, and if it creates a new piece of art. Further, then, if it is transformative and must be made with perceived intent, if

⁴³¹ When I use the term film studies, I include all forms of moving images; film, television, documentaries, news footage, commercials, video games, video diaries, home videos, the thirteen seconds of black screen your 4-year old accidentally recorded on your cell phone. Everything that is a moving picture and potentially can be placed within the term film studies is included in its definition here, even though my source material is mainly television series and in some occasions films.

⁴³² Dyer 2007, p. 1.

film parody is different from other forms of parody, and if and how it is art, worthy of attention.

Film Parody

Parodies on film have been around almost as long as film art itself. An audience more and more conscious about genre, style, clichés and tropes in film and TV-series, but also newscasts, literary originals, real events etc. makes for a fertile soil for the production of parody in moving pictures on all platforms. From being a popular film genre, parody pivots more and more towards television, web series, and amateur or grassroots films on video channels and social media such as YouTube, TikTok or Twitter and Reddit with its extensive meme culture. Referencing or poking fun at something in the vast amount of popular culture we consume today is a rewarding task, and a clear historic change is distinguishable within the increasing media consumption. Parody exists abundantly at grass roots level and even though changes in media history has meant great changes for parody as an art form, there is still a distinct connection to the thoughts and theories of Bakhtin about the subversivism in an unofficial language attacking the official.

Harries states that parodies create new textual configurations and modifications on existing canons, but they also create new ways of looking at texts by developing and nourishing strategies for critical consumption by the audience.⁴³³ Film parody has, according to Harries, increasingly developed into its own canon, where parodic discourses according to Harries perform their subversive activities in surprisingly standardized and predictable ways. In a culture climate that he describes as “ironic supersaturation” there is even a risk that classic canon and genres lose their relevance for a new audience. Parody is dependent on an audience understanding the reiteration of a source text for the parody to work, meaning that there cannot be too great a discrepancy between the parody and the source text. Harries criticizes many theorists and critics for putting too much weight on the differences between the parody and the source text and not enough on their similarities and how a successful reiteration is achieved.⁴³⁴

Harries establishes a methodology for formalistically analyzing parody as a genre, based on the film analysis by Rick Altman. He divides film into three categories for analysis, lexicon, syntax, and style. Lexicon is what consists of the film’s iconography, which in large part can be translated to the film’s mise-en-scène. Syntax is the narrative structure with plot and story, while style like sound effects, camera movements, dialogue screens etc. permeate the lexicon and syntax

⁴³³ Harries 2000, p. 7.

⁴³⁴ Ibid, p. 8 and 22.

of the film creating further expectations based on the specific source text. One of the ways in which parody generates similarities and differences is by faithfully recreating either syntax or lexicon from the source text while changing the other dimension.⁴³⁵ Harries' methodology is practical for recognizing parodic activity when analyzing films or TV shows, especially when using the terms he uses for trying to categorize parody. He defines and exemplifies six categories of function in film parody: *reiteration*, *inversion*, *misdirection*, *literalization*, *extraneous exclusion* and *exaggeration*.

Reiteration is to incorporate elements from the source text in order to create a connection and establish narrative expectations, by recreating mise-en-scène, characters, cinematography, line readings, musical cues etc. in order to anchor the parody's expectations to the source text.⁴³⁶ When Stewie in *Family Guy* S05E09 *Road to Rupert* dances a duet with Gene Kelly, he takes the place of Jerry the mouse from the original in *Anchors Aweigh* (Sidney 1945) using the same dance moves as his animated predecessor. Everything else in the clip is exactly as it is in the source text and therefore works as a reiteration that is not turned in any direction.

Inversion is to turn the source text or elements from it to its opposite in order to break expectations for comedic effect, considered by Hutcheon as central to all parody.⁴³⁷ Turning non-diegetic music to diegetic music in the opening of *High Anxiety* (Brooks 1977) by having the main character pass a symphony orchestra playing the tune on a bus, or turning the Care Bears from the loving cuddly friends of the original to genocidal maniacs in *Robot Chicken* S02E10 *Password: Swordfish* are great examples of inversion, and when Gilda the Griffon in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* S05E08 faces the same dilemma as Elsa in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Spielberg 1989), she inverts the original by choosing her friends over the falling treasure.

Misdirection is to lead the viewer into a reiteration to then subvert expectations with a surprising twist.⁴³⁸ In the *Star Wars* special by *Robot Chicken*, the scene from *The Empire Strikes Back* (Kershner 1980) where Darth Vader explains that he is Luke Skywalker's father is reiterated. The scene follows the original at first, but continues with Vader explaining other improbable or outright ridiculous plot events from the *Star Wars* saga, including the fact that the empire is defeated by Ewoks, the existence of midichlorians, and that he as a boy built C-3PO, causing Luke to put out his cigarette and leave the conversation if Vader does not want to take it seriously. The entire premise of *Rick and Morty* can be said to be a

⁴³⁵ Ibid, pp. 8-9.

⁴³⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

⁴³⁷ Harries 2000, p. 55, Hutcheon 2000, p. 88.

⁴³⁸ Harries 2000, p. 62.

misdirection, where it started as a direct reference to the *Back to the Future* films (Zemeckis, 1985, 1989, 1990), but quickly derailed the original premise, making the professor character a megalomaniac alcoholic and turning Marty into Morty, an equal parts anxious and horny teenager.

Literalization is to create jokes or gags through self-reflection and meta reflexivity, including the literal literalization of actions, names, or lines, creating puns by changing visual, textual or sound-based aspects of the source text or through illuminating the filming process.⁴³⁹ Character's names usually work as personality signals with narrative information that defines the character and can give clues to their properties, like Biggus Dickus and his wife Incontinentia in *Life of Brian* (Jones 1979), or the recurring *Simpsons* characters Crazy Cat Lady, Comic Book Guy, or Rich Texan.⁴⁴⁰ Another example is when the characters in *Archer* draws attention to the odd temporality at play in the series by asking "What decade is this?" answered by "I know, right?".

Extraneous inclusion is to incorporate elements that do not usually belong in the action.⁴⁴¹ One example is in *Family Guy* S07E03 *Road to Germany* where the Nazi research division in war time Berlin for some reason has gathered one hundred air balloons, whereby one bursts turning it into a reference to Nena's hit *99 Luftballons* from 1983. The toll booth in the middle of the desert in *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks 1974) or Jack Colt (Emilio Estevez) running after a villain with a gun in one hand and a teddy bear inexplicably under the other arm in *Loaded Weapon 1* (Quintano 1993) are two other examples, the teddy bear is never explained and never seen again in the movie.

Exaggeration is to exaggerate narrative, mise-en-scène or other aspects of the parody for comedic effect.⁴⁴² The age of Mr. Burns in *The Simpsons* is a running gag that gets worse at each instance, at one point having his age consist of four figures making him at least a thousand years old, and the seemingly magical powers afforded to Pinkie Pie in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* as long as it serves a comedic effect, including running backwards faster than any other pony alive or chugging hundreds of cupcakes in one sitting, are both excellent examples of exaggeration. *South Park* has a long tradition of exaggerating physical traits of famous people in their parodies, recreating Barbara Streisand into a Kaiju-inspired monster, making Michael Moore overtly obese and giving Jeff Bezos psychic powers.

⁴³⁹ Ibid, pp. 71-76.

⁴⁴⁰ Dyer 2007, p. 122.

⁴⁴¹ Harries 2000, pp. 77-82.

⁴⁴² Ibid, p. 83.

Parody and the Breaking of Logic

The first part of the definition of parody we need to address is the breaking of logic. The main reason for its inclusion in the definition of parody is to differentiate parody from pastiche. It is important first to note that parody and pastiche have many similarities. They both reiterate and transform source texts into new texts, and both are intentional.⁴⁴³ Dyer defines pastiche as an imitation presenting itself as such, containing the combination of elements from other sources. It is imitation that knows it is imitation.⁴⁴⁴ This is true for the definition of parody within this work as well, but for Dyer parody always implies a negative evaluation of its referent, while homage is the opposite, always implying a positive evaluation of its referent. Pastiche does not necessarily do so, Dyer points out, it can oscillate between positive and negative.⁴⁴⁵ For Dyer, parody is imitation that makes fun, mock, ridicule or satirize its source text, while pastiche does not. He references Dentith's definition of parody as always relatively polemic and Rose's separation of pastiche from parody with the former being "neither necessarily critical of its sources, nor necessarily comic".⁴⁴⁶ Parody, in other words, needs to be polemic towards its source and humorous, while pastiche needs not be. This is where we disagree.

I do address the argument that parody needs to be comedic or polemic, but first I want to discuss my definition of the differences between pastiche and parody. Note that I would agree with Dyer, Rose, Dentith and several other scholars in that parody is more often than pastiche polemic and humorous, but not necessarily so. Bakhtin stated that there is a great difference in degree between literary parodies, ranging from external and crude that seeks to mock and ridicule and nothing else, to the romantic irony that works almost completely in alliance with its source text.⁴⁴⁷ Rose describes four main categories for recognizing parody; changes to the coherency of the text quoted, direct statement, effects on the reader, or changes to the 'normal' or expected style or subject-matter of the parodist.⁴⁴⁸ Direct statement is uncertain since a parody must be read as parody to be understood and a direct statement from an author that "this is parody" can mislead as well as guide an audience. There have been plenty of examples throughout history of creators using "it was only a parody" as an excuse when their works have received criticism, even when it has been obvious that this was not originally the purpose as with certain

⁴⁴³ Harries 2000, p. 30, Hutcheon 2000, p. 38.

⁴⁴⁴ Dyer 2007, pp. 1-6.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 40.

⁴⁴⁷ Bakhtin 1981, p. 413.

⁴⁴⁸ Rose 1993, pp. 37-38.

examples of using blackface or wearing swastikas. Effects on the reader also fall under perceived intent, which is discussed later, but I want to focus on the first and last statements. Parody changes the coherency of the text quoted and changes the expected style or subject-matter of the parodist. This plays into what I believe separates parody from pastiche. In creating the new text, parody changes the coherency of the text quoted and changes the expected style or subject-matter. It breaks the internal logic of the new text, while a pastiche performs changes that work with the coherency of the text quoted and uses the same framework of style or subject-matter to fit into its new context. This does not mean that parody makes the source text illegible, since that would mean it would not be recognized by an audience which is a necessity in order for it to be understood as parody, but the changes made after reiterating the source text works against the grain of the source text instead of working with the grain of the source text as is the case with pastiche.

For Hutcheon, the difference between parody and pastiche is that parody is recognized by seeking difference from its source text, while pastiche seeks likeness and correspondence. She quotes Gerard Genette in describing parody as transformative in its relation to another text, while pastiche is imitative.⁴⁴⁹ Ramona Curry argues that parody deconstructs while pastiche reconstructs, which Harries nuances by noting that even though parody deconstructs things, it still creates a new text in its end result, while pastiche also deconstructs things in that it removes things from their original context and reinserts them into a new assemblage. However, the general difference that parody deconstruct the frames of the new context and pastiche reconstruct and work within the frames still stands.⁴⁵⁰ The main methods of pastiche according to Dyer are deformation, likeness, and discrepancy, where discrepancy is the “interruption of extraneous elements, most often jokes and witticisms” that would not fit in the source text and that signals the text as pastiche.⁴⁵¹ Both parody and pastiche uses deformation, likeness, and discrepancy in its handling of a source text, but I would argue that parody focuses more on discrepancy and pastiche more on likeness, even though both necessarily contain all three elements. I would also argue that the key difference between parody and pastiche lies in form more than tone. Pastiche needs to follow the logic, work within the frames, of its reiteration and context, while parody needs to break logic and break frames. This is reminiscent of the division of pastiche as imitative and parody as transformative from Hutcheon via Genette, but there are clear differences. Their definition focuses on parody as polemic and pastiche as friendly towards its source text, my focus is on how parody and pastiche create new texts (or pieces of art), and how these new texts work within the new internal frames that they set up. Do they transform or imitate in their new context?

⁴⁴⁹ Hutcheon 2000, Genette 1997.

⁴⁵⁰ Curry 1990, p. 29, and Harries 2000, p. 31.

⁴⁵¹ Dyer 2007, pp. 52-58.

Pastiche and parody both reference, or rather reiterate, a source text of some sort, be it a specific piece of art, genre, style etc. In order to be understood as pastiche or parody, they need to imitate the source text in a distinct enough manner so that it is recognized by an audience, otherwise it cannot be understood as a pastiche or parody. The imitation or reiteration of the source text must then be subverted in some way so as not to be an exact imitation, which is a different concept. This creates a new text, a new piece of art, that contains both the elements of the original source text, the subversion or inversion made, and the combination these make. I will define in more detail with specific examples from *BoJack Horseman* how all these steps work in creating parody, but the key point here is that a new text or piece of art is created in both pastiche and parody. Up to this point all (relevant) scholars agree. The difference between pastiche and parody comes with how this new text creates its internal logic. Bakhtin stated that for a parody to be authentic and productive, it must “re-create the parodied language as an authentic whole” containing its own internal logic based on the parodic language.⁴⁵² The logic of the parody is, seemingly contradictory, to break with the frames of logic and expectations. A pastiche needs to work within the frames of logic and expectations, whether it is genre, style, period, specific film references or other references. This is close to what Wes Gehring calls reaffirmation parody, a “more subdued approach to parody that manages comic deflation with an eventual reaffirmation of the subject under attack”.⁴⁵³ Parody, on the other hand, creates its internal logic through in some way breaking the logic and expectations of the source text in its reiteration in the new context of the parody. Parody creates a language guided by internal logic, but that logic is one of illogic. The key feature, even the defining feature when contrasting it to pastiche, is the breaking of logic. Where pastiche works within the frames of the combination of reiteration of source text and change, parody seeks to break the frames and work outside it. The breaking of the frames is the internal language of parody. This can be accomplished in many ways, some listed as the methods of recognizing parody defined by Harries; reiteration, inversion, misdirection, extraneous inclusion, literalization and exaggeration. What is noteworthy in this is that pastiche also uses some of the same elements, sometimes to a lesser degree and sometimes more frequently. Reiteration is a staple of most pastiches, and exaggeration is one of the ways a pastiche signals its intentional imitation. This ties into the idea that parody is transformative, while pastiche is imitative, parody aims at transforming or breaking the logic of the new text created, while pastiche aims at imitating the logic of the new text created.

Bear in mind that parody and pastiche have a lot of overlaps, but pastiche works within the rules of the original, most often and with greatest clarity concerning

⁴⁵² Bakhtin 1981, p. 364.

⁴⁵³ Gehring 1999, pp. 6-7.

genre. Hutcheon emphasizes that pastiche often needs to keep within the same genre as the source text, while parody allows for adaptation, and pastiche will often be “an imitation of not of a single text, but of the indefinite possibilities of texts”.⁴⁵⁴ *Deadpool* (Miller 2016) for instance is, using this definition, more pastiche than parody. Self-reflexive narration is often found in pastiche, and though fourth wall-breaks are inherently parodic, it can be used in pastiche as well. *Deadpool* has a lot of parodic gags, but it is still an action movie or superhero movie. It is not a parody like, for example, *Superhero Movie* (Mazin 2008) where the logic of the new text is constantly broken and where it consequently does not make sense as a superhero movie. Edgar Wright’s comedies *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright 2004) and *Hot Fuzz* (Wright 2007) use many of the traits of parodic storytelling, reiterating genre tropes such as jump scares and cheesy one-liners, literalizing almost all names in *Hot Fuzz*, exaggerating Shaun’s oblivion or Sgt. Angel’s arsenal etc. Pastiche, in Dyer’s words, “deforms the style of its referent: it selects, accentuates, exaggerates, concentrates.”⁴⁵⁵ *Deadpool*, *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* all poke fun at their genre source texts, but they can still be understood as a superhero movie, zombie horror movie, and police action movie respectively, which makes them pastiches rather than parodies. Absolute definitions have become harder to set, and examples within a film or episode can be parodic without changing the overall definition from pastiche. What Harries calls “sustained film parody”, which is a film that operates within a parodic mode from start to finish, is very rare today compared to the time period 1975-2005, when influential parody directors like Mel Brooks, Jim Abrahams and David Zucker made the bulk of their movies.⁴⁵⁶ Instead we often have genre movies with parodic influences, references and self-commentary in serious award-winning features, and drama and artistic ambitions in parodic comedies. The lines are blurrier, and the definitions are harder to pin down. *BoJack Horseman* is an example of a TV show that oscillates between parody, pastiche and straight storytelling throughout its six seasons, which makes it excellent material for finding illustrative examples.

It would be constructive to first give an example of straight parody, to understand what the baseline is, and for this purpose I have chosen sequences from S02E05 *Chickens*, in which an anthropomorphized chicken runs from a transport owned by fast food company Chicken 4 Dayz, destined for the slaughterhouse. The chicken meets Todd, who tries to hide her from the police and take her to a safe place where she will not be eaten, or at least not treated poorly. There are two examples of parody that stands out in this episode, first two commercials made by Chicken 4 Dayz and by Gentle Farms, the gentler kinder version of chicken farm, second the representation of the police squad responsible for the chicken hunt. The

⁴⁵⁴ Hutcheon 2000, p. 38.

⁴⁵⁵ Dyer 2007, p. 56.

⁴⁵⁶ Harries 2000, p. 19.

commercials are played back-to-back at the beginning of the episode, with a channel switch sound in-between indicating that they are on TV. The Chicken 4 Dayz commercial is energetic, loud, colorful, with teenagers having an attitude and expressing themselves, reiterating a generic fast-food commercial aimed at teenagers as a customer group. It inverts the original by having one of the teenagers eating what is referred to as a bucket full of “mystery stuff” and a jingle spelled out by graffiti text urging costumers to “don’t ask questions just keep eating”. The implied downside of cheap fast food that it is probably not produced with quality and ethics in mind is downplayed as it is in real life, but here it is literalized to the point where it breaks the logic of a realistic commercial. Highlighting and emphasizing the downplaying is what makes the commercial a parody, but it could not work as a parody if it did not also reiterate the garish tone and colors of a type of commercial directed at adolescents that we are firmly aware of.

The next commercial from Gentle Farms reiterates another type of common style and tone in commercials, the beautiful and serene imagery of a rural setting and the mellow and soothing voice of a narrator talking about the products and their organic connection to nature. The voice in the Gentle Farms commercial is an anthropomorphized rooster in farmer’s clothing speaking to the camera from his farm, dungfork in hand. He contrasts their operation with Chicken 4 Dayz by explaining that they do not keep chicken pumped up on hormones and cooped up in tiny cages but let chicken run free on the range and from birth “lovingly inject them with natural delicious hormones”. An in-world animated presentation divides chicken who will not be food (friend) to those who will be (food) so that there is no gray area. The words “no gray area” are then spelled out in writing in a parodic act of literalization. With the exaggeration of the calm Midwestern twang of the narrating rooster and extraneous inclusions like a foosball table for the chickens on the range shows that this plays as a parody with a stark satirical take on the hypocrisy and moral quagmire of the meat industry, but it plays as a straight commercial within the *BoJack Horseman* universe, just like the animated part of the commercial plays as animation within the universe while the rest of the commercial is “live action” which is an interesting double layer in the use animation of *BoJack Horseman*. For an audience accustomed to commercial style and messaging, neither of the commercials works as commercials, there is no doubt for us that they are supposed to be parodies, breaking the logic of what a chicken commercial would look like or say.

The other example I want to focus on is the depiction of the police in the episode. When we are shown a point of view of the officers in charge of investigating the escape from the Chicken 4 Dayz transport, it is represented as a shaky hand-held camera reiterating camera work from “realistic looking” cop shows. Ironically, since the shaky-cam effect needs to be created in animation to reiterate the source text, even an exact reiteration signals its constructed nature, and the created “live feel” stands out as more unrealistic in comparison to the

regular camera work. In the example from the episode the shakiness of the camera and the constructed zoom effects are slightly exaggerated, but even without the exaggeration the context of animation turns the use into parody. Since the shakiness and the zooms must be added and re-created through animation instead of simply using the same techniques as in the original, a further layer of self-reflexive artifice is added to the scenes. In this case, it is not necessarily the exaggeration that turns the use into parody, but the context of the scene. Note that since this “camera work” is in an animated show and the reiteration needs to be constructed, and since the cops in the *BoJack Horseman* universe are not in an actual TV show, their reality when depicted is manifested via shaky camera work. In other words, the cops in *BoJack Horseman* generally live in a world where they are seen through what looks like a shaky camera, blurring the lines between reality and reiteration.

Further examples of parody in the depiction of the crime scene and the investigation is that one police officer at the crime scene is a literal anthropomorphized blood hound, sniffing for clues, that the officer in charge is a cat named Mjaumjau Fuzzyface, in an example of literalization, who is introduced reiterating the famous monologue Tommy Lee Jones gives in *The Fugitive* (Davis 1993), where he wants the officers to search in every “gas station, backyard, outhouse, pool house” but in this occasion Officer Fuzzyface interrupts himself by asking for a cookie, inverting the original source text. The police scenes are also accompanied by dramatic music, emphasizing important statements that often come after a dramatic pause. In the police station, we are presented with a literalized barrage of police procedural tropes, like the yelling boss, a maverick, a by-the-book rookie, a curmudgeonly veteran one week from retirement, and a discussion of whether Officer Fuzzyface is a loose cannon, a reckless renegade, a cop on the edge with nothing to lose, if he is too old for this shit, if he plays by his own rules or if he thinks that rules are meant to be broken. The sheer number of explicit references to cop show tropes is an example of both exaggeration and literalization. They are poking fun at both cop shows and action movies in general, and specific examples like *The Fugitive* mentioned above, *CSI Miami* (2002-2012) (Officer Fuzzyface removing his sunglasses before dropping a one-liner) and *Lethal Weapon* (Donner 1987) (I’m too old for this shit) to mention a few. It is not meant to play as a police procedural or an actual depiction of police work, it is a clear and unambiguous example of parody, but what about those examples that lie close to parody, but instead would read more as pastiche?

In the second part of season six, episodes 8-16, a new character is introduced. Page Sinclair, star reporter at The Hollywoo Reporter who is leaving the paper in

order to marry her fiancée and settle down after one last visit to the office.⁴⁵⁷ While at the office of the paper she hears talk of the death of TV and pop star Sarah Lynn (child star on *Horsin' Around* who dies from a drug overdose in S03E11 *That's Too Much, Man!*) and wonders if there is not more to the story than the press lets on and decides to investigate it as her final job before retiring for good. Page Sinclair and her sidekick and love interest Maximillian Banks are based on the classic era of screwball comedies of the 1930s and early 1940s, films with directors such as Howard Hawkes, George Cukor and Preston Sturges. These movies were comedies recognized through their fast-paced dialogue and slapstick humor, often addressing class discrepancies or the institution of marriage. Film critic Andrew Sarris famously described them as “sex comedies without the sex”.⁴⁵⁸ Both characters and side plot are specifically reminiscent of *His Girl Friday* (Hawkes 1940), where a female star reporter is leaving her journalistic career after one last job, which she will work on together with her dashing former lover and love interest.

In *BoJack Horseman* S06E08 *A Quick One, While He's Away*, Page Sinclair is introduced first through the overtly expositional words of her editor in chief Bill Beakman after receiving the message that she is on her way up to the newsroom: “Ah, shit. She’s the best reporter this building has ever seen, but God damn is that woman a pain in the ass!” Sinclair then makes a dramatic fast-talking entrance disrupting her colleagues while lamenting it being her last day before she “weds tonight and becomes a domesticated woman”. She wears a white dress which can best be described as a combination of work attire and wedding dress, complete with corset and wide-brimmed hat, a very distinct attire that with her persona and speaking pattern places her temporally firmly within the classic screwball era in time, even though the place is most definitely a newsroom in the 2010s.

What is interesting here is that not only does Sinclair (and her colleague Maximillian Banks) reiterate a different time period (the early 1940s), but editor in chief Bill Beakman also reiterates another time period, but a different one. He is not the editor in chief normally found in a modern newspaper setting, but rather a reiteration of the films about journalism from the 1970s and 1980s, such as *All the President's Men* (Pakula 1976), *The China Syndrome* (Bridges 1979) or period pieces like *Zodiac* (Fincher 2007). Here we have three different timelines of journalism, two of which are based on the representations we have seen in popular

⁴⁵⁷ In S01E06 *Our A-Story Is a 'D' Story*, BoJack steals the 'D' in the Hollywood sign to impress Diane and even though Mr. Peanutbutter is credited with the deed, it is considered such a romantic gesture that it is decided that Hollywood henceforth will be known as Hollywoo, which it consistently is referred to as until the last episode of the series, S06E16 *Nice While It Lasted*, where Mr. Peanutbutter attempts to restore the 'D', but accidentally orders a 'B' instead.

⁴⁵⁸ Sarris 1998.

films and television series from different eras, working together simultaneously when setting the scene for the newsroom of *The Hollywood Reporter*. It ties into what Ihab Hassan points out about hybridization in the sense of postmodern storytelling, that it has the possibility of simultaneous quotations from different time periods “not to imitate but to expand the past in the present”, which in this example is highlighted and played with.⁴⁵⁹

When Sinclair becomes enthralled with the scoop of Sarah Lynn’s mother trying to find out more about her daughter’s death, she makes a phone call to her waiting fiancée on an old phone appropriate for the 1940s but not for a modern workplace. Beakman is quick to point out the incongruity in this by asking “why do you have that?”. In S06E12 *Xerox of a Xerox*, Page’s sister asks her why she has the archaic accent that she has since they are from Fresno. Page Sinclair is constructed as a consciously exaggerated version of the screwball template from *His Girl Friday* shoehorned into the new temporal context of 2020 Los Angeles but what makes her a pastiche more than a parody is that she still functions as an investigative journalist in the new context. Precisely as her predecessor she gets the work done and exposes the truth behind Sarah Lynn’s death and BoJack’s complicity in it. It is Page Sinclair and the tenacious journalistic work she has mustered that enables TV host Biscuits Braxby to confront BoJack in a live interview in *Xerox of a Xerox*, which is what finally changes the public opinion on who BoJack is and what he has done. Even though the representation of Page Sinclair includes parodic elements, it does not break the logic of the new piece of art that is created with the reiteration and transformation of the screwball format in general and *His Girl Friday* in particular, which is a journalist, be it temporally displaced, in search of the truth behind a tragic story. It is this story that is being told, and it has severe consequences for BoJack and for other characters on the show. The representation of Page Sinclair is thus more pastiche than parody.

Another example of pastiche in *BoJack Horseman* is the show within the show, the sitcom that made BoJack famous, *Horsin’ Around*. Clips from and references to the show are made throughout the series and it plays a prominent part in the Christmas special *Sabrina’s Christmas Wish*. *Horsin’ Around* is a pastiche of a classic sitcom from the late 1980s and early 1990s where the titular horse played by BoJack Horseman adopts three orphans to come live with him. In each episode the children and the Horse learn valuable lessons about family, morality, and what is important in life, reminiscent of other 1980s and 1990s sitcoms like primarily *Full House* (1987-1995), but also *Family Matters* (1989-1998), *Step by Step* (1991-1998), *Growing Pains* (1985-1992), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (1990-1996) and *Boy Meets World* (1993-2000). The series uses common sitcom tropes like one-liners through Sabrina’s popular “That’s too

⁴⁵⁹ Hassan 1987, p. 170-171, where he criticizes Fredric Jameson for describing postmodernism as something ahistorical and exclusively present.

much, man!” and Ethan’s failed “yaowza yaowza bo-baowza”, guest stars like Erika Eleniak, supermodel Cindy Crawford, Hulk Hogan and OJ Simpson trial attorney Barry Scheck, overuse of the phrase “I’ve heard of [something] but this is ridiculous!”, and special episodes about among other things racism, the Armenian genocide, and not looking directly at the sun.

The Christmas Special *Sabrina’s Christmas Wish* is introduced within the episode by BoJack explaining why he does not like Christmas specials since they are “cynical cash grabs by greedy corporations looking to squeeze out a few extra Nielsen points with sentimental clap traps for mush brained idiots who’d rather watch a fake family on TV than to actually have a conversation with their own dumb family”, which literalizes the commercial motivation of the TV industry but also works as a self-conscious comment on the show’s own Christmas special that they are a part of. There are some examples of parodic exaggerations in the show. In the Christmas special episode where Todd and BoJack watches the Christmas special of *Horsin’ Around*, The Horse says that he most definitely will not try to trick Sabrina into doing anything bad so that he will not have to fulfill her Christmas wish to bring her parents back, we expect a cut to where he does exactly this, but before we get there he continues:

“Never in a million years would I resort to something that low, no, we better keep brainstorming because I am definitely not doing that idea, how desperate do you think I am, you are reeeally scraping the bottom of the barrel with that one, no, I will clearly not be pursuing that line of action. No way! No how!”

And only then does it cut to him doing just that. Another example is when Ethan says, “Cue the waterworks in...” and we expect him to count down from three, but he starts at thirty and BoJack needs to fast forward with an impatient sigh. These examples are exceptions however, and the Christmas special clearly shows that *Horsin’ Around* works as a somewhat exaggerated version of a 1990s sitcom. It does not break the logic of the new text that is created, it is more a sitcom than a parody and therefore falls into the category of pastiche.

Parody Is Not Necessarily Humorous

One of the more interesting aspects of the Oxford Dictionary definition of parody from the introduction of this chapter is the insistence on comic effect. This has been a dividing line for parody scholars with some siding with the dictionary definition and some arguing that humor is not necessary for parody. One of the latter is Linda Hutcheon, who cites several theorists who insist on adding humor

to the definition of the term parody, such as Margaret Rose.⁴⁶⁰ For Rose, the difference between imitation and parody is comic discrepancy or incongruity.⁴⁶¹

Hutcheon, however, finds the insistence on comic effect restrictive and states that “a more neutral definition of repetition with critical difference would allow for the range of intent and effect possible in modern parodic works.”⁴⁶² In this she instead commends Gerard Genette for leaving both humor and ridicule out of his definition of parody as “a minimal transformation of a text”, but then continues to criticize him for the division of parody into satiric or playful modes, and his idea that while serious parody might exist, it must be given another name and that we now do not have a name for it at all.⁴⁶³ Parody for Hutcheon is not necessarily comical and not necessarily polemic towards the parodied text, but always characterized by ironic inversion and critical distance which marks difference rather than similarity.⁴⁶⁴

Rose’s view of parody as necessarily humorous is shared by Richard Dyer, who uses it as one of the defining differences between parody and pastiche. He quotes Rose when arguing that pastiche differs from parody by being “neither necessarily critical of its sources, nor necessarily comic”.⁴⁶⁵ Simon Dentith, who Dyer also quotes in his definition of parody and pastiche, concludes however that parody “need not be funny, yet it works better if it is, because laughter, even of derision, helps it secure its point.”⁴⁶⁶ For Dentith, parody is often, but not always, comedic.

Sara Ödmark has written about political satirists and stresses how humor in a message increases attention to that message, but it also signals unimportance. This can be counteracted if the comedian establishes serious intent and it situates the political comedian or satirist “in a unique borderland between serious and nonserious communication, generating a dynamic public negotiation about the limits and boundaries of comedy”.⁴⁶⁷ Kristeva states that the laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic but also serious and that the revolutionary power of its resistance makes laughter fall silent “because it is not parody, but murder and revolution”.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁰ Other scholars mentioned as examples of this use is Dane 1980, Eidson 1970, Falk 1955, Macdonald 1960, Postma 1926, and Stone 1914, Hutcheon 2000, p. 51, Butler 2020 also insists on parody as humorous, p. 209.

⁴⁶¹ Rose 1993, pp. 37 and 59.

⁴⁶² Hutcheon 2000, p. 20.

⁴⁶³ Hutcheon 2000, p. 21, Genette 1997, pp. 34-36.

⁴⁶⁴ Hutcheon 2000, pp. xi, 6, 15, and 32.

⁴⁶⁵ Dyer 2007, p. 40, where he quotes Rose 1993, p. 72.

⁴⁶⁶ Dentith 2000, p. 37.

⁴⁶⁷ Ödmark 2021, pp. 24-26.

⁴⁶⁸ Kristeva 1986, pp. 34-61, cursive in original.

When looking at examples of parody throughout film and TV history in general, and *BoJack Horseman* in specific, it is obvious that parody is often used for comedy. But is it always humorous? An interesting example of humorless parody comes from *BoJack Horseman* S02E08 *Let's Find Out* where the first episode of the new game show *Hollywood Stars and Celebrities. What Do They Know? Do They Know Things? Let's Find Out!* (created by JD Salinger) is being broadcast live. This is a parody of game shows in general, if not of a specific example. The title alone is an example of exaggeration, likewise its many different quiz elements and parts, including an essay assignment and “the small talk round” which interrupts the small talk between Mr. Peanutbutter as game show host and BoJack Horseman as the first guest and contestant:

Mr. Peanutbutter: “30 seconds on the clock. BoJack. How are you?”

BoJack: “Uhh... fine?”

Mr. Peanutbutter: “Correct! So, did you see the game last night?”

BoJack: “No, I don’t really follow...” He is interrupted by a buzzer and a red cross on his pulpit.

Mr. Peanutbutter: “Ooh... so sorry. It says here that you DID see the game last night.”

Throughout the episode, the crowd is eerily astute with what happens in the show even though it is the first episode, prompting BoJack to question if they have rehearsed this earlier. Several of the segments of the show are introduced with jingles lifted from the horror genre rather than family friendly game shows, a female voice screaming “AAAHHH GOD NOOOO!!!” and “THEY’RE ALL DEAD I WATCHED THEM DIE!!!” interspersed with the more usual chants of “LET’S FIND OUT!” and “DROP DA BOMB!!!” (a positive bomb). When Mr. Peanutbutter reads BoJack’s essay on to what extent the feudal class system was the cause of the French revolution, which he had thirty seconds to write as one of the quiz questions in the game show, itself a parodic inversion of what a game show question usually looks like, he deems it terrible and throws it into a basketball hoop with accompanying neon signs reading “BoJack’s Essay” and “Terrible”.

The game show logic is constantly broken in *Hollywood Stars*, using all recognizable marks of parody from Harries model, reiteration (having the crowd chant as they would in a real game show), inversion (horror screams signaling a new round), misdirection (introducing celebrity Daniel Radcliffe, then turning him into a celebrity stereotype douche), extraneous inclusion (the kiss cam which JD Salinger laments that he did not have for *Catcher in the Rye*), literalization (the

title of the show) and exaggeration (Mr. Peanutbutter's not so subtle "tell" of raised ears when delivering the right answer), almost entirely with comic effect. There is no doubt that we are watching a parody of a game show. The interesting part is when BoJack manages to antagonize Mr. Peanutbutter by asking personal questions about his wife Diane. Instead of moving on to the next round, Mr. Peanutbutter pulls out two folding chairs center stage and directs BoJack to sit in one of them so they can "get real, really really really real". He proceeds to tell BoJack that he knows that BoJack kissed Diane, displaying an uncharacteristic anger and a serious tone that suddenly permeates not only the in-series game show studio, but the episode itself.

This is two former friends having a serious discussion with real consequences and absolutely zero laughter, all within the format of a parody. Even when JD Salinger decides to turn on the rain inside the studio, drenching the contestants in ambiance, the conversation does not ease on its gravitas. Pulling out folding chairs and having a serious conversation in the middle of a family friendly game show definitely breaks the mold of that kind of entertainment. It reiterates the form and frame of a game show, it breaks the logic of how a game show normally works, but it does so without comic effect, transforming the original text into the creation of a new piece of art which would be best described as a serious drama. Sure, someone might find the inclusion of a dramatic scene within a game show parody in itself funny, but the scene is not played for laughs and is still parody. Any piece of a parody, even the concept of parody itself, can be thought of as funny by someone. The mere idea of changing something into something else, especially by inverting expectations, can seem humorous to someone. Some people will laugh at anything and there is nothing you can do about it, but that does not mean it qualifies as comedy.

Here, the parody fills another purpose. In the scene we have two characters who are notoriously bad at talking about serious emotions, as established when BoJack does not want to talk about his childhood in the writing of his memoir in season one, and in Mr. Peanutbutter's unyielding positive demeanor which is later emphasized when he refuses to engage in the thought of his brother having cancer in season three and realizes in season five that his parents have not been sent to a farm as he was told, but are indeed dead. They are also TV stars from the 1990s and an integral part of the Hollywood fame culture, where life on or off the stage are either very different things or unavoidably intermingled. In this context, maybe the only place for Hollywood stars of BoJack's and Mr. Peanutbutter's stature to have a serious and honest conversation about their relationship, their feelings towards each other and the consequences it has for people around them, is during a glitzy family-friendly game show? By placing the conflict between BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter within the frames of parody, their conversation turns into a commentary on their societal positions and the restrictions of masculinity regarding honest and expressed feelings, which would not have worked as

effectively if they had this conversation in another setting. Parody is used not for comedy, but to enhance the depth and meaning of the scene, thus elevating its artistic impact.

Another example comes from S01E11 *Downer Ending*, where BoJack hallucinates while on drugs, tackling questions of the possibility for people to change and if anyone will remember him when he dies. In one of the hallucinations, he imagines a scene in a suburban garden where what would normally be a juice stand is populated by a child giving out life advice for five cents. This reiterates the classic scene from *Peanuts* (1965-2006) where Lucy van Pelt offers psychiatric help for five cents, but with Diane adapting the role of Lucy. The original “the doctor is in” is replaced by “the memoirist is in” on the bottom stand of the psychiatrist’s stand. Diane has been altered in appearance to emulate Lucy and BoJack sits down on the stool next to the stand, starting with “Good grief!” just as Charlie Brown would have done in the original, accompanied by music reminiscent of the music used in *Peanuts*. So, it reiterates a source text, in this case a recurring scene from *Peanuts*, but it also transforms it to create something new partly in the context of a drug hallucination in the episode, but also in the dialogue and ending of the short scene.

Diane: “What seems to be the problem?”

BoJack: “Good grief! I’m so depressed. I just want everyone to love me, but I don’t know how to make them do it.”

Diane: “You can’t force love, you blockhead! [also a *Peanuts* reiteration] All you can do is be good to the people in your life and keep your heart open.”

BoJack: “I screwed it all up, it’s too late for me, isn’t it?”

Diane: “I don’t know, I’m just a crazy drug hallucination, I’ll say whatever you want me to.”

BoJack: “Then tell me it’s not too late.”

Diane: “Well it’s not too late, it’s never too late.”

BoJack: “Yeah, that’s right!”

Diane: “It’s never too late to be the person you want to be. You need to choose the life you want. That’ll be fiiiiiiiive centsssss...”

And when she utters her last line, she is stretched into the distance along with a Snoopified version of Mr. Peanutbutter disappearing from the screen. The

reiteration is obvious and the transformation of the original also clear, the breaking of logic comes with the context of the drug hallucination, Diane remarking that it is a drug hallucination and the ending where she and Mr. Peanutbutter/Snoopy are stretched out into the horizon. But the scene is not played for laughter, instead the parody is used to connect BoJack's wishes to childhood innocence, to manifest his basic and somewhat naïve but also very foundational needs to be a good person and be seen as a good person. By choosing to stage this scene as a parody instead of a normal dialogue between characters, the show creates connotations to a wish for a simpler life, of the child's view of the world, something that BoJack never got while growing up. This is parody that amplifies emotions like grief, fear, nostalgia and hope without the use of laughter.

Parody is constructed to elicit emotions. Very often the emotion aimed at is mirth expressed in laughter, but there are many examples of parody where there are different emotions at stake. Either dramatic, tragic, thrilling, angry, elated, but also parody that focuses on aesthetic values where it is used for artistic or aesthetic purposes. This is parody used for storytelling purposes, for eliciting reactions other than laughter, feelings other than mirth. It is serious parody; it is artistic parody. Comedy in parody is not a binary function; it is not either comical or not comical. Rose states that parody can aim for a comedy effect and convey complex and serious messages without making the parody unfunny, but as I have shown here, there are instances when parody is used without any comic effect at all.⁴⁶⁹

Yuriy Tynyanov said that parody can turn comedy into tragedy, but Rose contradicts this by stating that there are no such examples that do not also carry with them a comical element. She argues that "even when we can say that a parodied phrase has been re-used in a more tragic context, it will be difficult to claim that none of its previous comic associations are not evoked with it to give at least a bitter-sweet taste to its new appearance, while the use of parody itself, with its incongruous juxtapositions of the unexpected, should also produce at least some comic reaction from its audience."⁴⁷⁰ It is possible to argue that the scenes I have described here "evoke comic associations" or "produce comic reactions" from its audience, but then again this is true of all art. As I have said, the very concept of referencing a source text can be interpreted as humorous for some of the audience, but when the scene in question is very much not meant to elicit laughter, it is more relevant to focus on the other emotions that it makes us as an audience feel, because otherwise these emotions and the artistic depth of the production might be overlooked or lost completely, or in Hutcheon's words, focusing on a broader palette of emotions "would allow for the range of intent and effect possible in modern parodic works".

⁴⁶⁹ Rose 1993, p. 29.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 124.

Parody Is Not Necessarily Polemic

In his dissertation *Skuggan av ett leende*, Swedish film scholar Örjan Roth-Lindberg describes parody as a means of ridicule, through mimicry and exaggeration. To Roth-Lindberg, parody means to define and refine certain elements and signs, amplifying and accentuating them, creating an imbalance in the language. Mostly, the exaggerated parodic elements are used on what is perceived to be weaknesses in the source text or style, the clueless, the already exaggerated, the pretentious, the idealized, the already cliché.⁴⁷¹ He builds on Bakhtin's idea where the function of pastiche is to emphasize the strengths of the source text, while parody emphasizes the weakness. Bakhtin defines parody as the author speaking in someone else's discourse but with "a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the original", which means that the text "becomes an arena of battle between two voices".⁴⁷² Bakhtin drew inspiration from a parody theorist influential at the time, Paul Lehmann, who published the important *Die Parodie von Mittelalter* in 1922. One of his key points was the division of parody as either comical or critical.⁴⁷³ In Bakhtin's later texts, he focuses more on the ridiculing aspects of parody, connected to its role in the carnival and its subversive potential against authority and, according to Rose, neglects to develop other aspects of parody.⁴⁷⁴

Many parody scholars make the same distinction as Lehmann, dividing parody into either only critical or only comedic. I have mentioned Dyer's division into parody that is separated from, unfriendly to, and working against the source text, and pastiche that does not necessarily do that.⁴⁷⁵ Jameson separates parody from pastiche by concluding that parody must be derisive and Morson claims that parody always needs to have a higher semantic authority than the source text, something that Hutcheon objects strongly to.⁴⁷⁶ Hutcheon argues that it is wrong to define parody based solely on polemic aspects, even though she admits that there are plenty of examples confirming the theory.⁴⁷⁷

Many parodic works lack a polemic sting, evoking the etymological roots for the word *para*, where the parodying text is consciously self-depreciating or simply read or decoded as wrong or "authoritatively inferior" in relation to the source

⁴⁷¹ Roth-Lindberg 1995, pp. 342-343, and 348.

⁴⁷² Bakhtin 1984a, p. 193, cmp discussion in Rush 1995, p. 5.

⁴⁷³ Lehmann 1922, cmp discussion in Rose 1993, pp. 147-151.

⁴⁷⁴ Cmp Rose 1993, pp. 158-159.

⁴⁷⁵ Dyer 2007, pp. 40, 46-47, Rose 1993, p. 72.

⁴⁷⁶ Jameson 2005, Morson 1989, Hutcheon 1988.

⁴⁷⁷ Hutcheon 2000, p. 32.

text.⁴⁷⁸ Parody for Hutcheon is intercommunication, not a display of opposites and contrasts. Since parody builds on a source text for the creation of the new text, it is far more conciliatory than aggressive towards its source text but maintains its critical distance.⁴⁷⁹ Harries emphasizes that a parody, even though it has moments when it expresses admiration towards its source text, always has a critical or satirical attitude. He rejects Hutcheon's idea that parodies can be neutral and playful, that there is always something innately critical in the form, even though it can be used in the manner that Hutcheon proposes.⁴⁸⁰ He concludes that it is "probably more productive to think of parody as a term connoting both closeness and distance as well as the oscillating process that binds both discursive directions".⁴⁸¹ Although Dentith also includes the word polemic in his definition of parody, he emphasizes that the degree of polemics can fluctuate wildly, and that the polemics can be directed towards the outer world instead of the source text.⁴⁸²

One example of this diversion of polemic edge in *BoJack Horseman* is in S02E12 *Out to Sea* which takes place on a cruise ship owned by an influential organization using improvisational comedy to lure in new members, but it is made perfectly clear when Todd joins the group that it is a thinly veiled allegory for scientology. In the episode, Todd and BoJack are forced to act out an improvised fight with two guards who claims that "if you die in improv, you die in real life." It is a reference to *The Matrix* (Wachowski/Wachowski 1999), but the context of improv as a satirical substitute for scientology turns it into parody. There is no polemic edge towards the original film in the statement, instead it is used to emphasize the ridiculousness of both improv and scientology. Rose does not agree with the school of thought from Lehmann, and she means that it can be both, writing that "[m]ost parody worthy of the name is ambivalent towards its target".⁴⁸³ She emphasizes the double meaning of the Greek word *para* that is the etymological root of parody. It can mean against, but it can also mean "next to" or "parallel", suggesting harmony or intimacy rather than contrast. It does not necessarily imply a conflict, and this is something that Bakhtin misses.⁴⁸⁴ Rose quotes Russian formalist Yuriy Tynyanov, who in his writings on Russian examples of parody suggested that "parody can be sympathetic to its target and that the material for it can be both respectful and admired" and referenced parodies

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p. xiv.

⁴⁸⁰ Harries 2000, p. 35, and Hutcheon 2000, p. 60.

⁴⁸¹ Harries 2000, p. 5.

⁴⁸² Dentith 2000, pp. 9 and 17.

⁴⁸³ Rose 1993, pp. 45-47, and 51.

⁴⁸⁴ Rose 1993, p. 140, Hutcheon 2000, p. 32.

of the Old Testament and Pushkin's *Chronicle of the Village Goryukhino*, which includes a respectful parody of Karamzin's *History of the Russian State*.⁴⁸⁵

Even though a polemic edge or an embedded criticism is common in parody, it is far from always present, whether it is directed towards its source text or elsewhere. To see how parody with or without a polemic edge is represented in *BoJack Horseman*, it might be productive to first give a clear example of when there is an outright criticism of the source text. *Philbert* (all of season five) is a parody of gritty detective series in general, *True Detective* (2014-) specifically, and a satire on the myth of the male genius. It is made with intentional critique of its source text, especially prudent when it turns out that the incompetent genius showrunner Flip McVicker has plagiarized ideas from jokes written on icicles, mirroring the plagiarism accusations directed at Nic Pizzolatto on *True Detective*.⁴⁸⁶ When BoJack, who plays the titular Philbert, questions the script where he has to say bitch twice in the same sentence when talking to his partner Sassy, whose character description is "hates bras but loves cold rooms", Flip answers that the first bitch is for her, the second bitch is for Philbert himself. When BoJack questions the poor lighting, Flip answers that "the darkness is a metaphor for darkness". In one scene BoJack is supposed to sit at the back of a strip bar making a drawing of one of the dancers while Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* plays on the soundtrack. It is tacky, misogynistic, pretentious and somehow also successful, mirroring some of the same shows in real life and it is a good example of parody with a polemic edge.

An example of parody without polemic edge occurs in S05E03 *Planned Obsolescence* when Todd visits his girlfriend Yolanda's parents, which reiterates a slamming doors-farce parody. By exaggeration, extraneous inclusion and literalization, the original farce tropes are turned into parody. Todd makes his own sound effects like "zoinks" and "ah-ouuuga", he notes that his and Yolanda's convoluted plan to hide their asexuality from her over sexual parents has exactly the right amount of complexity and that even one more piece of complexity would make it impossible to pull off followed instantly by the next piece of complexity, and it ends with the last barrel of the family lube turning the entire living room into a slip-n-slide. It is played for comedy, but even though the tropes of stage farce are transformed and exaggerated, it is done without any polemic edge towards that source text. It does not attack or negatively represent farce comedy even though it exaggerates its most common traits, it is only played for comedy in the parody. The plot of the sequence is to hide Yolanda's asexuality to not risk her

⁴⁸⁵ Rose 1993, pp. 117-121.

⁴⁸⁶ Pizzolatto was never formally accused, but similarities between the monologue from *True Detective* and the works of horror writer Thomas Ligotti was noticeable, if not plagiarism as such. <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/7/5975769/true-detective-a-work-of-plagiarism-a-guide>

being disowned by her sex-loving parents. It is a twist of the more common trope of a homosexual offspring afraid of telling the truth to their heterosexual parents, but it does not have any real polemic or satirical edge in this direction either. It just uses classical tropes for the sake of humor and for telling a different story of a family reconciling after revealing misunderstandings and secrets. As Dentith said: “Sometimes the laughter is the only point, and the breakdown of discourse into nonsense is a sufficient reward in itself.”⁴⁸⁷

There are many other examples throughout the series that do not have a polemic edge. The *Peanuts* scene from S01E11 *Downer Ending* is not polemic or critical towards its source text, instead it uses its place in the collective memory to emphasize the conflict between simple yet pointed advice and the difficulty of following the advice. When the *Decapithon* video game in S01E04 *Zoës and Zeldas* turns out to be a *Tetris* replica, it is not critical towards Tetris in particular or puzzle games in general, it only uses misdirection to subvert our expectation of how a game called *Decapithon* would look, making it a parody without any real polemic edge. The many posters of films and stage shows scattered throughout the show often poke fun at the juxtaposition of anthropomorphized animals in classical movies without polemic edge towards its source texts. Examples include *Catsablanca*, *His Squirrel Friday*, *Hamilton* (starring a pig), *Dances with Wolves* (a dance movie), *When Tabby met Snappy*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (with Elizabeth Taylor as a cat), the famous celebrity hotel Chateau Marmont becoming Chateau Marmoset, and Penguin Publishing being run by actual penguins. Eduard Manet’s *Olympia* in S02E10 *Yes And* turns into parody by making the titular character a shark and turning the cat on the side of the bed in the original into an anthropomorphic cat in the parody, but it does not deride from the original. The repeated and random outbursts of “to the [...]” reiterating the original Batman series, like “to the limousine depository!” in S03E06 *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew* and “to the next amends” in S03E11 *That’s Too Much, Man!* celebrates more than derides the original but it still works as a parodic extraneous inclusion. In S03E12 *That Went Well* Mr. Peanutbutter arrives at the beach with orcas and spaghetti strainers to save Pacific City from a sinking ball of spaghetti, reiterating *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015) without any polemic towards the original. The caper parodies of S02E09 *The Shot* and S04E10 *lovin that cali lifestyle!!* use many of the tropes from the caper genre, but not with malice or polemic effect.

The key to parody according to Hans Robert Jauss is to build up expectations to then invert them, which ties into the idea of parody needing to break logic and expectations in the new piece of art. Jauss emphasizes that the evocation and destruction of expectations in such texts need not only serve as a critical purpose but may also produce new poetic effects.⁴⁸⁸ He argues that “[a] parody or travesty

⁴⁸⁷ Dentith 2000, p. 38.

⁴⁸⁸ Rose 1993, where she quotes Jauss 1967, p. 33.

can exploit the discrepancies between high and low on the level of either form or content in order to attack its object (which is mostly a text of authoritative standing) through critical imitation or to transform it into something new through an artistic heightening of the imitation.”⁴⁸⁹ For Jauss there are alternatives to parody with polemic edge, parody that attacks its source text or for that matter other texts, it can accentuate or create an artistic or aesthetic effect. Rose notes however that the problem with Jauss’ theory is that he separates parody into either comical/negative or meta-fictional/artistic, and I would argue that it is perfectly possible to have comical parody that is not negative.⁴⁹⁰ Parody does not need to be polemic, it can also be comedic, artistic, or poetic. It could be parody that does not direct an edge towards the source text or any other target, but still reiterates and transforms the source text structurally, for comedic, aesthetic or artistic purposes. Harries means that the admiring aspects of parody are not relevant for analysis and with a point of view like that it is not strange that all that is discovered is criticism or satire, missing entirely the value of aesthetic parody.

Parody Is Not Necessarily Satirical

In *Archer* S05E05 *Southbound and Down*, Archer and Pam are chased down a Texas highway by gunmen in pursuit of their cargo consisting of cocaine. Due to circumstances Archer uncharacteristically finds himself without a weapon, which would be practical to fend off the chasers, and the following conversation takes place:

Pam: “And here you are without your gun, that’s pretty ironic, huh?”

Archer: “No Pam, once again you’re confusing the word “ironic” with “you are an idiot”. What’s ironic is that every other store we drive by is a gun shop!”

Pam: “Ooh, okay, so then what’s satire?”

Archer: “Nobody really knows! Hang on!”

And he proceeds to easily defeat the highway robbers with his usual set of skills. The scene offers a succinct description of what irony is and is not, but comedically fails to give the same answer when it comes to satire. But is it really that difficult to define satire? Yes and no.

⁴⁸⁹ Jauss 1976, pp. 103-132, cmp discussion in Rose 1993, p. 172.

⁴⁹⁰ Rose 1993, p. 174.

Like with parody, there have been many definitions of satire over the years, but most of them entail that satire, unlike parody, must contain both humor and a polemic edge in order to be satire. Media scholars Amber Day and Ethan Thompson stresses that it is important to differentiate between political humor and satire. Political humor is simply humor about politics and politicians, but satire must entail an aggression, a criticism, not only towards the person, but towards institutions, structures, norms and belief systems.⁴⁹¹ Furniss points out that a parody “entails a critique of established expectations, while satire is more specifically focused on social criticism” which I would agree with. She also argues that parody tends to be seen as ideologically neutral, which I and almost every parody scholar before me would strongly object to, but that satire in turn is “generally overtly politicized”.⁴⁹² Hutcheon specifies that satire is generally negative towards what it references, while modern parody does not have to be and that parody can pay tribute to its source text while satire cannot, satire aims to ridicule its target.⁴⁹³ Plantinga when analyzing *This is Spinal Tap* (Reiner 1984) concludes that satire “implies ridicule of its target, while a parody need not devalue its object, but may range from an ethos of condemnation to one of homage and celebration”.⁴⁹⁴

From the perspective of satire, what separates satire from parody is that satire always has a polemic edge while parody does not necessarily need to have that, while what separates parody from satire is that parody always needs to reference a source text which is a work of art, while satire can reference the “real world”. A work of art meaning Dyer’s broad definition of the word as something that is made and of stuff, and does something, and Dyer’s definition of how pastiche works is also applicable for this distinction when it comes to parody. He describes pastiche as “concerned with imitation in art” and that it “may imitate a specific work or else kind of work” and that the imitation “is of other art, not of life or reality itself”.⁴⁹⁵

Parody, unlike satire, needs to reference a source text. Hence the inclusion of source text in my definition of the word. Parody always has a source text, or as Hutcheon would put it: a coded discourse. For her it is the basis for it to be called parody, and that satire aims at a non-model reality, real objects, while parody aims at text or artistic objects, i.e. modelled reality.⁴⁹⁶ Rose argues that “one major factor which distinguishes the parody from satire is the parody’s use of the

⁴⁹¹ Thompson 2013, p. 170.

⁴⁹² Furniss 2016, p. 128.

⁴⁹³ Hutcheon 2000, pp. 43-44, McDonald 1960, p. 563.

⁴⁹⁴ Plantinga 1998, p. 321, see further discussion in Nilsson 2013, pp. 8-10.

⁴⁹⁵ Dyer 2007, p. 2.

⁴⁹⁶ Hutcheon 200, p. 16, where she quotes Ben-Porat 1979, see also Harries 2000, p. 32.

performed material of its ‘target’ as a constituent part of its own structure”.⁴⁹⁷ So theoretically the difference is rather cut and dry, the tricky part comes when you look closer at the implications and implementations of the theoretical definition. Parody is often satirical, satire is often parodic, there is a lot of overlapping between the concepts. Parody needs to reference a source text, but the mere reference is not enough for it to be considered parody. When BoJack in S01E02 *BoJack Hates the Troops* says to Princess Carolyn “You couldn’t even get me in the room for *War Horse*. There was like ten horses in that movie, I didn’t need to be THE War Horse.”, it is a reference to *War Horse* (Spielberg 2011) as a source text, but it is not reiterated in the episode, in the new text and does therefore not qualify as parody. There is no re-enactment of *War Horse* or any of its elements, it is simply referencing the movie within the context of the storytelling.

For this section I focus on S02E09 *The Shot*, where the crew shooting the film *Secretariat* starring BoJack needs to film a pivotal scene. It recreates the in-universe actual event where track star and national hero Secretariat visits Richard Nixon in the White House in order to avoid being drafted to go to Vietnam. This leads to his brother Jeffretariat taking his place and subsequently getting killed in action, news that Secretariat also receives in the Oval Office of the White House. The guilt of this choice combined with a lifelong running ban after a gambling scandal leads to Secretariat’s suicide at the age of 27. BoJack is adamant that this scene is necessary for the movie, because “the Nixon scene is the core of the whole movie, where we see Secretariat be morally corrupted and get to look into the real darkness of his soul”. The episode begins by showing how the meeting between Secretariat and Richard Nixon actually went down, but it is presented in a very cinematic fashion, with careful blocking, sudden zooms and non-diegetic music emphasizing the events. Richard Nixon as a character is an exaggerated version of himself, with words like “arranged” pronounced with villainous glee, and an inability to laugh even when trying. And here is where it gets interesting.

Imitation like parody needs an audience that understands it as an imitation and who the imitation is supposed to be of.⁴⁹⁸ The difference between an imitation and a parody, just as the difference between a satire and a parody, is that parody needs to reference a source text while imitation and satire references “real life”. There is no doubt that the depiction of Nixon in this scene is politically critical enough to qualify as satire, but the question is where the “real” Nixon ends and the representation of Nixon, ensconced in American popular culture through countless imitations, re-enactments and mockeries, begins? The character who ends up playing Nixon in the shot is the security guard at the museum, and when he catches the crew in the act in the oval office replica, he shouts “Breaking and entering!?” That’s against everything Nixon stood for!”. An obvious reference to the

⁴⁹⁷ Rose 1993, p. 81.

⁴⁹⁸ Cmp Hutcheon 2000, p. 10.

Watergate break-in that leads to Nixon's resignation, but can it also be interpreted as a parody on cultural depictions of Nixon from the likes of *Nixon* (Stone 1995), *Frost/Nixon* (Howard 2008), *J. Edgar* (Eastwood 2011), *Watchmen* (Snyder 2009), *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis 1994) or even *Futurama* (Cohen/Groening 1999-2023)? Can Richard Nixon in this case be considered a person from real life or can he be considered a source text, from which it is possible to create a parody?

The inclusion of Nixon's famous dog Checkers in the scene with Secretariat where he has been turned into an anthropomorphized Secret Service agent certainly is a parodic choice. And if so, can this be true for other "real life" people, events or items if they only have been represented enough times in popular culture? Consider the Hindenburg crash or the Empire State Building and the numerous representations they have in popular culture. Like Richard Nixon, it is difficult to know where to draw the line, and one could even argue that the line in these cases is so blurred that it does not exist anymore. I do not think it necessary to pinpoint exactly where real life ends and fiction begins here, but it is important to recognize that the boundary is vague and constantly changing.

When it is time for the crew of Secretariat to break into the Nixon Museum in Yorba Linda (which has a replica of the Oval Office) to shoot the scene, the mission follows the genre template of the caper movie, established by many movies throughout history but more than any other the *Ocean's Trilogy* (Soderbergh 2001, 2004, 2007). The caper genre is reiterated through fast editing, genre typical music, expository narration and storytelling tropes like a montage of rounding up a crew of experts for the job. While the editing and music stay true to the original throughout the montage, the story is inverted by adding roadblocks for the inexperienced leadership. When they cannot get the best locksmith in the city, they need to ask the second-best locksmith in the city, and when that fails, they settle for a locksmith, which turns out to be Todd, since he "kinda knows how to pick locks".

The caper part definitely qualifies as parody, and one of the parodic elements is the literalization and inversion of Character Actress Margo Martindale, who throughout the entire show is referred to as this and nothing else. Character Actress Margo Martindale helps BoJack sabotage Todd's rock opera in S01E04 *Zoës and Zeldas*, then helps stage a bank robbery to steal Diane's engagement ring for BoJack in S01E09 *Horse Majeure*, which is where she discovers a flair for the darker sides of society, ending with a prison sentence. In *The Shot*, she is picked up by BoJack from prison right in time to stage a diversion while the crew shoots the scene. Princess Carolyn is added as a cat burglar since she is a cat and the last member of the caper is Alan, the cable repair panda who just happens to be in the room when they go through the plan. Alan wears a red shirt as part of his uniform, which is a reference to the original *Star Trek* (1966-1969) series where whoever in the crew beamed down to a planet wearing a red shirt was most likely the one to die on the adventure. A "redshirt" has since become a trope, complete with its

own Wikipedia entry, parodied in numerous films and TV shows such as *Galaxy Quest* (Parisot 1999) and *South Park* S02E07 *City on the Edge of Forever*. BoJack hammers home this reference by saying: “Now, things could get ugly, one of you is very likely to die, possibly Alan.”

The diversion created is a break-in at the art gallery in Yorba Linda, next to where the Nixon Museum is located. Visible paintings and sculpture in the gallery include pastiche versions of the art of George Rodrigue (*Blue Dog*), Heather Jansch (known for her driftwood horses, but here the horse stands on two legs), Philip Shelton (the sculpture *Man Diving* is turned into a diving dolphin) and *Dogs Playing Poker* by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge from 1894, a staple symbol of kitsch art in American culture, only here the dogs play 4-in-a-row. One particular painting strikes a chord with Princess Carolyn, the smooth soothing colors and lighting of *Glowing Fuzzy Nonsense* by Thomas Kinkade. The other art works in the gallery, possibly with the exception of *Dogs Playing 4-in-a-row*, functions as pastiches in that they have been reiterated so that we as an audience with some knowledge of the art world can spot the reference, transformed in some way as explained above, but still carry the same function as the source text art pieces in our world. The Kinkade painting is different, though. The literalized title and the usage in the episode, where Princess Carolyn mentally steps into the painting becoming part of the aesthetic, turns it into parody. Shortly thereafter, an intense shootout starts between the caper crew responsible for the distraction and the police arriving at the scene. Following the trope of the redshirt, Alan almost immediately gets shot, but in a comic subversion of the trope it turns out that Alan’s phone stopped the bullet. When he pulls it out it rings and it is his wife telling him they are having their baby now, which prompts Alan to leave the scene altogether. This is an example of a parodic trope, displaying self-consciousness, meta-humor and knowledge of film theory and film tropes.

The gunfight reiterates classic action movie shootouts having criminals shoot intensely at police and vice versa. Where it turns into parody is first by having Character Actress Margo Martindale do most of the shooting, letting her do it in the name of character actors and actresses everywhere, having her pull a machine gun out of nowhere and letting Alan survive and go home to his wife. Compare this with another scene about gun violence in *BoJack Horseman*, which I analyze in more detail in Chapter 7. In S04E05 *Thoughts and Prayers* a mass shooting forces the studio responsible for the action film *Ms. Taken* to rethink its content. Not because it contains gratuitous gun violence, but because it takes place in a shopping mall, the same location where the mass shooting took place. Throughout the episode five different mass shootings occur, the first four without any real reaction other than the inconvenience of re-shooting mass shooting sequences in the movie due to them happening at the same locations as in real life. The fifth, however, is performed by a woman, after Diane writes an article about the empowering effects guns can have for women in public spaces. Since the last mass

shooting is performed by a woman, the male legislators get really anxious and Diane confronts them by posing the rhetorical:

“Maybe you shouldn’t blame women for wanting guns, maybe you should blame the constant societal messaging that tells us we are safe only as long as the men around us allow us to be. So, if you have a problem with women carrying firearms you can roll up your sleeves and actually work to create a society where women feel safe and equal. Or you can just ban all guns.”

This of course prompts the California state legislature to immediately ban all guns. The entire episode and this ending in particular is a scathing satire on the state of American society, both in terms of the acceptance of (male) gun violence as an everyday occurrence, but also on the priorities of a patriarchal governance. Diane’s comment “I can’t believe this country hates women more than it loves guns” and Princess Carolyn reply “No?” is satire, while Character Actress Margo Martindale’s shootout in the art gallery is parody. The news segment with navy seal Neal McBeal in S01E02 *BoJack Hates the Troops* is a parody of a news show, but a satire on the American relationship with its war heroes. Sextina Aquafina’s music video *Get That Fetus, Kill That Fetus* in S03E06 *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew* is a parody of r’n’b music videos but a satire on the American relationship to abortions.

The distinction between satire and parody is that satire comments on real life events and that parody needs to reference a source text, but there is also a difference in that satire is about content, while parody is a matter of form, in its theoretical construction. The content of a parody can make it clearer and easier to read, but all the aspects of parody, reiterating a source text, transforming it, creating a new piece of art that breaks its logic are all definitions of form, which makes the question of what parody is a matter of form. However, it is when we start discussing content, how parody is used, to what ends and with what means, that it actually starts to get interesting.

Parody Creates a New Piece of Art

By now it should be clear that parody is not mere quotation or ridicule, as some definitions would have it. It is not simply adding a humorous reference to an already existing text. Instead in this aspect it lies more in the veins of Harries’ definition of parody as “the process of recontextualizing a source or source text through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, in order to create a new text”.⁴⁹⁹ Even though parody deconstructs its source text, it also

⁴⁹⁹ Harries 2000, p. 6.

recreates a new text in its final result, just as pastiche deconstructs by picking things from its original context and reinserts them into a new assemblage.⁵⁰⁰ Key phrases here are recontextualizing, transformation and create a new text, which leads us into the parts of my definition of parody which defines it as reiterating and transforming (a source text to) create new art, with the definition of art from Dyer being something made and of stuff that does something.⁵⁰¹

The reason I use both reiterate and transform in my definition of parody is to highlight both functions, even though the transformation process might have been enough since it presupposes a reiteration to be understood as a transformation. It is important, however, to remember that any parody needs to first manifest the source text it refers to for the audience to get the reference. Rose points out that it is fundamental for parody to recreate or reiterate the source text and then move the reiteration in another direction. To succeed with this, one must reiterate the source text in a manner where the audience will understand it as such, and when and how this transformation is made.⁵⁰² An insufficient reiteration would mean that the new text is not read as parody, but as something else. Just as Dyer describes pastiche, parody then incorporates the source text as a part of the new piece.⁵⁰³ Key in the definitions of both Dyer and Harries is the focus on creating a new text or a new piece. Parody does not simply add the reference to the existing piece, nor does it place an existing text in a new context. This is bricolage, which will be discussed later in this text. It is in the combination of old and new texts that the transformation takes place, creating a brand-new text or piece of art.

To exemplify parody as the creation of a new text through reiteration and transformation and the different ways it can be put to use for storytelling or poetic purposes, I want to look closer at one of the pivotal episodes of *BoJack Horseman*, S03E11 *That's Too Much, Man!*. The title of the episode itself is the catchphrase of youngest orphan Sabrina, played by child star Sarah Lynn, in the hit TV show *Horsin' Around*, which laid the foundation for BoJack's fame, and both the show and the catchphrase has been used several times in *BoJack Horseman* up until this episode. In the episode, BoJack tries and fails to handle the news that he is not after all nominated for an Oscar for his lead role in *Secretariat*. He contacts Sarah Lynn and asks if she wants to go on a bender with him. Sarah Lynn, nine months sober after rehab, jumps at the opportunity and immediately downs a bottle of vodka she had hidden in her kitchen. The episode follows their bender as BoJack tries to come to terms with his past failures both professionally and personally, with extensive use of subjective storytelling through the use of blackouts, memory

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵⁰¹ Dyer 2007, p. 1.

⁵⁰² Rose 1993, p. 171.

⁵⁰³ Dyer 2007, pp. 46-47.

loss and hallucinations, reminiscent of S01E11 *Downer Ending* where BoJack, Sarah Lynn and Todd tried to re-write BoJack's memoirs in one night through a drug induced hyperactive session. After facing people he feels he has wronged to make amends as part of the AA twelve step program, BoJack makes everything worse and ends up in the planetarium with Sarah Lynn where she ultimately dies from a heroin overdose.

The episode starts with a shot of a framed painting of Sarah Lynn as Ophelia from Hamlet floating down a river. The image reiterates the famous John Everett Millais painting *Ophelia* (1851-52), but she has been replaced with the image of Sarah Lynn, transforming the original work into a commentary on Sarah Lynn's status as a troubled superstar and substance abuser, creating a new piece of work, a pastiche with a self-knowing sense of fatality both in the sense of fate and mortality. In placing the painting above her bed, Sarah Lynn signals an awareness of the public image of her, the expectation that she will die young and consequently how she embraces that image of her and the closeness to death that it entails. Sarah Lynn wakes up and greets the day with an overtly positive and naïve nursery rhyme, accompanied by non-diegetic music emphasizing the wholesomeness of the phrases: "Good morning, morning. Good morning, sun, good morning trees. Good morning busy buzzy bees." She opens her curtains and addresses the last cheerful greeting towards the anthropomorphized bees and ants working in her garden. A gardener ant answers her, also in cheerful rhymes "Good morning, Sarah Lynn, good to see you, Sarah Lynn. The tulips and chrysanthemum are really coming in." Sarah Lynn replies "Good morning, handsome garden ant, I like the way you plant my plants. Your flowers make my feelings dance; I love your handsome planter's pants." Then she is interrupted by paparazzi photographers, she swears at them and needs to calm herself indoors after shutting the curtains. "It's ok, Sarah Lynn. You are calm, you are thin. Your skin is so soft it's like you murdered a baby and stole its skin. Your skin is murdered baby-soft... OK!" The tone and style of the cheerful morning rhyme, along with the seamless unrehearsed co-operation with the garden workers, reiterates happy harmless stories directed to children in the vein of Dr Seuss or Disney stories.

This is inverted through the interruption of the paparazzi, momentarily removing Sarah Lynn from the children's rhyme narration, having her swear and hide in a manner more in line with the character she has been in the show so far. When calming herself down, she returns to the rhymes, but this time the content is less innocent and more drastic, comparing her soft skin with that of a murdered baby. This functions as an inversion or an exaggeration, and it is the contrast of innocent children's content, perhaps commenting on the childhood that Sarah Lynn never got to experience as a TV star from the age of three, and implied brutal violence tied to the demands of an entertainment industry beauty standard, combined with the context of Sarah Lynn who up until now has been presented as no holds barred addict of substances, violence, sex and drama that transform the

scene into something new, in this case I would argue a parody permeated with ironic inversion and a strong satirical message.

Sarah Lynn's entire house is made of drugs. What looks like yogurt covered raisins is Vicodin covered Vicodin. On the wall of Sarah Lynn's living room is Marc Chagall's *The Birthday*, a painting that illustrates two lovers sharing a kiss and levitating from the ground in what can be described as romantic elation, but here the painting is made from LSD, another gateway to levitational elation. It is also noteworthy considering the focus on parody and pastiche in architecture from scholars like Hutcheon and Jameson, that BoJack has a segment in the episode where he wakes up from a memory lapse in the middle of a rant about the failure of the triangle as a building form and that the pyramids therefore were "gauche as shit". Sarah Lynn and BoJack watches a clip from *Horsin' Around* with Erika Eleniak from *Baywatch* (1989-2001) as a guest star. The entire family is gathered around the kitchen table while BoJack as The Horse closes a book on history and says: "Well I think we all learned a valuable lesson today about the Armenian genocide" and Sarah Lynn replies with her signature catchphrase "the Armenian genocide was too much, man!". As established, *Horsin' Around* is a pastiche of the classical family sitcom of the 1980s and 1990s, filled to the brim with messages of family values, morality, wholesomeness and communal laughter, using sitcom tropes such as laugh track, catchphrases, misunderstandings, guest stars and a moral lesson learned at the resetting of the story at the end of each episode.

The scene reiterates the recognizable traits of the sitcom, including the musical accompaniment of the conclusion of the episode. The inversion is that the lesson learned today was on something as gruesome and serious as the Armenian genocide. Having Sarah Lynn include the Armenian genocide in her famous catchphrase inverts the original function of the line, even though it clearly is thought to be working well within the confounds of the *BoJack Horseman* universe. For us as the audience of the episode, it creates a new piece of art using the contrast between the seriousness of genocide and the harmless predictable cheeriness of a sitcom episode conclusion to comment on the ridiculousness and ham-fisted storytelling of some of the sitcoms that *Horsin' Around* is loosely based on. This is emphasized when BoJack comments on the episode with the line "Why can't life be like it was on *Horsin' Around*, all our issues conveniently settled within 22 hilarious minutes?". In this kind of sitcom, everything must be neatly settled in the closing scene of the episode, even if the theme of the episode was the Armenian genocide and the guest star was Erika Eleniak.

When trying to make amends to Diane, BoJack and Sarah Lynn break into her and Mr. Peanutbutter's house when they are not home. Above the bed of Mr. Peanutbutter and Diane is a painting reminiscent of Paul Cezanne's still lifes, but since Mr. Peanutbutter is a dog, it does not only contain fruit, but also slippers and a newspaper. Like the Mallais painting of Ophelia, this is a pastiche of the source text that functions as either an original painting or a customized pastiche within

the *BoJack Horseman* universe. After apologizing to who he thinks is Todd, but who is actually a young boy on a park bench wearing the same cap as Todd, BoJack shouts “to the next amends!” in the style of the original *Batman* (1966-1968) series. His car rolls along with the driver’s door open and Sarah Lynn chasing it. The scene is accompanied by music reiterating the sound style of *Yakety Sax*, used as the theme from *The Benny Hill Show* (1969-1989), signaling what is supposed to be a goofy farcical chase scene. Placing that kind of scene in the middle of an alcohol and drug infused bender where BoJack in the previous scene hits someone with his car transforms the reiteration of *Batman* and *The Benny Hill Show*, one campy action and the other one burlesque comedy, into an ironic and rather acidic parody, considering the contrast between the light tone of the original and the potential consequences that the actions of BoJack and Sarah Lynn might have.

The main storytelling device for the episode is the subjective narration of BoJack’s perspective, shown primarily through jump cuts signaling memory lapses. After one of these cuts, where BoJack and Sarah Lynn are on the way to Ohio to make amends to Penny, the teenage girl whose family BoJack stayed with in S02E11 *Escape from L.A.* and who he almost had sex with after her prom night, Sarah Lynn fills in the blanks of what they have been doing that BoJack does not remember. In the scene, they are in a library wearing trench coats and fedoras carrying a bag with the words “spy shit” on it. Sarah Lynn explains: “So we decided to do a stake out. There’s a whole makeover sequence where we went to the mall and tried on different trench coat for each other. Do you not remember any of that?” Sarah Lynn and BoJack as celebrities are so infused into Hollywood storytelling devices that they re-enact them in real life when performing what can be described as a spy or caper scene. When spying on Penny at a party later that night, BoJack sees her drinking a beer and remembers that “This is just like that episode of *Horsin’ Around* when Olivia went to the frat party, but Penny doesn’t have a kind angel played by Jose Canseco to help her get out of this jam.”

BoJack and Sarah Lynn consider themselves the main characters in the figurative sense in that they are at the center of the experience of their own lives, but also in the literal sense of being the star of the show that is played out even if the show is their life. In real life for them, their characters need to follow the tropes of the specific genre even though it is unnecessary for the task at hand. BoJack as a character in the *BoJack Horseman* television show fits neatly into many of the definitions that outline what Mittell describes as the anti-hero of contemporary complex television narration. Mittell argues that the increased complexity of television narration allows for the development of complex and nuanced characters that can have flaws or be outright villains but still garner our attention and make us invest emotions in their faith, like Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), or Don Draper in *Mad Men* (2007-

2015).⁵⁰⁴ BoJack is a flawed character who does deplorable things throughout the series, but we are still as viewers invested in his faith. The double edge is that BoJack as a person within the *BoJack Horseman* universe who literalizes his desire to connect with people and be loved and appreciated despite his flaws, he is well aware that he oscillates between the desire of being the villain and the hero and he self-reflexively considers himself an antihero at times since an antihero is someone that the viewers are invested in. The lines between BoJack as a person and BoJack as a celebrity and as an actor are frequently blurred both in the narration and in the depiction of BoJack's self-image, and it is one of the central thematic throughlines in the show.

In the episode the lines between TV show and reality become more and more blurred with the increasing amount of time lapses and eventually hallucinations, induced by a dose of heroin. In one of the hallucinations, BoJack is in a living room with Mr. Cuddlywhiskers, his partner in creating BoJack's second and less successful comedy show, *The BoJack Horseman Show* (introduced in S03E02 *The BoJack Horseman Show*):

Mr. Cuddlywhiskers: "This last episode got the worst rating yet; I was afraid your character trying heroin would be a bridge too far. And this jointed blackout structure with the one flashback in the middle really confused our audience. They hated all the fourth wall breaking meta-jokes."

BoJack: "Of course! Audiences hate meta jokes. When will comedy writers learn?"

While this scene plays out, the walls of the house shake increasingly, mimicking an earthquake. When Mr. Cuddlywhiskers suggests a guest star for the show in order to boost the ratings the walls shake even more, and when Sarah Lynn comes up and Mr. Cuddlywhiskers says: "I'm sure she'd do it for you, you're like a father for her" the walls literally break, and the image turns sideways. The literalization of the fourth wall break, while commenting on the futility of meta humor, is a clear-cut parodic device, but the consequence in this scene is not humorous. The reiteration is of the fourth wall break as a concept commonly used in parody and other forms of meta humor, the transformation literalizes the concept of a fourth wall break into walls actually breaking while simultaneously discussing fourth wall breaks. The new piece of art is the parodic scene where the manifestation of the fourth wall break symbolizes BoJack's shattering life when realizing that he is responsible for ruining Sarah Lynn's life and for whatever happens to her next, once again foreboding her death at the end of the episode, as the Mallais painting of Ophelia did at the very start. It is parody not played for laughs, but for deep

⁵⁰⁴ Mittell 2015, pp. 142-143.

emotional and symbolic meaning, emphasizing the gravity of the situation for BoJack and the consequences it will have for his future.

Before the end scene, we are treated to a scene of immense intertextuality when BoJack and a noticeably unwell Sarah Lynn watch the Oscars from a motel room somewhere in Los Angeles. It turns out Sarah Lynn wins the Oscar for best original song, for her song *The Silly Banana Song (Love Theme)* from the hit movie *The Nazi who Played Yahtzee*. Sarah Lynn realizes she should have been there, which also makes her realize that she does not like anything about herself, and she asks BoJack if she is doomed, if he is doomed. This is what prompts BoJack to take her to the planetarium which she has wanted to go to since the beginning of the bender, and this is where she succumbs to a heroin overdose, but only after she expresses her enthusiasm for domes to which BoJack replies “I prefer rectangular buildings, as we have firmly established”. Even this last shot of the episode contains a parodic reiteration, this time of the kind of presentation common in a planetarium, where a lofty voice-over narrates imagery on the dome. It is inverted into parody when the star formations listed are “horse, cat, human or even lizard”, commenting on the anthropomorphized animals populating the *BoJack Horseman* universe. After this, BoJack ends the episode with a short monologue where we as the audience see his and Sarah Lynn’s outlines against the starry sky of the planetarium dome:

“See, Sarah Lynn. We are not doomed. In the great grand scheme of things, we’re just tiny specks that will one day be forgotten. So, it doesn’t matter what we did in the past, or how we’ll be remembered. The only thing that matters is right now. This moment. This one spectacular moment we are sharing together. Right Sarah Lynn? Sarah Lynn... Sarah Lynn...”

Before the last “Sarah Lynn...” the screen turns dark, and the audience is left with the certainty that she will not wake up, as it calls back to the scene in the hotel room when BoJack calling on Sarah Lynn in the same way eventually wakes her up, to his relief. This time we are not awarded that relief. The monologue itself is not a parody or a pastiche or even a reference, but even this scene, which must be described as one of the darkest in the entire show, is introduced through the means of parody, creating what can only be described as a new piece of art.

Parody Needs Perceived Intent

Parody needs to transform its source text to be understood as parody. This transformation needs to be performed with perceived intent. Before explaining this further, I want to make the distinction between instances when transformation although subtle is perceived as intentional, and where the author or perpetrator intends to hide the transformation as much as possible. This imitation with change,

where the change is too small to qualify as a new piece of art, is *plagiarism*.⁵⁰⁵ A plagiarism or a forgery is made with the intention of not disclosing the differences to the original, while parody only works if the difference is discovered. The line between pastiche, homage and plagiarism can sometimes be blurry since pastiche is often more subtle than parody, which generally wants to be clearly noticed in order to work properly.⁵⁰⁶ There is an interesting example of plagiarism within the *BoJack Horseman* universe that can help exemplify the term.

Mr. Peanutbutter, like BoJack, was a star in a sitcom in the 1990s. This is how he is introduced in the very first episode, where he jokingly riffs “BoJack Horseman and Mr. Peanutbutter in the same room, what is this, a crossover episode!?”. Mr. Peanutbutter’s show was called *Mr. Peanutbutter’s House*, but instead of a horse adopting three orphans, two girls and one boy, Mr. Peanutbutter is a dog who adopts a teenage boy and two orphan twin girls. BoJack also notes in the first episode that the entire story including the set-up, story, plot points and style was stolen from his show, which in turn is a classical family sitcom strictly following the generic frames and staples of the genre. Mr. Peanutbutter retorts that his show was “very different”, since it featured a dog, not a horse, and that the adopted girls were twins. When shooting the yet unnamed pilot in a flashback scene in S04E01 *See Mr. Peanutbutter Run*, the show is referred to as *Untitled Horsin’ Around Knockoff*, but the creators are very careful not to let that shine through in the finished product.

The inclusion of the show in the *BoJack Horseman* universe serves a couple of purposes. It establishes the dynamic between BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter, where one is negative and suffers from substance abuse, but still has an extensive knowledge of politics and culture both high and low, whereas the other is positive, healthy, fit, references pop culture frequently but is often unaware of more complicated art or his role in the industry. Things fall into Mr. Peanutbutter’s lap, and he never needs to question it, even though he lacks originality both in personality and as a lead role in a TV show. The other purpose of the show’s inclusion is to satirize the American television industry and its lack of originality. Not only does BoJack’s show *Horsin’ Around* fit neatly within the framework established by family friendly sitcoms, but it also works so efficiently for a substantial TV audience that it gets a knockoff replica. Had *Mr. Peanutbutter’s House* been a self-conscious show with meta references and knowing winks towards sitcom tropes and the shows it is built from and replicates, it could have passed as pastiche or even homage, but as it is presented in the *BoJack Horseman* universe it falls under the category of plagiarism.

The relationship between the author and reader is key to understanding parody. Roland Barthes’s famous exclamation of the death of the author was a perhaps

⁵⁰⁵ Cmp Rose 1993, p. 69.

⁵⁰⁶ Cmp Rose 1993, p. 72.

somewhat hyperbolic description of the shift of focus from the author to the reader of a text. How a text is read, not the intention behind it, is what is most important.⁵⁰⁷ Foucault asks in reference to Barthes what difference it makes who is speaking, and while the reader or the audience is central to the understanding of parody, they are the ones who need to understand it as parody for it to work, it sometimes does matter who is speaking; who is the author.⁵⁰⁸ In parody as in with most art the exact same piece of art can yield distinctively different meanings depending on who the originator is and how that someone is conceived by different audiences. A stereotypic depiction of a gay character can be read as camp or homophobic, while a joke about a Jewish person can be inside ball or antisemitism, a reference to an act of fellatio has different connotations if it is delivered by the giving or receiving end. Knowledge about the author may be necessary and is an integrated part of the understanding of the parodic message.

The author is not to be understood as an individual creating a piece of art which is then presented to an audience for consumption. It is not as simple either as having an author as an encoder packing a gift of connected codes for the audience to decode upon unpacking. The text is not written, and then read, instead it is created in a textual relationship between the encoder and decoder and created in the time and place where it is consumed, because all those factors influence the understanding of both text and source text. A text can change from non-parodic to parodic over time and place and depending on who is reading it. This ties into Hutcheon's ideas about how we should not consider the author as an encoding agent, as an individual creating a text, but instead as a position to be filled within the text.⁵⁰⁹

Parody is not simply two texts that interrelate, the encoder and decoder must share a set of conventions to understand parody as parody, but also a recognition of the intent of the encoder. The audience must recognize that what they are experiencing is a parody, what type of parody it is, what it parodies and to what degree, in order for it to be a parody. For Hutcheon, readers are "active co-creators of the parodic text in a more explicit and perhaps more complex way than reader-response critics argue that they are in the reading of all texts",⁵¹⁰ All codes have to be shared to be comprehended, which is also true for parodic codes, no matter whether they are intended as positive or negative, subversive or reinforcing towards their source texts.⁵¹¹

⁵⁰⁷ Barthes 1968, pp. 146-148.

⁵⁰⁸ Foucault 1986, p. 120.

⁵⁰⁹ Hutcheon 2000, p. 86.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 93.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, p. 93, where she quotes Eco 1979, p. 7, and Yunck 1963, p. 30

In parody, it is essential for both encoder and decoder to have an understanding of what parody is, what the conventions of the genre are, and to both recognize it as parody for it to work properly.⁵¹² Morson's idea that parody always needs to have a higher semantic authority than its source text, and that the decoder must be aware of this hierarchy, is something that Hutcheon disagrees with, even though she admits that there are plenty of examples confirming the theory.⁵¹³ There are, however, many examples of the opposite, where the parodying text is consciously self-depreciating or simply read or decoded wrongly or as "authoritatively inferior" in relation to the source text. Parody is not simply two texts that interrelate, according to Hutcheon. The encoder and decoder have to share a set of conventions to understand parody as parody, but also a recognition of the intent of the encoder whether it is intended as subversive of established canons or as a conservative force.

In *The Producers* (Brooks 1969), in perhaps the most famous example from stage and film history, Broadway producers Leo Bloom and Max Bialystock try to have their show *Springtime for Hitler* bomb completely, but their intentionally tactless and provocative subject matter is read as a parody by an enthusiastic audience, and thus becomes a parody, no matter the original intent of the creators. Parody, therefore, is not created by the intent of the creator, but comes from the perceived intent of the creator. If an author claims that what they have created is a parody, this of course weighs heavily into the understanding and interpretation of their work, both with regard to the way the work is formed and to the public discourse about it. Parody is created with the spectator, the decoder, but that decoder could theoretically be one person, and that person could be the author. Different spectators interpret parody differently, depending on who they are, where they come from and where they are in life. The same person can interpret parody differently at different stages in life, depending on experience, knowledge, and point of view, to only mention a few. As soon as we leave the theoretical space of "the decoder creates the parody", whether something is a parody or not is a matter of discussion.

Context is important for the understanding of parody. *The Room* (Wiseau 2003) is generally considered one of the worst movies of all time, and since its conception it has drawn a steady crowd who watches it to make fun of it, the ironic audience that watches something that is so bad it is good. This can be described as an unintentional parody, and there is a Swedish term that has been suggested for it, namely *pekorall*. *Pekoral* is an unintentional parody that turns into parody due to the failure in realizing pretentious ambitions. German theorist Hans Kuhn describes *pekorall* as "unintentionally comic or stylistically incompetent".⁵¹⁴ The

⁵¹² Hutcheon 2000, p. 19.

⁵¹³ Morson 1989, p. 67, Hutcheon 2000, p. 93.

⁵¹⁴ Rose 1993, p. 68.

director of *The Room*, Tommy Wiseau, has been immortalized like his predecessor Ed Wood, director of among others the cult classic *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (Wood jr. 1957), in a Hollywood film starring James Franco, *The Disaster Artist* (Franco 2017). While *The Room* was made in earnest to be a good movie, Wiseau has since leaned into the ironic consumption of his film, attending awards ceremonies and enjoying fame, or infamy, in online communities. As an author, he embraces the turn from sincerity to irony, trying to frame the original product as a parody. The “so bad it’s good” genre of culture consumption has a neighboring concept which is also steeped in irony and borders on pastiche and parody. They are movies or TV shows that are intentionally over the top, gratuitous and made for an ironic audience, derived from the low budget kitsch genre films of horror, western, action or exploitation. One of the most famous examples is the *Sharknado* (original film Ferrante 2013) franchise. These are movies that are created with intentional irony for an ironic audience, not meant to be read as sincere or ambitious, but as kitsch created for a knowing audience.

For pastiche to work, emphasizes Dyer, it needs to be ‘got’ as a pastiche. In the sense of understanding its double meaning, it is an aspect of irony.⁵¹⁵ The ironic, Rose argues, typically involves the transformation of a conventionalized code into another code, an activity that results in the possible recognition of incongruity between the two codes.⁵¹⁶ The term irony generally describes a statement of an ambiguous nature, which includes a code containing two (or more) messages, one of which is the message of the ironist to his “initiated” audience, and the other the “ironically meant” decoy message.⁵¹⁷ Dyer distinguishes between parody, which he describes as always read as parody, while a pastiche depends on the perception of the audience.⁵¹⁸ This is something that is not true for the definition of parody I choose to use, where parody is very much dependent on the perception of the audience. Film parody operates on both semantic and structural levels in creating a text with ironic layering. Hutcheon points out that “by evoking and denying its selected target, parody becomes inevitably ironic – a quality that permeates all parodic efforts”, meaning that irony always happens intentionally, whether the attribution be made by the encoder or the decoder.⁵¹⁹ If irony has occurred, just like with parody, it has occurred because it has been perceived as intentional, either by the one performing the irony or the one who has read the irony.

The basis of irony, according to Rose, is a hidden message for an initiated audience, which can be connected to camp and performativity, both deeply ironic

⁵¹⁵ Dyer 2007, Hutcheon 1994, p. 89ff.

⁵¹⁶ Harries 2000, p. 30.

⁵¹⁷ Rose 1979, p. 51.

⁵¹⁸ Dyer 2007, p. 24, Rose 1993, pp. 68-69.

⁵¹⁹ Hutcheon 1994, p. 118.

actions. The irony hides its true message for a reader to decode, while the parodist displays a contrast between the source text and parody in order for the parody to be successful. The incorporation of the source text in the parodic text is what structurally separates parody from irony.⁵²⁰ Just like irony, parody is dependent on context and discourse. The different layers of meaning conveyed or hidden require an audience to understand both what is said and what is implied, and the difference between them.⁵²¹ Harries comments that even when a parodied text is not present, the context can determine it as parody. He uses the example of watching “weepies” at a comedy festival, and it can also be applied on other forms of ironic viewing like *The Room* and *Sharknado*.⁵²² Parody, Rose argues, can be humorous even though it is not perceived as such by an audience who does not understand its humor but can learn to.⁵²³ This of course implies that it is not possible to define a parody as parody unless the audience understands or learns to understand it as such. Parody still needs to be perceived as parody, even though different decoders can react differently to it. The audience is not a homogenous unit, different decoders perceive intended parody differently, but just as Rose here touches on, the same decoder perceives parody differently depending on age, place, language, knowledge of references or film art etc. The audience or decoder is not a fixed point but is always mutable and in motion.

Hutcheon writes that imitation and parody both need to be understood as such by an audience, that the imitation or parody is made and what the source text is.⁵²⁴ Parody is in the eye of the beholder, but the beholder needs something to behold. We need signals from the text to guide our interpretation, and the degree of visibility of these signals determines their potential for assisting us.⁵²⁵ In an expected parodic encounter, the target logonomic system must first be easily recognizable by the spectator. Thus, well-known film genres such as the western or horror are often used as parodic models.⁵²⁶ Harries criticizes Hutcheon for implying that understanding a parody demands a sophisticated subject, that it requires something more or higher to get all the nuances of a parody. He states that “the plurality of readings evoked from any textual encounter demands a more dynamic and fluid spectatorial system than one based merely on either ‘getting it’ or not”.⁵²⁷ Focus instead needs to be laid on context, because different viewing

⁵²⁰ Rose 1993, pp. 87-90.

⁵²¹ Hutcheon 2000, p. xiv.

⁵²² Harries 2000, p. 25.

⁵²³ Rose 1993, p. 32.

⁵²⁴ Cmp Hutcheon 2000, p. 10.

⁵²⁵ Ibid, p. xvi.

⁵²⁶ Harries 2000, p. 104.

⁵²⁷ Ibid, pp. 24-26.

contexts will produce different readings. Harries concludes that “a text is complete in its assemblage of signs, yet the interpretation of those signs is always fluid and contextually bound.”⁵²⁸ Dyer writes that pastiche often incite snobbery in who gets the reference or not, which is also true for parody, but he also emphasizes that it is used in popular and mass culture and not only in high brow culture. He points out that pastiche is found in all social groupings, not only in the powerful and culturally astute, and that “every pastiche has its particular group that gets it”.⁵²⁹

In S05E08 *Mr. Peanutbutter's Boos*, we see four different timelines where Mr. Peanutbutter takes his three different wives and current girlfriend to a Halloween party at BoJack's place. Each time the party ends with him having a fight with his current partner, for different reasons that stem from the same source, his unwillingness to change. When Mr. Peanutbutter and his current girlfriend, 25-year-old Pickles Aplenty, arrive at the party, she needs to take a selfie before leaving the car. She says, “I'm ready for my close-up.” before snapping the shot and Mr. Peanutbutter says “Nice, *Sunset Boulevard*?” to which she replies, “I usually take *Fountain*.” It is at once a comment on the incessant use of travel directions through LA traffic, parodied in films like *LA Story* (Jackson 1991) and TV sketches like *The Californians* in *Saturday Night Live* (1975-), and a jab at the age difference between Mr. Peanutbutter and Pickles. She does not get the reference for the line she uses, either because she uses the line without being familiar with its origin, or because she does not know it is a famous movie line at all. Either way she is not in a position where she can read what Mr. Peanutbutter says as a reference, and it therefore falls flat.

When Diane talks to Mr. Peanutbutter in the present, she notes that he only dates women in their 20s, who are not fully grown up yet, to which he replies “So you're telling me they grow up, but I stay the same age? Alright, alright, alright...” which works perfectly fine as a line describing the situation he is in right now, but hits differently if you are aware that it is an inversion of the original line from *Dazed & Confused* (Linklater 1993) where Matthew McConaughey says “That's what I love about high school girls, I keep getting older but they stay the same age.” and his most iconic line from the same movie “Alright, alright, alright.”. Mr. Peanutbutter's delivery of the line is entirely different, filled with contemplation rather than bravado as in the original, but it is a distinct parody if you are aware of the reference. In order for it to be read as parody however, it is necessary to know the reference and appreciate how it is used in the original form. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, can it be funny? In order for a falling tree to be amusing, it needs to be observed. It needs to be perceived by a cognitive mind capable of finding some incongruity or absurdity in the way the tree falls based on previous frames of reference of trees and their surroundings. And if there is

⁵²⁸ Ibid, p. 109.

⁵²⁹ Dyer 2007, p. 3,

anything humor scholars can agree on, it is that a falling tree has endlessly greater possibilities of being funny if the event is shared by several minds in a social setting and not just observed by one mind alone.⁵³⁰

An interesting example of the importance of a knowing audience and in who delivers the parody is in the notion of performativity. In S05E04 *BoJack the Feminist* Mr. Peanutbutter wants to toughen up his image to get a part in the remake of *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet 1975). The public image of Mr. Peanutbutter has so far reflected his persona as an excessively upbeat individual who loves parties, people, social situations, tennis balls, doorbells, movies, Zachary Quinto, slippers, life and just about everything else, except for skunks and the post office. He starts the episode as a runway TV journalist “filling in for a Mario Lopez type”, a role infused with positive energy. He needs to convince Princess Carolyn as a producer, and the rest of the world, that he has the bad boy attitude that is needed for the role. “Not tough enough, huh?” he says. “I’ll show them how tough I can be.”, which is emphasized by non-diegetic dramatic music and a zoom into close-up. The music then suddenly switches to energetic red carpet background music, and he says in an upbeat tone “We’ll be back with more red-carpet pre-show fashion extravaganza, so don’t touch that remote!” and the music switches back to dramatic for his end line “...or else!”. Mr. Peanutbutter then tries to act like a tough guy when he enters Todd’s office without knocking, with sunglasses on and with tense upper arms, he tries to punch a wall, but it only hurts his hand, and he says “owie”. His attempts at performing the role of a masculine ideal, a rough and tough guy, falls parodically flat.

Judith Butler writes about the possibilities of subversivity in the visualization of performativity in enacting gender through for example drag and cross-dressing, where the understanding of the parodical requires a knowing audience. She states that to be a man or a woman is to be a part of a masquerade, an enactment of certain norms through actions, behaviors, gestures and desires connected to a natural femininity (or masculinity), and which becomes a reality through persistent imitation.⁵³¹ What is important is that this enactment does not correlate to any inner essence or core, it just produces that effect on the surface. Since the essence or identity these enactments refer to is fabricated, the actions, gestures, behaviors and other corporal and discursive means referring to them are *performative*.⁵³² The attribution of gender does not come from an expression of true or real masculinity or femininity, but from an enactment based on what masculinity and femininity is considered to be. Gender is therefore not a neutral and constant state, gender “is” not, but gender “is done” constantly and repetitively, it is in the constant process

⁵³⁰ Cmp Ödmark 2021, p. 17.

⁵³¹ Butler 1990, p. 47.

⁵³² Ibid, p. 185.

of becoming but can never reach the place where it is fully formed or finished.⁵³³ Subversivity, the ridicule of the believability of gender roles and gender segregation, is created by the audience understanding what the show is about, understanding the performativity in it.⁵³⁴

Drag is not polemic towards its source text; it enhances and highlights its parts and celebrates the (sometimes exaggerated) performance of femininity. The subversivity lies with who uses the tools on display and the disruption of normativity lies with challenging notions of heteronormativity and gender roles through the positive reiteration of a source text. The difference between drag and transvestism in comedy is often between reiterating female attributes in a celebratory manner and appropriating female attributes for the sole purpose of laughter.⁵³⁵ In order to create parody it is essential to first identify the performative in your source text, what points of reference are necessary in order for the intended audience to read it as parody. This requires a knowledge of the source text and the key attributes that it entails. This can be compared to imitating a historical figure where it is important to both know things about the person you are imitating but also instill the imitation with your own characteristics in order to perform it for an audience. Harries emphasizes that one of the distinct features of camp is centered on “the viewer’s awareness of certain moments of excess in a text and the reading of it in a specific way to accentuate that excess.”⁵³⁶ A knowing audience is required to understand parody as parody, whether it is in postcolonial mimicry, performative drag or cross-dressing, or in a failed tanking at the box-office, even if the knowing audience might not always know as much as they think. Camp can be subtle or overbearing, but it can also bridge the gap between emotional involvement with and a critical distance from a text, allowing the viewer to experience both simultaneously.⁵³⁷

Todd had a transformation of his own from loveable goof to cool and tough guy in S02E03 *Still Broken*, where he channels Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* (1989-1998), who built a transformation chamber in order to change from the nerdy Steve Urkel into the dashing and debonair Stefan Urquelle. Todd uses the prop from the show to transform himself into Toad Chavay, a cool collected tough guy who always gets his way, accompanied by an electric guitar playing non-diegetically in the background, even though it is made perfectly clear by other characters in the show that the transformation chamber is not real and does not work. It is an exaggerated way of telling the audience about the importance of self-

⁵³³ Ibid, p. 25.

⁵³⁴ Ibid, p. 141.

⁵³⁵ Cmp Sandler 1998, and Moore 2021.

⁵³⁶ Harries 2000, p. 7.

⁵³⁷ Pike 2001.

esteem. Todd does a knowing parody of *Family Matters* without polemic edge; it is used to show what Todd could accomplish without BoJack shooting him down.

In *BoJack the Feminist*, Mr. Peanutbutter lets Todd film him while he picks fights with strangers and paparazzi in order to perform the tough guy character. When that does not work, he dresses up in what he thinks is what bad boys and tough guys wear. His second outfit is an exact replica of the red leather outfit that Eddie Murphy wore in his standup special *Delirious* from 1983. Mr. Peanutbutter defends his choice by saying that “all the toughest guys wear leather, biker gangs, motorcycle cops, non-heteronormative dominatrixes.” They go to the sleaziest bar in all of Hollywood and when entering the rowdy scene to the tunes of the same kind of electric guitar as with Toad Chavay, Mr. Peanutbutter once again tries to pick a fight by saying “Listen up people! There’s a new sheriff in town, and his name is...” but immediately gets interrupted by the bartender starting to talk about the actual new sheriff of the county, which eventually leads to a unified celebration of Mr. Peanutbutter for raising such an important issue.

Try as he might, Mr. Peanutbutter cannot play the role of the bad boy or the tough guy, the masculinity ideal that has permeated movies and TV shows for as long as we can remember, but he knows how you are supposed to act when impersonating one. By making a positive and loveable character like Mr. Peanutbutter dress up as a masculine stereotype, with the clothes, glasses, posture and behavior to match, and having every single attempt for bad boy status go awry, the show destabilizes the constructs and highlights the performativity of masculinity. An attempted quotation by Mr. Peanutbutter of masculinity is turned into parody through its failure and subsequent highlighting of its artifice. By showing explicitly how masculinity is performed, how ridiculous it can be if another person tries to literally and metaphorically put on those clothes, the show questions the foundation that gender constructs like these are built on. This example reiterates the tropes of masculinity so that we recognize them from other source texts but transforms them through the failure to implement them, thus emphasizing their artificiality.

Parody Is Transforming

Another neighboring term to parody and pastiche that is sometimes used is bricolage. According to Jeremy Butler, bricolage “identifies a work that has been assembled from previous works – a mash-up or something that borrows from something else and puts it to a new use”.⁵³⁸ Bricolage does not need to contain an

⁵³⁸ Butler 2020, p. 209 quoting Claude Levi-Strauss.

element of critique.⁵³⁹ The main difference between bricolage and parody or pastiche lies in its lack of transformation. Bricolage is laying puzzle with existing pieces. Parody does not quote or place, it reiterates and changes. The *Bob's Burgers* reference used in Butler's text with the opening credits using the same extermination van but changing the name of the company to a new pun every week is therefore parody, while the *Dream On* (1990-1996) example of interspersing a clip from an old film to illustrate and verbalize the character's feelings uses bricolage, just like when Stewie dances with Gene Kelly in place of Jerry or the frequent cutaways to Conway Twitty in *Family Guy*. Bricolage permeates the media landscape of today, not least in meme culture which is based on placing existing pieces of a puzzle in new context.

There are, however, many examples where exact imitation can be read as parody. An interesting example on the intersection of performance and ethnicity or postcolonialism can be found in Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Bhabha states that in a colonial or postcolonial society, the colonizer and the colonized cannot be seen as homogenous entities, but that there are vast differences within them and several similarities between them. A key aspect that he focuses on is the ambivalence that arises both in the colonizers conflict between wanting to describe the population and to silence them, and also in being part of the colonized state or region, but being forced to adhere and adapt to the approaches and manners of the colonizer.⁵⁴⁰ The colonized party can identify with or imitate the colonizer, while simultaneously being alienated, a hybridity that creates an ambivalent subject position.⁵⁴¹ The imitation can emulate, but never quite reach the original, and at the same time there can be a consciousness in that difference, in the discrepancy between original and imitation, no matter how close to the original it is. Bhabha describes the mimicry or parody of official and acceptable behavior as a way to exercise a subtle civil obedience, or what early British missionaries in India described as "sly civility".⁵⁴² By mimicking and parodying the official vocabulary it is possible not only to access things said between the lines, but to displace the construction of meaning entirely. What is strict, civil and proper, in other words what is "right", can be exposed, ridiculed, and by extension altered. Hutcheon describes parody as imitation with change, often with the person responsible for the parody identifying and enhancing specific traits for satirical and/or comic effect. She has also stated that all parody is overtly hybrid and double-voiced.⁵⁴³ In the example that Bhabha uses from an old proverb where "a good servant knows

⁵³⁹ Butler 2020, pp. 212-215.

⁵⁴⁰ Bhabha 1985, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 154-155.

⁵⁴² Ibid, pp. 157-162.

⁵⁴³ Hutcheon 2000, p. 28.

how to bow to his master and silently break wind as he is passing by”, we are not from the perspective of the master talking about a parody, but an imitation where every effort is made to emulate the original behavior. The only thing separating it from normative behavior and turning it into ridicule or parody is the identity and context of the person performing the imitation. It becomes parody when the imitation is perceived as comedic because it is a colonized person performing it, and because there is a knowing audience in a shared situation who can perceive the imitation as parody. It is parody that becomes parody based on who is performing it, not what is performed.

Quotation and parody have a lot of overlaps, with the difference that parody often makes a change. This is evident in the use of quotation at moments where there is no transformational activity within the text, in order to generate the recognition of similarity to the source text.⁵⁴⁴ While non-parodic quotation may be described as leading the reader to make associations between two related but contingent texts, the function of the quotation in the parody is to connect and contrast disparate texts so that either their concealed identity or their concealed discrepancy will be foregrounded.⁵⁴⁵ Svante Nordin has shown how quotation can be seen as an application of a text in a new situation, which gives the quotation authority but also changes its meaning.⁵⁴⁶ Sometimes parody can be infusing an imitation or a direct quotation in a new context, like in *Hot Shots!* (Abrahams 1991), an example of the sustained parody films that Harries analyzes. It parodies many forms of pop culture, but its main target is the movie *Top Gun* (Scott 1986), which follows fighter pilot Maverick played by Tom Cruise whose role is parodied by Charlie Sheen as Topper Harley in *Hot Shots!*. In one scene in the original, Maverick receives a talking to by one of his superiors, who uses the phrase “your ego is writing checks your body can’t cash” with sincerity and menace, trying to get the arrogant pilot to play it safe instead of risking it all. This exact line is then used in the parody, a superior to Topper Harley says with sincerity and menace that “your ego is writing checks your body can’t cash”. Normally in a parody the line would be changed or maybe illustrated by a literalization where his ego was actually writing checks, but in this case, it is left in as a direct quotation, which is also one possible way of reading it. I would argue however that the direct quotation here suggests that the original line is so ridiculous that it does not need changing to adapt to the parodic context. The original is treated as a self-parody and can therefore be lifted directly into the sustained parody film, implying a rather stark polemic edge towards the original script.

A milder example can be found in the S02E08 episode *Let’s Find Out* where character Mia McKibbin gives Todd a scolding reiterating the one Gust Avrakatos

⁵⁴⁴ Harries 2000, p. 26.

⁵⁴⁵ Rose 1979, p. 49.

⁵⁴⁶ Nordin 2001.

(played by Philip Seymour Hoffman) gives his boss Cravely in *Charlie Wilson's War* (Nichols 2007). She ends the rant in the exact same way as Avrakatos does, by saying "and I'm never ever sick at sea", so they are two people yelling at someone in a workplace using the exact same line which in both occurrences have no real place in the rant. What turns this direct quotation with the same intonation in the same situation into a parody is in the very reiteration of the line along with the context in which it is being used. Mia McKibben is not, as Gust Avrakatos, angry that she did not get the post as station chief in Helsinki but uses the line in a rant against her competitor for the pen that JD Salinger has promised the best worker at the end of shooting the first episode of *Hollywood Stars and Celebrities*. *What do they Know? Do they know stuff? Let's find out!*. That she makes the serious quotation in a trivial manner, and that this takes place in a context like *BoJack Horseman*, is what turns it into a parody, even though it is not transformed in any other way.

The Film in Film Parody

Parodies in film have been around almost as long as film art itself. Harries notes that "film parody has created its own tradition and canon of films by recalling and playing with the codes and conventions of films past." Cinema is built on a tradition of basing its movies on other sources, such as plays, books and real events and it is natural for films and TV shows to reference or relate to them.⁵⁴⁷ Hutcheon points out that parody changes with culture and its forms, its relations to its "targets" and its intentions differ when moving through time and space. She criticizes Bakhtin for arguing that theories on literary parody can be directly translated into any other art form, that it would function in the same manner no matter where you use it.⁵⁴⁸ Interesting for this study is that, even though she uses plenty of examples from literature, music, architecture and painting, she rarely talks about films and the unique contexts and discourses within that field of study. Film parody has its own growing canon, where parodic discourse implements its subversive activities in a surprisingly standardized and predictable way, according to Harries. In a culture climate that Harries describes as "ironic supersaturation", there is even a risk that classical canons or genres loses its relevance to newer audiences.⁵⁴⁹ The popularization of parody makes postmodern irony less threatening, less radical and more commercially viable for a large audience.⁵⁵⁰ One

⁵⁴⁷ Harries 2000, pp. 9-11.

⁵⁴⁸ Hutcheon 2000, p. 8, where she references Bakhtin 1978, pp. 229-233.

⁵⁴⁹ Harries 2000, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

key difference between parody in literature and parody on film is the increased possibility of simultaneous parodies. In a single sequence, a character can be dressed in one way, move in a different way, be named something, talk in a different way, with background and set design referencing one thing while another character can represent something else, and the music played or the camera position, movement, editing and framing can reflect something else entirely. All these aspects can reference and parody different source texts at the same time.

In S06E10 *Good Damage* Diane struggles with writer's block and tries to figure out what her book should be about. The episode starts with a musical montage reiterating the style of music, acting, editing and tempo of *The Monkees* (1965-1968), to show how Diane is handling being on antidepressants. Her writer's block is then illustrated throughout the episode through a manifestation of her inner dialogue, her thoughts and what she writes shown in hand drawn sketch animation with outlined figures, black-and-white color and twitchy movement.⁵⁵¹ While Diane is on the phone with Princess Carolyn talking about the book she is supposed to write, they touch on subjects like TV ratings, references to a parodic version of *Shark Tank* (2009-), trauma and the Japanese art of kintsugi where cracks are filled with gold to make the whole even more beautiful, meanwhile commercials run in the background for stores like Bah Kids, Bugo Hoss for distinguished horses, and an enthusiastic dog as a poster boy for Berner Republer.

So, during a serious conversation discussing high art and displaying awareness of cultural tropes, commercial parodies are visible in the background but never commented upon. Diane remembers conversations with her dad who in the subjective visualization of her thoughts turns into a Godzilla type monster who bites the top of a building off. An image of her sitting on the floor crouched over a typewriter once again reiterates the style and imagery of *Peanuts* and Snoopy crouching over a typewriter. She starts to write about growing up in Boston and realize that to understand Boston you need to go back 250 years, which is illustrated by a clock ticking backwards and a dissolve into Boston harbor where two men on a ship tosses boxes of tea into the sea. They have 18th century contemporary wigs but also bare chests with marked sixpacks. One of them says in modern Boston slang and intonation "Taxation without representation is wicked outta just, brah!" to which the other gentleman replies, "Bro check it out I'm teabaggin' the haaabaa." and the first one responds, "No frickin' way! Go Pats! Unrelated."

Actual events of the Boston Tea Party intermingle with modern Boston slang filtered through references from films like *Good Will Hunting* (Van Sant 1997) and *The Departed* (Scorsese 2006) alluding the timelessness of masculinized representations while classic animation methods like metamorphosis and plasticity

⁵⁵¹ For further study into the scribble aesthetic of *Good Damage*, see Ristola 2024.

are self-consciously used by picturing Diane as a ship with kintsugi cracks and Mr. Peanutbutter as a kraken dragging her down, all this to the ironic tune of a 18th century revolutionary war flute playing in the background. When Diane is interrupted in her inner monologue by the insistence of a young adult detective character she conjures up, the illustrations turn from black-and-white scribbles into vibrant color, the voices go from echo-y to grounded, and the mall where the detective, named Ivy, solve crimes is now turned into a generic copy of the mall where Diane sits to write, including stores like Clothes, Chicago Style Food, Food by the Foodful, another Clothes, and the former commercial of Bugo Hoss now being for Clothes.

These are examples of something that would be impossible to do in literature with the same simultaneity as with moving pictures. The narrating discourse of film does not create the diegesis through words alone in the way it does in literature. In film, the narrator has the power to make an image, to shape an optical and aural moving representation of the world.⁵⁵² In literature, a parody or pastiche can be subtle or direct, it can focus on form, style or subject matter, but it is rarely more than one thing at a time. In film parody, this is a rule rather than an exception. This also makes the border between parody and pastiche in film and tv blurry. Judging whether a piece of art is fully either parody or pastiche is often impossible for film and tv and it is always in some way in contention and a matter of discussion. In film and TV something is often parody at one point, pastiche at another, and often both at once with different elements like style, story and *mise-en-scène* signaling different uses, but at the same time together creating something new.

Breaking Down the Borders of Parody

Why is it important to study parody? What can it do besides make a few people laugh at times and a few other people feel smart for catching a reference? Bakhtin was adamant that parody in general, but during the carnival specifically, could have a lasting reformatory or revolutionary effect on people. The temporary taking down and ridiculing of authority and norms such as the king and clergy could change people's minds and actions.⁵⁵³ It has been repeated in variations by other scholars that parody can have subversive effects. Christopher Stone said as early as 1914 that ridicule is society's most effective means of curing inelasticity, that it can be used to "explode the pompous" and prevent the incompetent from achieving success.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵² Rush 1995, p. 7.

⁵⁵³ Roth-Lindberg 1995, pp. 342 and 348.

⁵⁵⁴ Rose 1993, p. 26, where she quotes Stone 1914, p. 8.

Dane comments on Bakhtin by adding that “the subversive force of parody functions by opposing the social institutions which the various linguistic registers represent.”⁵⁵⁵ Hassan states that Bakhtin’s carnivalization “riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony and hybridization”.⁵⁵⁶ Hutcheon emphasizes the potential of showing alternatives that parody can have, that it challenges monolithic thinking in modern theory, that theories can help explain some parts of existence, but not all, and that parody plays a part in highlighting that.⁵⁵⁷ Parody and ironic distance can even be instrumental in discovering new ways to perform art in different genres. Jauss notes that “the evocation of expectations means that the comic hero can be used to make conscious certain norms which can then be made fun of or made problematical, and that such parody can serve as a release from other authorities, or as a means of protesting against them, as well as a way of establishing new norms against the old”.⁵⁵⁸ Shohat emphasizes that “parody is especially appropriate for the discussion of ‘center’ and ‘margins’ since – due to its historical critical marginalization, as well as its capacity for appropriating and critically transforming existing discourses – parody becomes a means of renewal and demystification, a way of laughing away outmoded forms of thinking.”⁵⁵⁹ Hoesterey adds that “postmodern pasticcio works have emancipatory potential for their dialectical stance toward history, the way they may stage a battlefield of cultural myths or draw attention to and rework cultural codifications that for centuries marginalized unconventional identities.”⁵⁶⁰ Dentith even argues that parody in its function as a representative of contemporary popular culture refuses to “grant final authority to any one way of speaking over another” and that works to challenge and dissolve linguistic and cultural authority.⁵⁶¹

Not all scholars are of course positive towards parody. Derrida had a distinctly negative view on parody, he said that it lacked meaning and significance.⁵⁶² Baudrillard describes modern parody as blank, blind and empty, something that Jameson also picks up on.⁵⁶³ The discussion on postmodernity, parody and pastiche as something negative, degenerate and empty is however mostly used for

⁵⁵⁵ Dane 1988, p. 8.

⁵⁵⁶ Hassan 2000, p. 116.

⁵⁵⁷ Hutcheon 2000, p. 116.

⁵⁵⁸ Jauss 1976, p. 105-106, quoted in Rose 1993, p. 173.

⁵⁵⁹ Shohat 1991, p. 238.

⁵⁶⁰ Hoesterey 2001, pp. 21-29.

⁵⁶¹ Dentith 2000, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁶² Rose 1993, pp. 191-192.

⁵⁶³ Baudrillard 1984, Jameson 2005, see discussion in Rose 1993, p. 217.

its role in architecture, possibly also for the modern art scene.⁵⁶⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, Harries also questions the subversiveness of parody by asking if we “really become ‘liberated’ after watching an hour and a half of *Spaceballs*?” (Brooks 1987).⁵⁶⁵ Well, maybe not, but then again it is not a film with a subversive message, it is a straight up comedy with some minor political commentary. Compare this with some of the storylines in *BoJack Horseman*, and you will get a different answer. Harries suggest that parody “does have some effect through its unsettling of established normative systems yet ends up losing most of its radical verve by becoming a normative system itself.”⁵⁶⁶ Even though there are examples of this happening, it is far from the whole truth. If you only look at cinematically distributed films, especially the sustained parody films that Harries uses in his analysis, it is easy to reach this conclusion, but if you shift focus to television shows you can see that parody is alive and thriving, and that it can be subversive, challenging and lead to political change.

It is important here to not forget that although parody can be used as an example of subversivity, revolution and change, it can, just like irony, have conservative functions. One is where the parody conserves the source text longer by referencing it and lifting it into the mind of a potentially new audience, as Hutcheon via the likes of Barthes, Kristeva and MacDonald argues in stating that “in imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces”.⁵⁶⁷ By parodying something you make a decision on what is worthy of a parody, what deserves attention and cultural space. What is parodied is also canonized. The severity of this is, however, downplayed by Hutcheon when she points out that most parodies tend to choose popular source texts to parody simply in order for people to be able to recognize them.⁵⁶⁸ Parody is often used to ridicule that which is considered powerful, arrogant, abusive, pretentious and full of itself. This includes expressions or works of art that take themselves seriously or push boundaries in their creation. It can thereby function as a reminder for innovators of art that they should not think that they are all that great, that their art and ideas are ridiculous and that the grounded sensible “normal” people have every right to laugh at their expense. It is perhaps most commonly used to mock expressions in modern art, but also to criticize political expressions from minorities.⁵⁶⁹ In *Irony’s Edge*, Hutcheon concludes that there are different traditions for the interpretation of irony, where some believe it

⁵⁶⁴ Cmp Rose 1993, pp. 216-232.

⁵⁶⁵ Harries 2000, p. 4.

⁵⁶⁶ Harries 2000, p. 120.

⁵⁶⁷ Hutcheon 2000, pp. 26 and 75, where she quotes Barthes 1974, Kristeva 1969, and MacDonald 1960.

⁵⁶⁸ Hutcheon 2000, p. 76.

⁵⁶⁹ Cmp discussion in Hutcheon 2000, p. 77.

to be conservative and destructive while others believe it to be fundamentally subversive, unsettling the certainties which sustain the social order.⁵⁷⁰ Dentith sees these different traditions in parody as well as irony, where one side has been mocking innovation, while one has challenged authority.⁵⁷¹ The truth is of course, as Dentith also concludes, that both irony and parody contain both these directions simultaneously.⁵⁷² Parody can be conservative and subversive in the same film, in the same episode, even in the same scene or sentence. Sometimes one side dominates, sometimes the other, but both always exist and play a significant role in the concept of parody. *South Park* is a perfect example of a show that constantly attacks whatever it deems deserve it, things that need punctuating or to be taken down a few pegs, no matter where in the societal hierarchy these things exist, leading to consequences that are sometimes reactionary, sometimes subversive. The important thing for *South Park* is not to be politically consequent, the important thing is the dismantling of what they believe to be authoritative, which is the very essence of carnival.

Parody, Hutcheon argues, “is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression.”⁵⁷³ In researching the subversive potential of parody it is important to keep in mind this duality, that subversivity and resistance can strike both ways depending on where the parody is coming from and who is making it, it can both subvert and reinforce society’s norms. This is one more reason why the interpretation of parody needs to take the context into account. Who made the parody, in what time, at what place and in what context? These questions need to be answered in order to understand the parody and what it tries to do. Hutcheon points out that the textual doubling of parody functions to mark difference.⁵⁷⁴ I would agree that a parody needs to change or transform something from the source text in order to create something new, even if that change or transformation is entirely contextual. However, when Hutcheon claims that the main function of parody is to create critical difference, I disagree. Harries argues that many parody scholars focus too much on the difference a parody needs to have from its original and forget the similarities needed to be reiterated for it to be understood as parody. Parody needs a reiteration and a transformation of a source text to be a parody but creating a critical distance towards its source text is neither the main function nor the purpose of parody. At least not all parody, as Hutcheon states. Parody can serve many purposes and many

⁵⁷⁰ Hutcheon 1994.

⁵⁷¹ Dentith 2000, p. 20.

⁵⁷² Ibid, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁷³ Hutcheon 2000, p. 26.

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 53.

functions, as we have seen in this chapter. It can be critical, ironic and humorous, in fact it often is. But it can also be celebratory, serious, philosophical, absurd, intelligent, unworthy and beautiful. Parody is not just one thing; it is a tool that can be used in an almost infinite number of ways. And this is exactly what I investigate in the rest of this study.

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a definition of parody that is correct. It is to illustrate the definition of parody I use as a tool in my analysis. The futility of finding an ultimate definition of parody is that it works in different ways depending on what material you use it for, be it film, television, music, literature, architecture, or your friend's obnoxious Trump impersonation. It works in different ways depending on when you do your analysis, where you do it, and who you are at that time and place. It is meant as a tool for analysis and like any other tool it can be picked up by others if they want and choose to, if they find meaning and purpose in using it, even if it is to hammer in a screw. When I argue that as soon as you lift your perspective from the theoretical definition it becomes a matter of discussion, that does not mean that I believe that it is not important or has no merit. I believe that it is of utmost importance to discuss and analyze how parody works and how it is used, in fact it can be said to be the main purpose of this entire thesis. But as soon as you switch perspective from asking "what is parody?" to "is this parody?" you leave the realm of perfect certainty that can only exist in a definition that is never tried, at least not in matters of art. So the question of whether *Hot Fuzz* is parody or *Archer* is pastiche is a matter of discussion, but it is something that you can argue for or against with varying degrees of legitimacy. The exactness of a certain definition of parody is not important in order to distinguish or hierarchize against other definitions, it is important in order to describe how I use it in this particular analysis so that the reader can understand why I argue the way I do. That is what this chapter has been about, not to give *the*, or even *a* correct answer to what parody is, but to explain in some detail how it is used in this analysis.

As I have stated, there have been many different definitions of parody throughout the years, but apart from the definition I use here there is a different definition that works parallel to it. Parody is also a genre, and that definition is not really affected by the definition I use here. It is also, in my opinion, not that important to use in a more thorough analysis like the one I try to do. Parody as genre is a sorting mechanism that was used to separate films on the shelves of video stores and is now used to categorize films on a streaming service, and that definition is separated from, albeit related to, the definition of parody that I use here, which is parody as an art form. Just like any other art form that encompasses the highs and lows of quality and ambition, there is cheap and expensive parody, there is ugly and beautiful parody, there is critical and uncritical parody, there is subversive and reactionary parody, there is funny and unfunny parody, there is

good and bad parody. In fact, there are a lot of bad parodies, but it is still an art form, and it is still interesting to examine what it does and how it is used.

One of Richard Dyer's main points in *Pastiche*, which he arrives at in Chapter 5, is that pastiche does not have a fundamentally negative timber, which it so often has been described as. Even though many have defended pastiche, including Marcel Proust, it has often been treated as a lesser art form, when it can be used in so many ways. Flaubert's *Parrot* and *Far from Heaven* (Haynes 2002) succeed according to Dyer with what critics and theorists thought was impossible or undesirable, "to be at once moving and inescapably pastiching". Dyer states that "[t]he most valuable point of pastiche resides in its ability to move us even while allowing us to be conscious of where the means of our being moved come from, its historicity."⁵⁷⁵ He also acknowledges that some people will never surpass their obstacle of allowing emotional responses to be interfered with by pastiche. Just look at the general notion that Wes Anderson's films have no depth behind their glossy surface, something that is actually referenced in *BoJack Horseman* S05E04 *BoJack the Feminist* where Mr. Peanutbutter inadvertently cures one of the paparazzi photographers' depth perception, prompting him to fly home and watch a bunch of Wes Anderson films to "see if I can perceive any depth in them".⁵⁷⁶ Pastiche is worth taking seriously, it can be clever and progressive, but it is not always so. Dyer argues against the notion that pastiche is incompatible with affect. It demonstrates that self-consciousness and emotional expression can co-exist.⁵⁷⁷ Even though Dyer argues that this does not apply to parody, since he has a different definition of the two, I would argue that it is one of the main points of this chapter as well, that parody can and often does elicit emotions other than laughter.

BoJack saves Todd from the improv cruise ship by evoking the tropes of war and action movies in preforming against the guards of the ship. Diane realizes she will not be able to discuss the sexual abuse that game show host Hank Hippopopolous is accused of and no doubt guilty of, in a scene which reiterates and inverts the deep throat scenes from *All the President's Men*. Princess Carolyn chases after Judah when she realizes that she has deeper feelings for him, in a romantic comedy chase to the airport reiteration, but realizes that he has tried to find her at the office, where they finally meet and kiss for the first time. Sarah Lynn dies from an overdose in BoJack's arms the same day she wins an Oscar for *The Silly Banana Theme (Love Theme)* from *The Nazi who Played Yahtzee*. Todd accepts his asexuality and confirms this by missing out on his triangle duties at the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra reiterating Will Hunting leaving Boston without telling anyone in *Good Will Hunting*. BoJack confronts his imminent death by drowning with a recurring dream that this time takes him closer to the inevitable

⁵⁷⁵ Dyer 2007, pp. 137-138.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 174.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 4.

darkness that follows performances at a vaudeville stage show in a mysterious house, where he confronts other people that have died in his life. Diane reacting to the “brrap brrap pew pew” of the *Get that Fetus, Kill that Fetus* chorus in an abortion clinic handling her own nerves before the procedure, listening to the teenager asking “you get that it’s a joke, right?” explaining how the abortion parody can make a difficult decision easier, and Diane realizing that the procedure could have been much worse and that the discourse on abortion needs oppositional voices, and being surprised when Sextina Aquafina’s live broadcasted abortion is “surprisingly tasteful” and “weirdly educational”.

Chapter 3 Beyond the Borders of National Identity

Debemos escuchar a este niño. ¡Mexico es mucho mayor que esto! – El Pollo Loco employee

So, as they say in Canada, peace oot! – Rick Sanchez

How hard can it be? I mean... Mexicans do it. – Malory Archer

For a shared national identity to gain political significance, it needs to be activated and specified, usually contrasting a national “us” against a different national “them” in order to strengthen “our” nation.⁵⁷⁸ The definition of Sweden and Swedishness requires the existence of Danes, Germans and Norwegians.⁵⁷⁹ Hence, the definition of America and Americanness requires the existence of Canadians, Mexicans, and Europeans to only mention a few. An obvious and material boundary mounted by a nation is its physical borders with other nations. The proximity of the other often decides the effort of demarcation, meaning that an “other” that is geographically or culturally closer often needs to be addressed more vehemently in order to uphold the sense of national community. As Andy Medhurst concluded, the closer the neighbors are, the more dire the need for differentiation often is. For Britain, differences with the French, German, Irish, and American (as a former colony) nations are more important than differences with the Portuguese or Peruvian nations. Likewise for the USA, the closest neighbors are important in forming the self-image as a cohesive and unique community, a nation unlike any other. And the closest neighbors for the USA, at least in the geographical sense, are Mexico and Canada. It is an area where comedy often plays a significant role, separating Swedes from Norwegians through the friendly banter of Norwegian jokes and vice versa emphasizing the differences between the countries and their inhabitants, despite the vast and obvious common

⁵⁷⁸ Ehn et al 1993, pp. 13-16, Skey 2011, pp. 66-94.

⁵⁷⁹ Löfgren 1993, p. 167.

ground between them.⁵⁸⁰ This chapter is concerned with borders, or rather what lies beyond the borders and how borders are created between “us” and “them”, how American national identity can be created, upheld, and deconstructed through contrasting it with perspectives on other national identities. More specifically, this chapter investigates what representations of Canada, Mexico, and as an extension Latin America can be found in the material, how these representations are contrasted against an American national identity, how an American national identity or American national identities are formed in these contrasts and what that looks like. Moreover, this chapter will focus on the role that parody and satire play in contrasting national identities and forming national identity.

A nation and the self-image that comes with it is created in contrast to something else and shaping an identity is usually done by distinguishing and separating from an other. An interesting example of the making of an other and the physical manifestation of cultural otherness occurs in the fourteenth season of *South Park*. In S14E09 *It's a Jersey Thing* a new family moves to South Park from New Jersey. The mother of the family is loud, confrontative and wears heavy make-up, the father is all muscles and tanned skin. Drawing on stereotypes and caricatures of people from New Jersey, established and on occasion made a pastiche in the docudrama *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012), the family makes a lot of noise figuratively and literally by fighting during the daytime and having sex during the nighttime. They also use the “confessional talk” style of directly addressing the camera with explanations and elaborations on what has occurred earlier, popularized through the docusoap and docudrama trend established in TV shows in the decade leading up to *Jersey Shore*. This is even though there is no camera crew following or filming the family, they just do it anyway. Pulling the confession cam technique out of the context of its docusoap source text and placing it as a behavioral trait rather than a television trope works as a parodic extraneous inclusion, and the effect the parody has is to make confession cam part of the othering of Jersey culture and its constituents.

Confession cam talks is not just something that Jersey people do; it is something that they are. The Jersey culture is depicted as very specific and different, with cultural and behavioral markers that works as signifiers for Jersey as an imagined community, with a distinct accent, Italian American heritage, unique hairstyles and clothing, and an attitude that must be described as in-your-face. Its followers and inhabitants explain every occurrence where Jersey differs from the other American society by explaining that “it’s a Jersey thing” signaling that only the members of this imagined community, with shared symbolisms, communication, and tradition, are able to understand its qualities. This can be said to be true of many subcultures

⁵⁸⁰ Medhurst 2007, where he uses the English need to separate oneself from the Irish, through the use of both political action and through comedy, when there is no need to distinguish oneself from the Portuguese, p. 28.

in society that form a community which outsiders “just don’t get”, even imagined communities based on a geographic place or region like Jersey can be found in other American examples, but two aspects make this representation different. First, that Jersey as the other is constructed through reiterating its representations in popular culture in general and the *Jersey Shore* television show specifically, including television tropes like the confession cam as part of its cultural identity. Second, the territorial replication of culture influence.

While the Jersey family exerts cultural influence over its surroundings, Jersey as a territorially defined entity expands its borders across the USA, which is illustrated by maps shown by Randy Marsh in the episode. Here we clearly see that Jersey have territorially conquered most of the previously American soil, claiming it as their own. The cultural, regional, and ethnic borders of Jersey manifests physically in the expansion of territory which has already conquered the entire eastern USA, which prompts Randy to compel the town of South Park to wage war against its enemy. The threat of the cultural other turns through a parodic exaggeration into war over physical borders. It is an interesting depiction of the confirmation of an “us” through the othering of a “them” and its satiric jab at the malleability of culture and nation is delivered through the means of parody.

This chapter does, however, focus on representations of Canada, Mexico, and Latin America. We will start with Canada and examine how it is represented in the material. Firstly, even though I will argue in the next chapter that Equestria is in fact an alternate version of the US and that places alluding to real Canadian places like Vanhoover and Neighgara Falls are used in the show, Canada or a Canadian counterpart is not really present in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. There is an argument to be had that the Crystal Empire, situated in the north, painted in frostier colors and populated by friends and allies to the Mane Six and the rulers of Equestria, is what is closest to Canada, but it is still a part of Equestria despite it being an empire of its own. The differences and anomalies are too great and many to make any sort of argument that a Canada can be identified in the show.

Similarly, the southern part of Equestria is named the Tenochtitlan Basin and is where most of the Indiana Jones styled hero Daring Do’s adventures take place. While even though this is an obvious reference to ancient Aztec culture including the name of its capital, buildings, names, and mythology, it does not play a very significant part in the show. Additionally, even though this is geographically placed in modern day Mexico, the references to Aztec culture and history are made more in a fantasy setting than a real-life political setting, so it is less important to the discourse on American national identity.

BoJack Horseman rarely strays outside the realm of the United States and even though depictions of American national identity are common, they are rarely constructed or deconstructed against other nations, including Canada or Mexico. No episode is placed in either country or on its border and references to Canada and Mexico are only made in passing and thus have little impact on this first

chapter. Similarly, in *Rick and Morty* references to Canada and Mexico can be found, like the underground dwelling Chuds in S05E04 *Rickdependence Spray*, which is seemingly inspired by Mexican Telenovela attributes and tropes, but it never takes center stage and is rarely important in constructing and satirizing American national identity. Thus, this first chapter focuses on the other two shows and their depiction of Canada, Mexico, and Latin America in relation to the US, starting with Canada.

South Park and the Canadian border

In the political satire *Canadian Bacon* (Moore 1995) the stereotypical representation of Canada as the passive, polite, democratic, and for the most part Anglo-Saxon neighbor to the north is drawn upon and satirized. A US government in need of a boost in popularity, economy and moral due to lack of enemies after the fall of the Berlin Wall decides that Canada could be a prime candidate, a plan which of course spectacularly backfires to hilarious consequences. The depiction of Canadians as passive and polite used in the film is also present in the two chosen TV shows in their representation of Canada. *South Park* often uses Canada as a blank canvas to project satirical and parodical play and absurdity upon, but Canada is also represented as a socialistic, honest, kind, and wimpish state in contrast to the loud, boisterous, bullying and cool American state.⁵⁸¹ Canada, in Homer Simpson's words in S15E04 of *The Simpsons*, *The Regina Monologues*, is America's brother who is also a son to Britain, but the "goody two-shoes who by the way never had a girlfriend". Canada is in many ways depicted similarly to Scandinavia, with government-controlled television, free health care, strict gun laws and political neutrality. In S13E04 *Eat, Pray, Queef* Canadian TV welcomes its viewers by stating "Welcome to the Canada Channel, the only channel in Canada." *South Park* turns to Canada many times during the show's run and let it represent whatever is necessary for the purpose of the current episode. It is made to represent a bastion of free speech in the *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* movie and consequently the object of a military invasion from the puritan censorship of America. One line from the Oscar nominated song *Blame Canada* describes Canada as "not even a real country anyway". Canada is the starting point for a discussion on injustices of gendered humor in *Eat, Pray, Queef*, a stand-in for the Writer's Guild of America symbolizing the futility of unorganized strikes in S12E04 *Canada on Strike*, and a playground for mobile games using microtransactions preying on young costumers in S18E06 *Freemium Isn't Free*, in which Canada is referred to as ethical, respected, and "a shitty tundra".

⁵⁸¹ For more discussion on Canada as a blank canvas in *South Park*, see Keyes 2009, and Coleman 2008, p. 132.

The animation style of the *South Park* characters is crude and angular due to the unparallel turnaround time of the episodes. In the beginning of the show there simply was not enough time to create more advanced animation and since it became so interconnected with how the show was perceived, the creators decided to lean into it and use it as the style of the show even when resources allowed more advanced animation in shorter turnaround. Canadian characters of the show, however, are even more crude and angular in their animation. When they speak, their jawbone separate from the rest of their head and their movements are even more jangled and sporadic than the regular American characters on the show. Their cars and trailers even have pixelated square tires which makes them bumpy when driving. By constructing Canadians as a physical and racial other, they are separated from not only Americans but people from other countries in the world, only Canadians are graced with this unique physicality.⁵⁸² Using Canadian as a racial category and not only a nationality helps, according to Gournelos, to “point out the illogical nature of racial constructions by comparing them to national boundaries”.⁵⁸³ Canadian characters are also rendered linguistically different from other characters on the show. Their accent is closer to Standard British English than their American counterparts, they use Canadian Raising diphthongs where words like “about” becomes “aboot” complete with examples of semi-phonetic respelling of the word on signs and posters, they use pragmatic particles like “eh?” at the end of sentences, and they apply the merger of vowel sounds in words like “sorry” to pronounce it “sore-ry”. This is treated as a foreign word in S19E02 *Where My Country Gone?* when Butters’ Canadian girlfriend explains its use to him.⁵⁸⁴ The physical and linguistic markers differentiating Canadians in the show from other characters are simplified to a degree where they must be read as satirical constructions rather than genetic markers of nationality.

In *South Park* S15E03 *Royal Pudding*, Canada works as a stand-in for both British imperial fantasies of royalty and tradition while simultaneously working as a playground for enacting and parodying tropes of medieval chivalry and adventure. In the episode, Kyle’s little brother Ike who is adopted from Canada, watches the Canadian royal wedding on TV. During the broadcast, increasingly absurd actions and occurrences take place, like throwing cereal at the bishop of Newfoundland or the Prince dipping his arms in a huge bowl of butter scotch pudding. Every time this happens, it is narrated by television commentaries who explain it with “... as is tradition”, parodying through incongruity the many strange customs and traditions surrounding the British royal family and monarchies at large, especially during elevated events such as a royal wedding. Attending the

⁵⁸² Cmp discussion of Canadian physicality in *South Park* in Passa 2020.

⁵⁸³ Gournelos 2009, p. 167.

⁵⁸⁴ For an extensive discussion on the linguistic differentiations of Canadians in *South Park*, see Passa 2020, pp. 398-411.

ceremony among other dignitaries are Terence and Philip and the Queef Sisters, rock artist Bryan Adams, the Duke and Duchess of Calgary, and the mushroom people of Nova Scotia. Real life celebrities are mixed with in-world celebrities, Canadian nobility molded after British model, and fairytale creatures who are a natural part of the wedding as any other guests.

When the princess is abducted, all Canadian citizens are instructed by the Canadian Prime Minister to go home and open their “box of faith”, which Ike does. In a literalization of the imagined community, all Canadians have a box of faith at home even if they, as Ike, do not live in the country anymore. It contains items to help every citizen to defeat the enemy and save the princess, and in a parodic reiteration of a fantasy quest, Ike makes his way to Canada to do his part allied with Canadians he meets along the way. He visits Native Canadians, Innuits living in the snow-covered north of Canada, in search of answers and to see if they might have taken the Princess because of how the Canadian population has treated them. They say that even though it is true that they hate Canadians, they would never take the princess. The episode emphasizes the righteous anger of the indigenous population not in contrast with the USA but as a reminder that this occurs in Canada as well. The Innuits lead Ike and his adventurers to the guilty party Atok Atok, who is the corporal manifestation of Tooth Decay, and who takes from all nations and not just Canadians. Ike manages to save the Princess and restore order to the nation of Canada.

Although full of absurdity and extraneous inclusions of characters and phenomena not usually connected to Canadian national identity, the episode does make some interesting contrasts with American national identity. The Canadian connection to one of its former colonial powers, the British Empire, is accentuated through the presence of royalty and nobility in princes, princesses, dukes, and duchesses and its fairytale royal wedding. Canada, unlike the US, is represented as closer to European manners and traditions and to a historical colonial power contrasted against the American present colonial power. And although South Park as a Colorado mountain town is usually depicted as cold and snowy, Canada is even more so, and its indigenous population is represented as having a mythical connection to the natural elements and the snow and ice surrounding them. Parodic representations of fantasy adventures and of televised royal rituals work to enhance the absurdity and otherworldly qualities of the episode, rendering Canada more of a made-up nation pasted together by different pieces of bricolage. Therefore, it does not contribute significantly to the creation of American national identity more than as a realistic counterpart to the fantasy world of Canada, but the parodic literalization of a Canadian imagined community does make it an interesting addition to the discourse on contrasting national identities.

One of the main storylines of season 19 of *South Park* is Mr. Garrison’s transformation from angry and bigoted fourth grade teacher to an unlikely presidential candidate. The Garrison character is an example of a responsive

approach to political activism in popular culture, in which politics is an actively negotiated discursive field where "common sense" is built, maintained, and altered.⁵⁸⁵ The episode starts with a frustration over immigrants pouring over the border to America to supposedly take jobs from hard-working white male Americans. Mr. Garrison initiates a protest movement that mirror the real-life rhetoric of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign where he repeatedly talked about the threat to American life and values stemming from immigration mainly from Mexican and Central American origin. "Build the wall" became a rallying cry, a campaign slogan, and a political promise from Trump if elected. This is knowingly referenced in *Where My Country Gone?* where Mr. Garrison runs a campaign on the famous "Make America Great Again" slogan and wants to build a wall to stop the uncontrollable surge of undocumented immigrants. The parodic use of a sentimental patriotic song titled *Where has my Country Gone?* where Mr. Garrison laments the many ways America is made worse through immigration, reiterates and ridicules actual patriotic lamentations like those of country singers Lee Greenwood or Toby Keith. The song includes exaggerated lines like "it took forty-three presidents to make us stand tall, and just one black guy to unravel it all". Once again, the parodic version says the quiet part out loud, and it would not be efficient unless it pulled off the reiteration of patriotic song source texts so the audience can recognize them. Parody is used to satirize the Trump campaign and the singers and songwriters who helped convey its selective patriotic messaging.

The kicker in the episode is that the immigrants do not come from the Southern border, but from the border to Canada. Mr. Garrison realizes that the more extreme his statements and rallying are, the more he gains in popularity with large parts of the population. His first public speech states that "Now I may not understand politics... or immigration policy... or the law... or basic ideological concepts... but damn it I understand there's a lot of Canadians here and I want to do something about it!" "Make America Great Again" is radicalized and literalized into "Fuck Them All to Death" and he convinces a mob of people that they need to build a wall on the border to Canada to stop Canadians from taking their jobs and way of life.

That this is satire is not in question, but it is an interesting example of the borders of parody. Does the Trump campaign and its messaging count as a source text in that it is a work of art, that it is made and of stuff and that it does something? I would argue that the incessive broadcasting of Trump as a person and a public speaker and the events during his presidential campaign, including the many imitations and satires of him before this episode, count as a source text which is possible to parody. Consequently, I would argue that the Garrison campaign in

⁵⁸⁵ For a more in-depth analysis of the Garrison character and its importance for the performative functions of sexuality, gender identity, and bigotry in *South Park*, see Gournelos 2009, pp. 101-122.

South Park and the Garrison as Trump character is not only satire but also parody. What the parody does in this instance is to highlight the performativity and artificiality of the original campaign and the Trump persona. By slightly exaggerating the messaging and literalizing the parts that are not said out loud but that are easy to read, like blaming immigrants for crime or arguing that abortion should not be an absolute right, the episode and the entire Trump arch in the season enhances the satirical edge through the means of parody.

When the angry mob reaches the Canadian border to build the wall they find that the Canadians have already built a wall of their own. This makes the agitated Americans and Mr. Garrison very invested in tearing down the wall to see what kind of cool stuff they have on the other side. Mr. Garrison shouts to his enthusiastic audience “Canadians say we can’t go into their country; I’m going into their country!” to which the audience chants “U-S-A! U-S-A!”. He is made to embody the American characteristic of not allowing anyone else to define them or tell them what to do. This springs from the self-assured notion of American exceptionalism, that the USA is the greatest country on earth and that it does not need to yield to other countries’ demands or even listen to what they have to say. Mr. Garrison succeeds in scaling the wall and getting to the other side, but once he is there, he realizes that the country is almost empty. There are no people on the streets, the shops are closed, and he is unable to find anyone to speak to. As this happens, Butters has dinner with his new Canadian girlfriend and her family states that no Canadian really wanted to leave the country, it is “the greatest country on earth”, a description often connotated with representations of the USA, but they accidentally elected a president for fun before they realized it was too late. He said a lot of outrageous things during the campaign, and they thought it was funny, and as a result the entire country turned into a postapocalyptic wasteland. The Canadian president is shown as crass, swearing, and donning a wig eerily similar to the hairstyling of Donald Trump. Mr. Garrison makes good on his campaign promise and rapes the Canadian president to death, enabling the Canadian government to hold re-elections and reset their country and its politics to a friendly, timid, socially conscious, polite, humble and politically responsible baseline, which allows the Canadian emigrants in the US to return north of the border and the status quo is temporarily enacted.

The episode offers an inversion of the common and in many ways accepted talking point of Latin American immigration as a threat to American society and prosperity. By replacing the usual stereotypes of loud, lazy, and criminal Mexicans with the stereotypes of polite, humble, quiet and perhaps most importantly Anglo-Saxon Canadians as the “threat” to American life, the absurdity of anti-immigration rhetoric is highlighted and ridiculed. So is the representation of the American impulse to keep everything out of the country until it is something the country want which prompts an invasion, albeit an invasion performed by a single individual in the episode. The parodic *Where has my Country Gone?*, complete

with an exaggerated reiteration of sentimental and nostalgic patriotic music videos, satirizes art popular in large parts of American conservative communities. In the song, Mr. Garrison laments the loss of a glorious common past in an attempt to invoke the nationalism of Skey's temporal dimension. He uses traditionally American phrases like "the land of opportunity", "liberty", and references presidents and the national anthem, and when he cites freedom, he does it in a parodically frank way by singing "'Cause when they said that this was the land of the free, I'm pretty sure that they were referring to me." The understated and implied separation of American citizens in the source texts *Where has my Country Gone?* parodies is literalized here to say the quiet part out loud and in doing so expose its nationalistic and racist undertones.

The criticism of the Trump campaign and the discourse surrounding it is not only scathing, but uncharacteristically direct and unambiguous, especially considering the clear warning of what might happen if you listen to power-hungry narcissists surrounded by unscrupulous sycophants, like in the Canada depicted in the episode. *South Park* very rarely issues undisguised and unironic warnings directed at its viewers, but this is one of these rare occasions. Canada and Canadians are used as placeholders for anti-immigration sentiments precisely because their representations as harmless, polite, friendly, and a little bit silly makes the hate against them shown in the episode so over-the-top, but the rhetoric used is only a slight exaggeration of the speech of sitting and candidate politicians when they talk about Latin immigration or perhaps to an even greater extent Muslim immigration. That the absurdity of anti-immigration politics only comes to light when directed at Anglo-Saxon neighbors speaks volumes about its current systemic usage and implications, and this episode successfully emphasizes that.

Archer and the New Scotland Front

During its fourteen seasons, *Archer* travels to all corners of the earth, including Antarctica and space, so there is no surprise that they also make it to Canada on a couple of occasions. There is an ambiguity in the American relationship with Canada, which comes to light on several occasions in the different shows in this text. Archer in particular articulates this rift voicing sentiments ranging between envy and disdain of Canadian government and society. In S02E12 *White Nights*, Archer asks if Canada even has an intelligence agency and when he receives the response that they of course do, he laughingly answers "Why?" In S06E06 *Sitting*, the in-house staff of Pam, Cheryl, Cyril, Ray and Krieger have their weekly poker night and have decided to keep their firearms in a time-lock safe until the end of the game due to past incidents. This prompts Cyril to ask, "And so basically the only thing keeping you from murdering each other is a lack of access to firearms?" to which Pam replies, "Works for Canada." and Cheryl sighs and mutters "Nothing

works for Canada.” Canada works as a common target for ridicule as the minor and unimportant neighbor in the north.

Canadian gun legislation is also mentioned in an episode where Canada plays a bigger part, S03E06 *The Limited*. Spy agency ISIS are on a mission to transport a terrorist fighting for a free Nova Scotia as a member of the terrorist organization New Scotland Front and deliver him to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or the “Mounties”, the armed forces of Canada. “Armed with what?”, Archer quickly replies, “Pamphlets about Canada’s responsible gun control laws?”. For Sterling Archer Canada is per definition a non-threatening country and its inhabitants and dissidents could not possibly pose a threat to his security. Since there are few real-life national security threats emanating from Canada, as opposed to other Archer assignments like Russian intelligence agencies, Colombian cartels, or European international arms traders, the New Scotland Front fighting for a free Nova Scotia was invented for the episode. Even though Canada has political discussions about the unity of the country with regards to its native population and its French speaking parts mainly in the Quebec region, the New Scotland Front is entirely fictional and draws upon the idea that Canadian terrorists would be an unlikely if not ridiculous notion.

The Limited begins with the giant hanging American flag in the Grand Central Station in New York centered in shot followed by a quick zoom out which reveals a second American flag suspended over an archway at the station, which is a rendition of the actual Grand Central Station that have these enormous American flags suspended above the hall and over the archway. This has two functions, it establishes the episode in a faithfully reiterated real life setting to signal realism and authenticity, and it establishes American national identity as the starting point of the episode’s proceedings, in this case the hanging flag in the background that Billig references as one of the clearest signs of banal and invisible nationalism.⁵⁸⁶ This is an episode about national identity, and American national identity is the starting point. The imagery of the flag is overdubbed by loud protests from the Nova Scotian terrorist, Kenny Bilko, proclaiming his Canadian citizenship and that American secret agents have no jurisdiction over him. A drunk Archer shows up just in time for the train ride north and relishes the possibility that Bilko’s companions will try to free him during the transport, since Archer has never had a fight on top of a high-speed train and is eager to try it. Archer possesses knowledge and appreciation of film tropes from spy and action genres and expresses his will to emulate them within the show’s hyperdiegesis. It is his only motivation for joining the mission, as he does not think the New Scotland Front or Kenny Bilko worthy adversaries. The crime of which Bilko was found guilty, blowing up a donut shop to disrupt the Mounties’ sustenance delivery system, consolidates the claim of Canadian terrorists as nothing to take seriously and with no real-life

⁵⁸⁶ Billig 1995, p. 8.

counterpart. It is not a real threat, much like Canada as neighbor is never a real threat, and the episode pokes fun of how it would look if it was.

Bilko manages to escape on the train and while on the phone with his friends in the NSF, he misunderstands a situation and thinks that Archer has shot the train's African American porter. He says on the phone: "OK boys, make sure you bring the heavy stuff, cause these crazy ISIS bastards aren't playing. They just killed a black guy... I know, right? Welcome to America." Later in the episode Bilko takes Cyril hostage and tells him: "I can tell you never played much hockey, huh? Probably too busy running around shooting black guys." The perspective of the Canadian terrorists within the episode is that American spy agents that are supposed to work for the law are much more dangerous and much more ruthless than they can ever be, even though it is based on misunderstandings in this case. The prejudice expressed is that American law enforcement shoots black people, that it is part of an American national identity, and even though it is expressed tongue-in-cheek through fictional Canadian terrorists it does offer a comment on how American law enforcement is perceived abroad. Bilkos friends in the NSF boards the train dressed up as officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or Mounties for short. In their characteristic uniform in red and black with a beige hat, they are a symbol of Canadian national identity made famous through countless iterations in Canadian and American film and television. However, at the same time as the NSF shows up on the train when it stops at the Canadian border, the real Mounties enter the same car, leading to what can best be described as a Canadian version of a Mexican standoff, where everyone is pointing guns at each other.

The scene is a parodic inversion of a classic standoff where the confusion of which Mounties are which is played for laughs and is more farce than action movie. Archer and Lana easily gets the upper hand on all Mounties and ties everyone up since they do not know who the real Mounties are and because Archer does not really care since he does not believe there can be any serious consequences from it. He does, however, not fail to quip that no train should have to stop on the way from America to Canada, since no-one would want to bring contraband or other security threats in that direction.

This is echoed in S04E04 *Midnight Ron* where Malory's husband Ron asks Archer who the hell would sneak into America via the Canadian border, to which Archer replies "Hmm... arctic wolves?". The physical border between the countries is treated as something of a non-entity even though the differences between the countries through the perspective of Archer is made very clear. The Mounties, as well as the Canadian flags waving on flag poles at the border, are symbols of the Canadian nation and are present in the episode. Canadian nationalism or regionalism is represented as sedimented and unquestionable, it is harmless and self-evident to the point where it is quite possible to make fun of Canadian separatists or nationalists without ever challenging the status of Canada

as a sovereign state or nation. The series does not question Canada as a nation, quite the opposite. Parodying the notion of a separatist group destabilizing society by making them Canadian and by necessity fictitious only solidifies Canada's natural state as a nation. The idea of a Canadian terrorist group is considered so absurd, albeit real within the show's hyperdiegesis, that it becomes parody in and of itself. Archer gets his fight scene on top of the train, but the NSF is never a real threat and the show knows and shows this succinctly.

The episode concludes with ISIS succeeding with the mission but destroying the train and assaulting the Mounties in the process, leading to them all being banned from Canada. Canada is represented as a place to deride and make fun of for being weak, harmless, predictable and boring as opposed to the USA, which is strong and fun, albeit violent and unpredictable including gratuitous violence towards African Americans. Keyes quotes Aniko Bodroghkozy who emphasizes that Canadians' pragmatic, local, episodic and fluent image of themselves and their culture need an absolute, powerful and mystified contrast in the American as a necessary basis of comparison.⁵⁸⁷ With America and Americans, everything can happen and often does, with Canadians nothing happens, and everything is safe. The ambiguity in the relationship between the countries and the formation of national identity within it comes with the notion that the American identity that is formed in contrast to the Canadian is of a nation that is powerful, rich and attractive, but also dangerous, volatile, bullying and braggadocios. Canada has sensible gun laws, as opposed to America. Canada has reasonably priced medicine due to universal health care, as opposed to America.

This is highlighted in *Midnight Ron* where Archer inadvertently helps Malory's new husband Ron smuggle money over the northern border. Malory scoffingly quips that Archer, before he embarks on his mission, needs to get some free penicillin for his likely venereal diseases "compliments of the socialist republic of Canada". Even though her comment as always is supposed to denigrate the left-leaning parts of the world, it still works as confirmation of the differences in health care between the countries. Malory sees the lack of universal or even affordable health care in America as a benefit compared to other countries, but it should be read, as with her other extreme views on politics, as a comic exaggeration of the stereotypical trope of the American upper-class only interested in personal profit and prosperity. To Malory the notion that others might receive health care is at best of negligent concern, at worst actively disgraceful. However you choose to view it, it is an acknowledgement of Canadian health care costing less and reaching more people than its American equivalent. The ambivalent positioning of positive and negative representations of Canada still works to contrast it with American national identity. Americans are strong, aggressive, violent, emotional, and self-occupied contrasted with the calm, thoughtful, fair, polite, and reasonable, even in

⁵⁸⁷ Keyes 2008, pp. 142-143, where he quotes Bodroghkozy 2003, p. 573.

the form of a separatist terror organization. Parody is used to emphasize the absurdity of Canadian domestic insurgence, thus reinforcing the ossification of the Canadian nation, and to poke fun at differences between two neighboring countries who still have a lot in common.

South Park and the Mexican Border

If the representation of the border to Canada is used as a projection surface to fill with hypotheticals, absurdities, pastiche and parody due to its unthreatening and unproblematic nature in real life American discourse, the Mexican border is decidedly different. Much like the Canadian border and the relationship between Canada and the USA, representations of the Mexican border and of Mexico and Mexican immigrants within the US in the shows are used to elicit laughter, satire, and subversion, but the manner in which it is performed follows other routes, both literally and figuratively.

As we have seen, in *Where My Country Gone?* Canadian immigrants are used to subvert the common tropes surrounding undocumented immigrants in America. S08E07 *Goobacks* uses allegory for a more direct comment on immigrant workers coming to America to work minimum wage jobs. In the episode a time portal opens up to the south of South Park, from which people from a poverty-stricken future appear to find work for even lower wages than previously accepted. The boys' snow shuffling business is one example of local employment filled by the newcomers, to the dismay of large parts of the local population whose exclams of "they took our jobs" is heard increasingly throughout the episode. The future immigrants work in gardens and as housekeepers, they run small shops and sell fruits and a trio of them can be seen riding in a futuristic low ride car complete with loud music and hydraulic effects, all references to common conceptions of the Latin American immigrant experience. The suggested solution to the problem is first to have all male residents of South Park have sex in a "big gay pile" to make sure the future people will not exist. Then Stan suggests that building a better tomorrow would remove the reason for temporal immigration which causes everyone to pivot to his suggestion. It is depicted in a montage showing environmental and social initiatives that help future people accompanied by a parodic reiteration of an ironic sappy peppy theme song. However, when Stan realizes this is even more gay they all decide to go back to the big gay pile and the episode ends. Of many possible interpretations of a moral message in the episode, one of the more interesting is the notion that if American citizens do not like immigrant workers "taking their jobs" they should perhaps try to make the world a better place to reduce the grounds for it by increasing minimum wages, reducing income deficits, and work for sustainable development and fair treatment, but that

it would never happen because those American citizens consider such undertakings “totally gay”.⁵⁸⁸

On several occasions *South Park* uses hyper-stereotypes, where common tropes, stereotypes and misconceptions are highlighted and exaggerated to such an extent that it should elicit a comedic and an ironic effect that subverts the literal messages.⁵⁸⁹ When used correctly, hyper-stereotypifications can have a subversive and deconstructive effect but sometimes the show misses the mark on some of them, like the pidgin stereotype representations of Chinese and Japanese people in S02E05 *Conjoined Fetus Lady*, S13E11 *Whale Whores* and S15E06 *City Sushi*.⁵⁹⁰ They also equate Mexico with Hell in S04E10 *Probably* and refer to it as “that miserable place” in S19E04 *You’re not Yelping*. There are, however, a couple of episodes of *South Park* that contain more interesting representations of Mexico, the Mexico-American border, Mexican immigrant experiences, and American national identity contrasted against Mexico.

In S15E09 *The Last of the Meheecans* the boys of *South Park* are playing “Texans vs Mexicans”, where one side’s mission is to enter the United States which in this case is Cartman’s backyard, while the other side tries to stop them as border patrol. Cartman in a Texas Ranger uniform speaks in a Texan accent and adds robotic sound effects to his binoculars when scanning for Mexicans. He reiterates common depictions of state troopers and border patrol seen on the news and in fictionalized versions, specifically the shows *Border Wars* (2010-2015) and *DEA* (2008-2009). However, Butters gets lost during the game and when sitting on a rock by the river in the woods he bemoans his incompetence in a voice-over narration. When he states that he as the final member of the Mexican side is “the last of the Meheecans” the image pans up to a star-lit sky where the same text can be seen reiterated in the same font and style as in *The Last of the Mohicans* (Mann 1992) along with a short snippet of the powerful orchestral film music from the *Main Title* track of the official soundtrack, a title placement and musical reference that is not usually found in *South Park* episodes. It works as a parodic reiteration of its source text with the caveat that Mohican is turned into the mispronounced and misspelled Meheecan. Using this reiteration creates a parody of the epic style and tone that stories of indigenous people and their strife often use. The legendary scale and consequences of the boys’ play, in turn inspired by televised depictions of the lives of people in border control, calls into question the significance placed on the control of migration, and it is a common usage in the show as a whole.

⁵⁸⁸ For a more in-depth analysis of *Goobacks*, see Gournelos 2009, pp. 175-176.

⁵⁸⁹ Coleman 2008, p. 132, Gray 2006, p. 64.

⁵⁹⁰ Cmp Kittredge 2007, p. 69, where she describe the representation of Chinese dodgeball players and that they “all look alike: short, bucktoothed, and wearing rice-paddy hats. The Chinese announcers speak in pidgin English and make fun of Caucasian racial characteristics (big eyes) and their presumed lack of intelligence.”

Lost in the snowstorm walking on the road, Butters gets hit by a car and tells the white Christian couple that hit him that he was trying to cross the border to the US. They do not realize that Butters is in character in a game and treat him as an illegal Mexican immigrant. They loudly use the few Spanish words they know and give him menial chores to do at their home, since that is what they suppose Mexican immigrants like to do. Butters cleans windows, washes dishes donning a hairnet, blows leaves in the garden among other things. A montage plays showing Butter's working while the other kids try to find him or guard the border to Cartman's yard, and the song *Work, Mexican, Work*, a parodic reiteration of work songs like *Say! Boss Man* by Bo Diddley from 1959 and *Working in the Coal Mine* by Lee Dorsey from 1966, (incidentally with a B-side titled *Mexico*). The parody connects the modern-day immigrant labor experience to an archaic past, a USA of the 1950s and 1960s where cheerful songs about ethnic stereotypes and the strife of others were commonplace and it comments on the fact that time may have passed, and laws may have been changed since then, but the experience stays the same in large parts of society. When Butters tires of the work and tells his white American Christian benefactors that he wants to go home, they panic and tearfully leave him at the nearest Pollo Loco restaurant. Here he befriends the Mexican American staff and when talking about his homesickness accidentally starts a mass movement of Mexican immigrants returning to their native land since they realize how poorly they are treated in the US.

The real border patrol has a quiet day and reflects on how few Mexicans there seem to be wanting to get into the United States these days. "Oh, they're out there", the border patrol boss muses, "plotting their next move, they'll do anything they can to get into the land of opportunity." At the same time as he continues with his "As long as this country offers everyone a better life, there's gonna be people clamoring to get in", Mexican immigrant workers easily scale the walls of the border fence and run back into Mexico. At the Marsh residence, Sharon and Randy watch the news on television. The news announcer proclaims, "You've heard of Mexican salsa, but Mexican pride?". Randy concludes that this is a good thing, but when he opens his front door to find mountains of leaves unblown everywhere he lets out a "NOOOO" scream plucked directly from the notorious Darth Vader scream in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas 2005). Through its memefication, the Vader "Noooo" scream has come to symbolize an unnecessarily exuberant exclamation signifying melodramatic hyperbole as response to a supposedly traumatic event. By reiterating this hyperbolic expression when Randy reacts to the amounts of loose leaf in his front yard, the scene turns into a satirical comment on white Americans and their relationship to mundane tasks and who it is that should perform them. Turning the absence of leaf blowers or rakers into a traumatic event further emphasizes the discrepancy between white middle-class America and its view on labor division in the country, something that a normal

scream or an expression of reasonable disappointment would not do in the same way. The parody is what sells the satirical message.

Butters is taken to Mexico with the wave of people moving back and is celebrated as a hero, and it is depicted as a reiteration of the famous scene from *Life of Brian* where Brian tries to convince an enthusiastic crowd that he is not the Messiah. Here, Butters, under his Mexican name Mantequilla (literally meaning butter), greets a doting crowd cheering his every movement. On the newly established “Dias de Mantequilla” Butters is celebrated by all of Mexico, but as the President of Mexico speaks in his honor and proclaims as a matter of fact that the US is on its way down and that Mexico soon will be a much better place to live, Butters realizes that he misses his friends and family and he decides to head home to South Park. The real border patrol quickly needs to switch focus and try to keep the people attempting to cross the border into Mexico on American soil in order to save the American economy, which turned out to be wholly dependent on the exploitation of Mexican immigrant workers.

Cartman shows up and joins the border patrol in his effort to win the game against Butters and also to stop immigration and most importantly wield authority. The Texans vs Mexicans game the kids played was based on border patrol television series and Cartman in the real border patrol is presented as a reiteration of those kinds of television shows with docu-drama camera work and editing. When Cartman uses lethal force to electrocute a dozen immigrants he is commended for his effectiveness by the people in charge. He is placed in charge of actions against immigrants, which is presented in montage of border patrol shuttling Mexican immigrants back to their places of work in American cities. When Butters returns to the border, he is welcomed by the border patrol who finally can get one more Mexican to go to the USA and do cheap labor, but Cartman is not having it and starts chasing Butters. The border patrol employees then chase after Cartman and an epic chase sequence with guns ensues, on donkey, by boat, by helicopter, on four-wheeler, and finally Butters climbs the border fence after Cartman is lured away with a Butters piñata. The short chase sequence parodies tropes from western films, action movies, epic fantasies, and heist movies, all commented with a play-by-play for Mexican radio listeners who cheers for Butters and the border patrol helping him. The parody is used to highlight the absurdity of the situation, to satirize the border patrol and its defenders by first literalizing its thirst for violence and then exaggerating the means with which they try to catch immigrants, emphasizing the show’s cartoon heritage and tradition in the process.

This is not primarily a representation of Mexico or Mexican people, but a representation of the American self-image. The US has since its inception been viewed as a place that people want to come to. At first, they were welcome to do so, but with stricter border control and harsher rules on immigration combined with an increased fear of foreigners and terrorist attacks that escalated further with

the 9/11 attacks, the US has been made more unattainable. The self-image that it still is the best country on earth and that everyone would choose to live there if they had the choice has remained firm, however. In *The Last of the Meheecans* it is the hollowness of this self-image that is highlighted and satirized, including parodying television shows built on the premise. By using reiterations from epic fantasy and depictions of indigenous strife to heighten the scale of the issue and then parodying shows like *Border Wars* and *DEA* with its unyielding patriotism and America-first stance, including a view on immigrants as freeloaders or parasites, the hypocrisy and absurdity of American border patrols, common American views on immigration, and an American economy dependent on the exploitation of labor is highlighted and satirized. By emphasizing the differences between the countries and the contrast in perspective on everyday life and employment, the white Anglo-Saxon view on USA as the economically superior nation on earth and the necessity to maintain an industry that exploits cheap labor is exposed. American prosperity is dependent on the idea that it is a country that everyone on earth wants to live in, and if that image is tainted or ruined, people desperate for employment in order to provide for themselves and their families will not turn to the United States, meaning that there will no longer be cheap labor from immigrant workers, undermining the entire economic system built on a foundation of inequality.

If *The Last of the Meheecans* draws inspiration from different source texts and parodies them to great effect, S23E01 *Mexican Joker* draws both its main storyline and plot points and its title from superhero films and comic lore from the last half century. In the episode, the Marsh family business, marijuana producer Tegridy Farms, is expanding and employing new laborers to harvest the weed plants, in most cases Mexican immigrants. When sales take a downturn again Randy realizes it is because a lot of the folks in town have started growing their own weed, and every single one of them does it by employing a Mexican gardener, Randy starts reporting Mexican workers to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Cartman, who is in a bit of a rut, learns that you can just report someone to ICE and he immediately reports Kyle who is put into an ICE detention center. The guards and managers at the detention centers realize that they have a white Jewish kid bundled together with the hundreds of Latin American kids and they freak out and panic. The presence of a Jewish kid in a detention center might cause someone to think they are racist and that what is happening here is wrong, as opposed to when they only contained kids from Latin America. Kyle, referring to Cartman, says to the guards that “I am just here because a fat, intolerant asshole didn’t want me around” and other kids concur that it applies to them too, even though they mean President Trump. Cartman is later sent to the same detention center because Stan finds out what he did to Kyle and rats him out to ICE. Immediately after arriving at the center, Cartman tries to have everyone sing and dance to *It’s the Hard-Knock Life* from *Annie* (Huston 1982). To Cartman, this is another filmic

adventure, and the settings and surroundings suggest musical to him, not personal tragedy. Like in *The Last of the Meheecans* and in many other episodes in the series, Cartman finds something in popular culture or political reality that he finds attractive and seeks to emulate it in his life. He is a source of innumerable references, reiterations, and parodic re-enactments and he often conveys a deep immersion in and understanding of different aspects of popular culture and public discourse, perfect for parodic use by the show's creators.

The title of the episode stems from the fear that one of the kids in the detention center will internalize the treatment at the detention centers and turn into some kind of super villain when older, like a Mexican version of the Joker villain from the Batman comics, seeking revenge on those who have wronged him. Kyle explains to the staff that by pulling kids away from their parents and isolating them behind bars, they are traumatizing them and teaching them to fear the US government, thus increasing the possibility that it will backfire when they are older. Kyle, being a ten-year-old boy, makes the reference to super movie villains who are driven by personal revenge from childhood trauma and that what they do now can produce a Mexican Joker in the future. It is this last statement that resonates with the guards and director of the detention center. One of the guards tries to respond, "But doesn't Mexican Joker understand that we are just doing our job and trying to make America great?". It is not Kyle's reasoning that takes hold, but his pop culture reference and its potential personal implications for the staff. This is the episode using intertextuality and pop cultural references and people's knowledge of it to offer a satirical discrepancy in the actions of the staff. They are more afraid of a hypothetical comic book supervillain and the personal consequences to them than the actual damage they do to human beings and the implications of that.

In an effort to diffuse the situation, the staff put on a hand puppet show for the kids. The show reiterates vaudeville shows or silent movie screenings with an accompanying piano emphasizing who is good or bad in the performance based on tone and style. In a storyline drastically too mature for an audience of children, the innocent white Princess Star is raped by the Mexican Joker, whose appearance is based on the Joker from the *Batman* (1966-1968) TV series of the 1960s played by Cesar Romero topped with a tiny sombrero on his head.⁵⁹¹ When he makes his entrance, the piano plays a "la cucaracha" tune in an ominous minor key, his voice is a stereotypic over-the-top Mexican accent, and according to the director of the detention center his rage and anger makes him "bad in the eyes of Christ". Here, the episode uses parodic inversions of self-consciously archaic art forms to comment on the lack of understanding and connection from the white male adult representations of the government in the form of ICE detention center employees

⁵⁹¹ For a more in-depth analysis of the original *Batman* series and its exuberance and camp consciousness, see Medhurst 1991.

towards their child captives. The director who is in charge of the hand puppet show believes that this will explain everything to the kids and the methods of hand puppet theater and silent movie piano are invoked to offer a simple and pedagogic presentation.

Of course, the lack of connection with the child audience is also what drives the performance too far in terms of explicit violence and simplicity in ethnic representation turning into racist stereotypes. From the director's perspective, the performance was supposed to be a reiteration of the simple and clear-cut good versus evil that early silent movie sometimes provided, but in the episode it is turned to parody because of his over-the-top use of tropes and oblivion of tonal discrepancy, and from the perspective of us as the episode's audience unintentional parody turns into intentional parody with a strong political and satirical message on the state of ICE detention centers and their lack of connection to and treatment of children. After the lack of success with the hand puppet show the ICE officers perform electro chock therapy on the children at the detention center because they read somewhere that it can help people get over trauma and thus not become Mexican Joker. The director yells at them, not for torturing children but because the treatment is expensive, and they are running a risk of overspending.

At the end of the episode the director tries to free the children, not because of human decency but for not wanting to be "part of a bad guy flashback scene" and that Mexican Joker remembers him fondly. When Kyle shouts that no-one there is Mexican Joker and that he only used it as an example, the director says that he is in the wrong flashback and runs away, leaving the kids imprisoned. The flashback scene as a trope and technique is never used in the episode, but it is reference to and used through being the only manifestation of consequences to government abuse that the perpetrators can understand and fear. Government employees receiving punishment for mistreating underaged immigrants is not something that anyone needs to be concerned with, but a comic book or superhero movie villain exacting personal revenge through the use of super powers is something that is plausible enough to elicit reactions. This is the fear of the unknown, of the other, manifested and satirized through the use of pop culture parody.

When Randy blows up all competing small marijuana plantations in South Park it is referred to as an act of terrorism and it is blamed on Mexican Joker. During the TV news, the anchor interviews the Commander of National Defense and at every mention of Mexican Joker's name, the anchor shivers and trembles in fear. Distant shouts from scared citizens can also be heard. The Commander says that Mexican Joker "has no reason, he has no compassion, Mexican Joker simply wants to create fear". The decisions made by people of authority in this episode do not stem from a sense of morality, justice, or even adherence to existing rules, however ethically dubious they might be. Instead, people in power are driven by fear, not of what might happen to the country, society, or the legal or immigration system, but what might happen to them personally. The irrational fear of a super villain

exacting personal revenge on them because they might be creating a flashback for that villain is what drives people in power to almost release children imprisoned for their ethnicity. Kyle's comparison to the superhero world is not seen as an illustrative comparison but is taken at face value and is what drives the actions taken. By using and parodying superhero lore and its many representations in recent years, specifically villain origin stories like *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014), *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn 2011), and of course *Joker* (Phillips 2019), the episode suggests that decision making at ICE detention centers and in American immigration policy at large is not based on facts or reality, but on an irrational fear of personal safety that has no bearing on real life. It is the children in the detention centers who are at risk, not the people in charge of immigration policy and enforcement, and the very real and poignant statement made by Kyle that oppression breeds resistance is skewed into its superhero literalization and used as a new way to plant fear into Americans of the foreigner, of the "other", of the unknown entity that will come to get you if you do not protect yourself and your nation from them.

Archer and Central America

For a show that was on television for fourteen seasons and crosses national borders in some way in most of them, Mexico as a nation is remarkably absent for the most part in *Archer*. There is really only one episode that uses Mexico or Mexican characters in a central capacity, but on the other hand it delves specifically with the US-Mexican border and the contrasts that arise from that, so it makes an interesting addition. In S04E08 *Coyote Lovely* ISIS is tasked with capturing Mexico's greatest and most notorious human trafficker, or Coyote, for a handsome reward. Moreno the Coyote turns out to be a woman who Archer immediately falls for, but perhaps the most interesting aspect of the episode is that the moral tiering within the ISIS group is temporarily altered. Archer as an ultra-egoistic hedonistic philanderer is usually morally abhorrent, which within the group still puts him above the likes of Malory, Krieger and Cheryl. Lana normally functions as the closest to a voice of reason and moral standard in the show.

In this episode however, Archer is the one who is empathetic and understanding of the Mexican immigrants, describing them as "smallish brown people who just want a job" and is generally fine with the fact that they are trying to enter America. Lana on the other hand, who usually functions as a counterweight to Archer, calling him out on his actions and behavior, voices concern and even disdain over the prospect of Mexican immigration into America. She refuses to let Cyril open a van carrying refugees because then they will "scatter" to "our overburdened health care system, or oh! maybe our tax funded government schools for which – spoiler ahead – they don't pay taxes." Archer finds it baffling, and quite amusing,

that Lana as a “Lorax-blowing tree hugger” is anti-immigration, not necessarily due to her normally liberal stances on political issues, but due to the fact that she is African American and therefore should be pro-immigration since her ancestors in Archer’s words hardly had papers when coming to the US. Since Moreno is attractive and Archer feels that the people in the truck should just be allowed to leave, he turns on his ISIS colleagues and decides to help the refugees. They flee in a car and run across two border patrol policemen who hurls bullets and racial abuse at the group. Archer easily overpowers them, and they apologize sincerely for the hard language and say that they are just doing their job. They are there to guard the border, “which we protect from terrorists” which makes Archer laugh sarcastically. He then says that “not to sound racist, but we all know who the terrorists are”. Lupe, an old woman in the group whispers “los Muselmanes” and Archer replies “Lupe! Come on! You’re in America now, here we just imply it.”

Archer here offers satirical commentary on the importance and objectives of the border police and on the American relationship to terrorism and terrorists, aligning himself with the notion that they are not Latin American but that they are Muslims, while simultaneously commenting on the American practice of not expressing deeply held racism out loud. The episode uses well-known spy and action movie tropes common in the series, like gun fights, car chases, excessive spy gadgetry, and double-crosses and in this case, it plays more like pastiche than parody, since the storyline holds up as an immigrant action caper with romantic entanglements and is inverted mostly through Archer’s sardonic commentary. It offers commentary on the political sensitivity of the US southern border exacerbated by American fear of and dependence on the Mexican other, much like in *The Last of the Meheecans*, but in the case of this episode the focus is more on character development than political satire. Archer lured by his libido places himself on the side of the attractive Coyote Moreno and helps the Mexican immigrants into the country, even helping to overpower two border patrol officers and taking a bullet in the process. Lana who is normally the liberal voice of reason aligns herself firmly with several conservative talking points on immigration, and Malory who is normally the most ardent advocate against illegal immigrants turns out to be the mastermind behind the expansion of human smuggling over the border, since that allows her to afford new carpeting in her office. Her usual disdain for foreigners and immigrants is no match to making a quick buck.

If we permit ourselves to widen the scope a bit further and move just a little bit south of Mexico to Central America, we find a storyline that runs through the latter half of the fifth season of *Archer*, and I believe it requires further scrutiny as it uses the contrasts in borders to define American national identity at the same time as it references and satirizes a notorious part of American political history. Season five is named *Archer: Vice* as a direct reference to *Miami Vice* (1984-1989) and the arc of the story in this season is how the agency will remain afloat after the FBI performs a raid and shuts down the spy operation in return for everyone

avoiding jail sentences. When the core crew gather to discuss the future, it is revealed that they somehow possess a literal, not a figurative, ton of cocaine, and decide to sell it off for profit as a cartel. Malory Archer characteristically quips “Well how hard can it be? I mean... Mexicans do it?”. The *Miami Vice* parody implicit in the title of the season is made literal in S05E02 *A Kiss While Dying* which takes place in Miami, but via parodic reiterations of *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (2001-) in S05E03 *A Debt of Honor* and *Smokey and the Bandit* (Needham 1977) in S05E05 *Southbound and Down*, the back part of the season focuses on representations of South- and Central America which includes examples of parody but leans more into the realm of political satire.

After a series of botched attempts at selling the drugs, Archer drags Ray and Cyril along to sell the cocaine to the Colombian Cali cartel and its leader La Madrina. It turns out she is an undercover agent from the Colombian National Police and sends the group to prison, but on the way there the three men manages to escape. After a raft ride down a river, they stumble upon a plane about to leave with more cocaine and after a fire fight, they manage to commandeer the plane and fly it back to Florida, where a man named Slater is waiting for them and buys the drugs with boxes of weapons, turning ISIS from being a drug cartel into an arms dealer. The weapons are meant for Gustavo Calderón, leader and dictator of the fictive small Central American republic San Marcos, a name used for a similar fictive small Central American republic in *Bananas* (Allen 1971) where it is used to satirize the politics of both small Central American nations and the United States. Calderón, nicknamed Baby Gus as a nod to Haitian President and dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier or “Baby Doc”, is fighting a civil war against communist rebels. When hearing that he is the intended buyer, Malory asks Archer if he has stumbled backwards into a “CIA-backed anti-Communist drugs-for-arms operation” which Archer immediately accepts is the likeliest scenario. What Malory and the plot line of season five are referring to is a number of allegations against the CIA of benefitting from drug trafficking from domestic soil in the US, and from foreign nations like South-East Asia, France, Afghanistan, and several parts of South and Central America, but more specifically American funding of the Contra rebels in Nicaragua during the 1980s, which led to the disclosure of the Iran-Contra affair in 1986-1987.

Richard Slotkin writes of the Reagan administration’s policies regarding Central America that it was important when given a chance to stand tall against Communist resurgence in the geographically close Central America to repair some of the discredit that lingered from Vietnam. Slotkin points out that the Reagan administration “invested a good deal of time, effort, money, and moral capital in justifying its support of the “contra” war against the Marxist regime in Nicaragua”

even though this meant bending and breaking American moral codes and federal law in the case of the Iran-Contra affair.⁵⁹²

The American invasion of Panama in 1990 is another reference point for the story arch. According to Slotkin, it literalized the metaphor of the “War on Drugs” and notable when looking at the rationale behind the invasion is that besides framing the Panamanian de facto ruler Manuel Noriega as a dictator, he is described in American propaganda very much as a villain from a western movie where focus is laid on his repellant physical (mixed-race) attributes, his sexual deviancy, and his drug addiction. The invasion was described in personal terms where the reason behind it was presented as rescuing American civilians, including an American officer and his wife, from abuse from Noriega’s forces.⁵⁹³ In *Archer* season five, San Marcos stands in for Nicaragua and Panama and works as a satirized conglomeration of small Central American nations. President Calderón is partly based on Noriega, partly on a general sense of Central American dictators. In the capital of San Marcos, the presidential palace looms large over the rest of the city which mostly looks like a shanty town or favela. The palace is filled with riches and the discrepancies between the poor population and the obscene wealth of the President is emphasized but not really exaggerated compared to actual dictators and their sometimes-absurd hoarding of wealth and the manifestations that encompasses. A multi-million dollar all white painting, a fleet of luxury cars, gourmet meals and vintage wines, a zoo with exotic animals, most expressions of extreme wealth that are on display in the palace of San Marcos are on par with real life counterparts. The civilian population of San Marcos are not shown in the storyline, focusing almost exclusively on the presidential palace and the war against the rebels, but they are described as poor and filthy by President Calderón.

The agency formerly known as ISIS flies down to sell the guns to President Calderón and are allowed to stay at the palace. Personal intrigue between the parties ensues while the rebels close in on the palace. After finding an armored tank in the garage, Cyril replaces Calderón as dictator and throws Calderón, Archer, and Cheryl, who in this season calls herself Cherlene, in prison. They break out of jail to join the rebels who are stationed at the airport, but when Archer and Cherlene make it there, it turns out the rebels are led by Slater and Hawley, the FBI man who shut ISIS down in the first episode of the season. They explain that the rebels are technically mercenaries from Honduras and Guatemala but controlled by the CIA and that they are both CIA agents. This consciously conflates the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, who were only funded by the USA, with the invasion of Panama by American forces. Meanwhile, Krieger has found three identical clones of himself working for the San Marcos government in a parodic inversion of clone films like *The Boys from Brazil* (Schaffner 1978). They design

⁵⁹² Slotkin 1998, p. 650.

⁵⁹³ Ibid, p. 651.

a rocket loaded with nerve gas which is used as an excuse for the CIA and the American government to start firebombing the country and launch a full-scale invasion. Slater calls in and initiates “operation dropkick”, a reference to the bombing in *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick 1964), and the US Navy airmen performing the invasion wear Tomcat arm badges and VF-1-unit patches in a reference to *Top Gun* (Scott 1986).

Here, an American invasion comes through parodic reiterations of film history source texts. When Lana and Archer connect the dots of the plot, Archer shouts in dismay, “We’ve been selling cocaine for the CIA so they can buy arms from Iran!? Did we at least free some hostages!?”. This satirically comments on the supposed justification to sell arms to Iran in secret during the Iran-Contra affair that it was done to have Iran apply pressure on Hezbollah to release seven US hostages they kept at the time, and that the proceeds of the arms sales would not finance the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The whole scenario turns out to not even be about world politics, but an effort to balance the budget of the CIA. Hawley explains that if they do not spend their entire budget this year, they will not get an increase next year. American meddling in other states’ business for their own gain is satirized in the convoluted plot that reiterates the real-life Iran-Contra affair and others like it, but the plot twist that this has all been to balance the CIA budget adds another edge. The military-industrial complex is depicted both as an uncontrolled entity within which people with agency can make moves for profit without scrutiny, and as a corporation like any other American company that needs to adjust for quarterly reports and balance their budget for the new fiscal year, and like other companies it does so for maximal profit no matter the consequences for the world around it. The hoarding of wealth that occurs through dictatorship and totalitarianism in San Marcos is contrasted against American values and actions, but not as a morally superior alternative, but rather as an alternative method of hoarding wealth for a precious few for which the rules do not apply.

Turning Cheryl into Cherlene, the country singer, is neither an accident nor without merit in this discussion. By accidentally discovering Cheryl’s talent for singing and realizing the financial potential of it, Malory embodies the ferociousness of American capitalism, the notion of profit above everything else. Since the civil war, country music has operated as a symbolic discourse of nationalist feeling in the USA.⁵⁹⁴ This is manifested in *South Park* S07E01 *I’m a Little Bit Country* when patriotic Americans supporting the US government post 9/11 and the war in Iraq without questioning are described as “a little bit country” as opposed to the critical side that is “a little bit rock’n’roll”. Country music is the music of “The Heartland” of America. The Heartland according to Gray and Lotz via Victoria Johnson is the construction of Midwest America as a stand-in for both hicks and white working-class folk “who don’t understand or appreciate progress”,

⁵⁹⁴ Johnson-Woods, p. 132, quoting Wolfe and Akenson 2005.

but on the other hand is constructed as the true and real salt-of-the-earth center of America, the moral and ethical heart of the country as opposed to the urban opposite.⁵⁹⁵ By making Cherlene a country singer guided by an unapologetically cynical capitalist in Malory and with Cheryl's usual unhinged persona and uncontrollable behavior, the storyline undermines the national wholesomeness of its genre and tradition through parodic inversion and misdirection.

In S05E08 *The Rules of Extraction* she is interrupted while taking photos for her new album cover wearing only cut-off jeans shorts and Rocket Pops in front of her bare chest. Pam suggests that the cover is not sexy enough and that the icicles should not be on the outside of Cherlene's body. In S05E11 *Palace Intrigue: Part II*, President Calderon smitten by his affection for Cherlene the country singer, tries to defend his continuous rule of San Marcos by informing her that like him, William Howard Taft was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court at the same time as he was President, and that the United States is not so different from San Marcos in that it did not ratify the 22nd amendment that imposed term limits on presidential rule until 1951. This prompts Cherlene to ask "Who are you? Dave Frishberg?". President Calderon, however, understandably does not understand the reference to the composer of famous melodies to political animations for children like the *Just a Bill* song from *Schoolhouse Rock!* (1973-2009). Cherlene continues, "Of course you don't! Because you don't live in a free country where the world's largest manufacturers of sugary cereal are allowed to sponsor interstitial animated programming unapologetically targeted at children." They both then agree from their different perspectives that San Marcos is a poor and filthy country but the distinction Cherlene makes between the countries highlights and satirizes one of the key elements of American national identity. She starts by contrasting a Central American dictatorship to the USA as a "free country", which is one of the most common ways for Americans to describe the USA, especially for people of Heartland America.

The definition of a free country as somewhere where large corporations are allowed to target children with commercials for insidious products makes the point that although there are vast differences between the countries, the defining contrast might not be that of freedom versus oppression, but that the system in charge in the US is not a dictatorship, but unchecked capitalism. A capitalism that has had enormous real-life consequences for countries like the ones San Marcos is based upon, with American fruit corporations exploiting cheap labor and lax regulations for larger profits, or as shown in the episodes the military-industrial complex using the countries in the area to balance their budgets in the name of fighting for freedom. A dialogue between President Calderon, Cherlene and Archer in the next episode S05E12 *Filibuster* continues on the differences between totalitarianism and capitalism but this time with its clear edge directed at the

⁵⁹⁵ Gray and Lotz 2019, pp. 52-53, referencing Johnson 2008.

former when Archer first asks President Calderon if the reason he is fighting off rebels might be that they are poor and starving while he owns, among other things, “a priceless fleet of cars”:

Calderon: “I’m fighting the rebels because that is what we do. My father fought the rebels; his father fought the rebels.”

Cherlene: “Soo... like a family business?”

Archer: “That manufactures oppression.”

Calderon: “Well, and cocaine...”

They stop by a zoo to see a tiger and Archer asks if there is any meat around, but scoffs at Calderon’s suggestion that they use other animals to feed the tiger.

Calderon (cont.): “Typical Americans, you think that meat comes from a Supermercado all wrapped in a nice plastic wrap.”

Archer: “Yeah, you’re describing meat.”

Calderon: “No, no, no, meat is blood and bones and sinew.”

Archer: “Well, now you’re describing... not meat.”

Calderon: “Meat is whatever the tiger says is meat because God made him the boss and all the other animals his food.”

Archer: “Thank you George Borewell for that clunky analogy in defense of totalitarianism.”

For Archer, self-preservation and the personal enjoyment of life on his own terms are usually most important. In terms of political positioning, he rarely makes stands, and when he does it is almost never on party politics or hot topic issues, but he does have a humanitarian streak and as a skewed version of the embodiment of American free will, he has issues with authorities and people wielding that authority to the detriment of others. In other words, he is not impressed with President Calderon’s defense of dictatorship and totalitarianism, and when the President gets killed and eaten by the tiger, he hardly bats an eye. Referencing George Orwell in this scene also works as a call-back to a previous episode where Archer describes Orwell’s *Animal Farm* also as a clunky analogy for totalitarianism.

Even though the storyline in the San Marcos episodes include a harsh condemnation of totalitarianism and dictatorship in smaller states, the main focus still falls on the actions of the American Government and the contrasts offered between Central America through San Marcos and the US. The America that emerges in the contrasts with San Marcos is a country ruled by capitalism through its corporations and its military-industrial complex. Just like American corporations have used Central America for their purposes, so has the American Government under the guise of the struggle for freedom. The connections between Government and capital are exaggerated with the CIA going to war in a foreign country simply to balance their budget, but it nevertheless fortifies the notion of the American nation and American national identity as permeated by capitalism. One of the common representatives for American patriotism, country music along with its performers and its connections to the notion of the Heartland of America, is here skewed in the creation of Cherlene to further emphasize the influence of capitalism and to satirize the greed of some country artists pandering to doting crowds, thereby undermining the connections between country, nationalism, and capitalism often otherwise rendered invisible.

Conclusion

This chapter emanated from a discussion on the origin and nature of nationalism and national identity. Scholars like Stam, Billig, Löfgren, and Medhurst emphasize the need for a nation to contrast itself with other nations where the geographically closest nations, nations on the other side of the border, are often the most important to contrast themselves with. For the USA the land borders are unusually distinct and few for a country of that size. The northern border is shared with Canada, the southern border is shared with Mexico, the rest is ocean. This should mean that contrasting America and American national identity with these countries is of great importance and of greater importance than other countries in the world. Looking at the representations of Canada and Mexico in the material of the American television shows I have chosen tells a slightly different picture though.

Firstly, three of the shows barely mention Canada or Mexico except in fleeting instances. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* alludes to regions with real-life counterparts that could be interpreted as Canada and Mexico, but they are included in the realm of Equestria as stand-in for the USA and are not used to define contrasting national identity. *BoJack Horseman* is the least international of the five shows and finds its representations of national identity within American society. *Rick and Morty* travels between nations, worlds, dimensions, and universes and has little use of something so grounded and pedestrian as the real-life national borders of the USA or at least what is on the other side of them.

In *Archer*, Canada is represented as friendly neighbor to the north that is of no real threat to American security. A group of Nova Scotian freedom fighters are invented as a parodic inversion of terrorist organizations from Bond films or other cop action scenarios. They target donut shops; they are baffled by what they perceive as extreme and racialized gun violence from their American enemies and are generally no match for the basic field competence of the ISIS agency. Canada is represented as the polite, kind, wimpy, counterpart empathic both in terms of personal and political policies, as well as being organized, fair, passive, and boring compared to the American bullying, boorish, aggressive, violent, insensitive, action-oriented, self-assured, and fun counterpart. American national identity is to stomp across a border like a bull into a china shop and not be concerned about what plates or vases gets destroyed in the process of securing a particular item. If that means invading a Central American country in a convoluted plan including fake mercenary rebels, the state of Iran, manipulating independent espionage agencies into drugs and arms trade only to balance the budget of the CIA, then so be it. The American self is the priority and other countries, and their institutions are pawns in an international chess board of politics and capitalism.

In *South Park* this image is distorted even further when the often absurd and random depictions of Canadian national identity have very little connection to their real-life counterpart whereas American national identity boils down to notions of American exceptionalism, the idea that the USA unquestionably is the greatest country in the world and that everyone from every other nation in the world would live there if they had the choice. Mexican immigrants should be grateful to be in the USA, and everyone wants to cross the border, until they realize that they were better off at home and that life in America does not live up to the self-described exceptionalism that was advertised, in turn dismantling the foundation of American economy. Canadian foreigners should be kicked out and a wall should be built to keep them out, until Canada builds the wall first and then it is more important to know what kind of cool stuff is on the other side of the wall because American national identity is to dictate terms for others and never be told what to do and what not to do by other countries. Other scholars have also concluded that the image of America portrayed in *South Park* is a nation that is internationally aggressive and indifferent to the concern of others.⁵⁹⁶ *South Park* even more than *Archer* focuses on the constructions of American national identity where the “them” on the other side of the border is not as important and can be an absurd distortion of its real-life counterpart, what matters is how the “we” is created and invoked when dealing with a foreign threat, be it real or imaginary.

Parody and satire are used in *Archer* and *South Park* to show national identities that are not as dependent on foreign contrasts as scholar like Medhurst emphasize, and a question that needs to be asked is if this is only true for the distorted

⁵⁹⁶ Dubinsky 2023, p. 116.

representations of the shows or if it applies in real life as well? The United States of America might not be as dependent on its neighbors to define their national identity. The notion of American exceptionalism is shaped more in isolation than in contrast with other nations, fostering a sense of self-reliance and self-importance that overlooks other countries or regards them as nuisances rather than worthy adversaries. The story of American national identity is not so much contrasted against its neighbors, close or far, but very much shaped by its borders. The borders that need protection and that are there to keep things out to not disturb the American Project. The USA does not need to look outside its borders for confirmation, it expects everyone else to adjust and conform. Parody enables the shows to use the familiarity of existing cultural production like patriotic and sentimental country music, epic historic fantasies like westerns and mythical Native American stories, espionage and action film tropes, convoluted super hero villain origin stories, or the absurdity of news covered real-life American foreign interactions, to reiterate how American national identity is constructed, upheld, reproduced, and made compulsory, and to then satirize and undermine its very foundations through the absurd, acidic, and often hilarious representations and storylines of these episodes.

There is no doubt that the contrast against other nationalities generally and the closest national neighbors specifically play a certain role in the creation of American national identity, but perhaps not as much of a part as with other nations. To understand the creation and reproduction of American national identity and the role that parody plays in its fictional representations, we need to look further at other aspects of its mechanics. But first we need to make sure that all five shows really address American national identity and in that sense one of the shows is different than the others since it does not take place in the USA. As always, however, there is always more to be found than what first meets the eye if you only look a little bit closer.

Chapter 4 *My Little Pony* and Creating Spaces for Play

When life gives you apples, make apple pies! – Applejack

I simply cannot let such a crime against fabulousity go uncorrected. – Rarity

It needs to be about twenty-percent cooler. – Rainbow Dash

Western assumptions about animation have stipulated that it is first and foremost a children's medium, and for television animation that was mostly true for a long time.⁵⁹⁷ The ascension of adult oriented animated television shows in the wake of *The Simpsons* meant a larger diverse audience, but even though they were primarily directed at an adult audience, their double coding meant that communication, humor, and satire worked on different levels for different audiences. Bart making a Pablo Neruda reference or Grandpa Simpson quickly exiting a brothel when he sees that his grandson collects tickets are jokes that work exclusively for an adult audience, and even then, for a limited segment of the adult population. But Sideshow Bob stepping on rakes, Maggie wielding a shotgun, Mr. Burns releasing the hounds, or the kids enjoying the latest mayhem of the Itchy & Scratchy shorts are all examples of storytelling that is easily understood and appreciated by a younger audience. Paul Wells states that this double coding is a key factor in making these animated shows some of the most feared series on television.⁵⁹⁸ This chapter looks closer at *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and how an animated television series aimed at a young audience also uses parody and satire but also addresses and uses American national identity to create spaces for alternative readings.

Four of the TV shows I use for this text are based in the United States of America, albeit with varying degrees of realism. *Archer* starts off in New York and veers off on missions in the US and other countries around the globe (and in

⁵⁹⁷ Mills 2005, p. 145.

⁵⁹⁸ Wells 1998, p. 225.

space) but there is never any spatial doubt as to what world we are in and what country is the base of operation. The temporal aspect of nationality and internationality is further examined in Chapter 6. *BoJack Horseman* is almost exclusively American. It is centered around the Hollywood industry in Los Angeles and makes minor detours to other parts of America and in specific episodes to the real Thailand and the fictional Ocean City. Despite some of these extraneous inclusions of place, however, there is no doubt that the show takes place in the US. *Rick and Morty* travels at ease through time and (literal) space, between universes and worlds, but the starting off point is the family home firmly established in the United States as a country. And the village of South Park is close to Denver in the state of Colorado and even though it is sometimes invaded by Kaiju monsters, rampant turkeys, sentient billionaires, or the nation of Jersey, it is still a small town in outback rural USA. The exception to the rule seems to be *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and at first glance it is. The show mainly takes place in the town of Ponyville, which is located in the country of Equestria, where the capital where the rulers live is called Canterlot. Equestria is a fictional country in a fictional world where ponies are norm and humans are nowhere to be seen, seemingly separating it from our world. But the show is made in America mostly by Americans with an American showrunner on behalf of an American toy company, and this of course is made visible within the show.

Working within the constraints of a commercial venture can be challenging but also offer opportunities for the show's creators. Before each season Hasbro would set up certain demands on the content, often based on what toys they wanted to push that season. There had to be a pink princess pony, one of the characters needed a brother, something concerning another side character needed more attention because she is popular in the 4-8 age category, but as long as those demands are met, there is plenty of room for creative freedom in storytelling and style. The commercial drive of the show was part of the deal, but sometimes Hasbro's demands and predictions of what their audience would want backfired, like when they demanded that main character Twilight Sparkle be made into a princess, because they did not think it was enough for her to be well read, studious, and organized, an attempt to move the focus from books as accessories to clothes, sparkles, and wavy hair, but it was met with an outcry of disappointment from audiences of all ages who liked their nerdy book-smart TV friend. This chapter looks into the representation of Equestria and how it references and reiterates elements from the real world generally and the United States of America specifically.

The United States of Equestria

In order to define and discuss representations of national identity in *My Little Pony*, I will use Michael Skey's five dimensions of national discourse outlined in the opening chapter. To reiterate, they are the *spatial dimension* mainly focused on territory and who controls it, the *temporal dimension* that creates and upholds a sense of national unity through traditions and rituals to emphasize a shared and often glorious past, the *cultural dimension* that constitutes symbols and symbolic systems where a shared language is one of the most important ones, the *political dimension* which is the importance for states to mobilize and sustain national movements through systems of education, law, finance, and territorial control, and finally the *self/other dimension* that contains the use of national characteristics, emotions, habits, and values that make someone a part of a nation in contrast to other nations.⁵⁹⁹

The self/other dimension intertwines with Andy Medhurst's term *Englandography* to summarize the different aspects that make up Englishness, the grammar used to construct and uphold the notion of Englishness. According to Medhurst, a numbered list of those instances is a common start for researchers in English nationalism, but it would, as a list of instances of American nationalism, unavoidably be insufficient. To complete a comprehensive definition of specific nationalisms is an impossible task, but what can be done, and what Medhurst successfully does in his book, is look at specific examples that have been used to form and/or uphold a sense of national community. Where Medhurst highlights historical examples of tea, football, fox hunting, warm beer, green pastures, the music of Elgar or The Specials, and "queuing up properly", an American list would surely include apple pie, the Statue of Liberty, the Grand Canyon, football (the other kind), John Wayne, Dolly Parton, hamburgers, highways, malls, and some notion of "freedom", but those examples do not, of course, summarize American nationalism, national identity or national specificity.⁶⁰⁰

In this Americanography of common examples used to encapsulate the American nation, some are worthy of more attention due to their frequency or intensity when studying the plethora of films, television series, or academic output on the subject. Place is an important category for doing nation, whether it is due to its connections to a historically neutral or nationalistically specific past, or to a sense of modernity and progress in urbanity or the erection of famous buildings. In the material gathered by Medhurst on Britishness or Englishness, the countryside was a central element, much more so than any of the nation's cities. Rurality triumphed urbanity in most people's description of nationality. Rural places are important for the construction of American nationality as well, but not

⁵⁹⁹ Skey 2011, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁰⁰ Medhurst 2007, p. 42.

more important than urban places and buildings. The Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, and Mount Rushmore, the corn plains of Iowa, the Great Lakes, the Appalachians or Rocky Mountains, the Nevada desert, all are examples of places tightly connected for many to a sense of American national identity. Mount Rushmore is of course quite literally built to create national unity, and by using a rock formation sacred to local Native Americans it is also an apt metaphor for the conditioning of citizenship. These are *our* presidents on *our* piece of land that *you* are not a part of, and as such it is still remembered and celebrated.

Mehring highlights the use of the Utah desert at the end of *Independence Day* (Emmerich 1996) “to re-establish the myth of the vastness of the American landscape ready to be re-cultivated.”⁶⁰¹ This is a reference to the pioneer spirit, the frontier myth established and (re)constructed throughout the history of the building of the American territory and nation, the concept of *Manifest Destiny*; that America is rightfully settled by westward movement of European immigrants.⁶⁰² Other common symbols of American national identity include the national anthem, but also food like hamburgers and fries, apple pie, sweet potatoes, Thanksgiving turkey, corn on the cob and drinks like Coca-Cola and bourbon.⁶⁰³ There are of course both regional specialties like Boston clam chowder or New Orleans jambalaya and internationally influenced food culture like Tex-Mex that have gained national status in some ways, but it is as with all symbols of national identity difficult to pinpoint exactly to what degree they are a part of what constitutes the American identity. Flags, national anthems, foods and drinks are common denominators in most national constructions, they are easily shared, recognized and to a certain degree enjoyed.

Combining the spatial and temporal dimensions, there is a sense of timelessness and natural national past that is easy to attach to rural geographical places, but in the USA, I would argue that there are just as many modern cities and buildings that are imbued with a national identity. New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, New Orleans, Memphis, and of course Washington are all used more than all British examples with the possible exception of London when describing a national importance. When it comes to buildings, The Statue of Liberty is perhaps the first that comes to mind, but the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Mall in Washington including the White House and the Lincoln and Washington Memorials, the Liberty Bell, the Alamo, the Hollywood sign, Route 66, arguably the Strip in Las Vegas, and unavoidably the World Trade Center Memorial in New

⁶⁰¹ Mehring 2010, p. 5.

⁶⁰² Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 10.

⁶⁰³ Stephen Colbert ironically invoked the power of the apple pie when referencing it as “that greatest of American desserts” at the legendary 2006 White House Correspondent’s Dinner, Gray et al, p. 124.

York are all examples of modernity and urbanity that are often mentioned when defining what constitutes America and American identity.⁶⁰⁴ These are the places that are under attack in films and television series when America faces some sort of enemy and they are readily disposed of when needed. The Golden Gate Bridge alone has been destroyed in numerous fictional outings including but not exclusively *It Came From Beneath the Sea* (Gordon 1955), *Godzilla* (Edwards 2014), *Super Man* (Donner 1978), *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner 2006), *Pacific Rim* (del Toro 2013), *San Andreas* (Peyton 2015), *Sharknado 5: Global Swarming* (Ferrante 2017), and *Monsters vs Aliens* (Letterman and Vernon 2009). When a national threat is to be signaled to an American audience, destroying famous buildings imbued with national importance is an effective shortcut.

Regarding the spatial dimension in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, Equestria is depicted as a vast nation demarcated by ocean on the western and eastern side and with land borders in the north and south, just like the USA. When a map of Equestria appears in season 5 and through the power of magic shows the Mane Six where they must go on a quest and who should be the one to go, the geographical resemblance with mainland USA is obvious, albeit with slightly blurrier land borders in the north and south. The Crystal Mountains constitutes a border against the Frozen North that is outside the realm of Equestria, and the Mysterious South does seem to have a land border to the south, but it is never clearly defined. One of the most obvious examples of Equestria as a stand-in for the USA is in the naming of places and the geography of the country. While Ponyville carries a generic equine name that evokes the town's rural character, and Canterlot alludes to Camelot and the legends of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table to anchor the capital in history, myth, and governance, the largest city in Equestria is Manehattan.

Named after the central borough of the largest city in the US, Equestria's version of Manhattan and New York resembles its real-life counterpart in many ways. It is situated on an island on the east coast of Equestria. It is depicted as a populace and busy city with heavy traffic, pony-drawn taxi carriages and skyscrapers. Some of the more notable buildings are the art deco Crystaller Building with a giant bronze horse head on top, the Mare Statue or Statue of Friendship on Friendship Island which is a large green statue depicted as an earth pony with a stone tablet in her left hoof and a raised torch in her other, and an ice-skating rink where Rarity, Pinkie Pie and Maud Pie skate in S06E03 *The Gift of the Maud Pie*, referencing in turn the Chrysler Building, the Statue of Liberty, and the Rockefeller Center rink. The theater district of Manehattan is called Bridleway, there is a vast unnamed central park in the city, and two named residential areas of the city are Whinnyamsburg and Bronclyn (where the haypacking and fashion districts are located), of course referencing Broadway, Central Park, Williamsburg

⁶⁰⁴ Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 12, Mehring 2010, pp. 3-5.

and Brooklyn, although the Meat Packing and Garment Districts seem to have been relocated there in the show. Several ponies in episodes situated in Manehattan speak in distinct New York accents, there are New York style diners, news and pretzel stands, and the population are hostile and aggressive towards Rarity's notion of helping others so they someday will help you, much in the vein of the famous New York attitude towards others. In comics and video games based on but outside the TV show, Manehattan also feature landmarks like Carneighie Hall, Madison Mare Garden, and the Manehattan Museum of Modern Art. A conscious and elaborate effort has been made to make Manehattan look and feel like real world New York, and there is no doubt that it has been successful.

Other cities featured or mentioned in the show include Fillydelphia, a modern city home to both ponies and dragons, and Baltimore, the historical city where ponies stayed off the dragon invasion. Just like Manehattan these cities are situated on the eastern seaboard like their counterparts Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York. Whinnyapolis, like its real-life counterpart Minneapolis, is often represented as the place from which domestic tourists come from to visit Manehattan or Canterlot. Las Pegasus is like Las Vegas a popular vacation and tourist destination in the southwestern desert with bright lights and plenty of games and activities, and Vanhoover in the northwest is the city of origin for the Pear family and interestingly within the boundaries of Equestria unlike its counterpart Vancouver which is outside of the US in Canada. Places like Neighgara Falls, Smokey Mountains and the San Palomino Desert are also mentioned or used as backdrop for episodes, and the towns of Appaloosa and Dodge Junction are used to reiterate western towns from film history.

In canonized paratexts like the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* comic series which contained 102 issues from 2012 to 2021, places like Seaddle, Chicoltgo, Applewood, Salt Lick City, and New Horseleans also feature, reiterating real life counterparts Seattle, Chicago, Hollywood, Salt Lake City, and New Orleans. Even though there are some names of Equestria towns, cities, or places that are based on real life cities that are not American, like Stratusburg, Trottingham, or Ponhenge, the majority of geographical determinants in Equestria are based on counterparts from the USA. Nations mentioned outside the realm of Equestria include original places like the Dragon Lands, Griffinstone and Seaquestria, but also nations based on real life counterparts like Saddle Arabia, Flankladesh, Maretonia, Maretania, and France. Geographical distances are often difficult to pinpoint exactly, but by the transport of choice for long distance in Equestria, which is trains, a journey to the furthestmost parts of the country takes more than a day indicating a distance similar to that of mainland USA.

Moving on to the cultural dimension where I will focus primarily on language. I mentioned that the citizens of Manehattan often speak in distinct New York accents, but that is not the only aspect of language that signifies American culture or the United States as a country. First and most prominent, though it is easily

overlooked due to its self-evident nature, is the fact that the language spoken in the show is English, most often American English with different dialects. Of the main characters, Twilight Sparkle, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and Spike speak with variations of a generic American accent. Rarity speaks with a Trans-Atlantic accent, a consciously learned English accent used mainly by American East-Coast elites and popularized via the entertainment industry of the late 19th and early to mid-20th century, which in the show is used to accentuate her elevated sense for the fashion industry specifically, but also taste and refinement generally.⁶⁰⁵ It is a class marker that separates her from the other ponies in terms of cultural capital, the knowledge and use of high-end products, positions, gestures, poses, and places. Rarity often speaks of haute couture fashion, an enhanced sense of style, and readily conjures up a divan to faint dramatically upon.

The Transatlantic Englishness in her speech is used to accentuate these aspects of her as a character, English equals posh and upper-class and means that she sometimes has a hard time understanding the other ponies on the regular American level, which is used as plot device in episodes like S01E14 *Suited for Success*, S04E13 *Simple Ways*, or S04E23 *Inspiration Manifestation*. The remaining member of the mane six, Applejack, also has a distinct American accent, but she is the only one who speaks with an outright regional accent. Her speech has a Southern twang that is reminiscent of Missouri or the Ozarks in Oklahoma where there are plenty of apple farms. Voice actor Ashleigh Ball has cited famous country singers like Miley Cyrus, Dolly Parton and Reba McEntyre as inspiration for the voice.⁶⁰⁶ The accent places Applejack and the show even more firmly into an American reality, which is easy to miss in translations of the show. In the Swedish version of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* for instance; Applejack's dialect is no different from the other ponies and the American references in speech and language are lost in translation.

An interesting aspect of the temporal dimension and the creation and upholding of a mutual past is the role of religion in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. A conscious decision was made to not include any existing religious denominations in *My Little Pony* to avoid any controversy that could arise from it. Even though we have established that Equestria is very much America, there are no churches in Ponyville, no Cathedrals in Canterlot, and no Synagogues, Mosques, or Temples in Manehattan. Religious institutions do not exist. There are funeral ceremonies and traditional festivities, but they are not explicitly tied to any real-life religious

⁶⁰⁵ Queen 2015, pp. 241-242.

⁶⁰⁶ BroNYcon interview, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKxv3FsRQtE&t=510s>, retrieved 2025-10-17.

occurrences, even though they might be reminiscent of them at times.⁶⁰⁷ The sun is raised by Princess Celestia, and the moon is raised by Princess Luna, both real ponies albeit royalty, and therefore not worshipped like gods but treated as the rulers of Equestria that they are.

As evident by the name of the show, magic has a central place in Equestrian lore, but the magic that is present in the show is very different from the magic or fantastical occurrences that our religions tell of. The magic of friendship is a naturally occurring power that can be studied and understood better, like gravity or temperature. Twilight Sparkle, the central character of the show, is a student of the magic of friendship, and by the final seasons she runs a school of friendship that teaches its findings to those inclined to learn more about it. Magic is science and the study of it is an academic endeavor that Twilight Sparkle excels in. Just like other natural phenomenon, magic exists outside the realm of human, or in this case pony, understanding or experience.

The philosophical question of whether a tree makes a sound when it falls in a forest with no-one around to hear it is easily answered from a scientific perspective, it makes a sound because trees always make sounds when they fall, they do not make sounds for the pleasure of a listening audience. So, gravity and temperature exist outside human experience, but humans of course influence, use, and measure them. Climate changes influence the degree of temperature, we travel to different parts of the globe in order to experience different temperatures, and we measure temperature using different scales in different countries and for different purposes. Like other forces of nature in our world, magic in Equestria can sometimes work in ways beyond comprehension, but there is always a firm scientific explanation for it even though it is not always known for the characters.

In writing on representations of religion in *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*, David Feltmate uses a definition of religion built upon the works of William James that is applicable here. He states that a religion “consists of the social structures and institutions that facilitate, support, and protect the belief that there is an unseen order and that our ultimate good relies on harmoniously adjusting to it”.⁶⁰⁸ In other words, religion does not exist outside the human experience, outside the social structures and institutions Feltmate mentions and the human interpretations of this unseen order that is not empirically measurable. Religion has held unquestionable importance and yielded massive consequences

⁶⁰⁷ A funeral ceremony in S02E17 *Hearts and Hooves Day* that contains a coffin, a man in a collar reading from a book, and lighted candles, and the Hearth’s Warming holiday as depicted in S02E11 *Hearth’s Warming Eve* is reminiscent of Christmas with exchanging of gifts and decorating trees during wintertime. In the episode Earth ponies are depicted as pioneer settlers, Unicorns as medieval nobility and Pegasi as militaristic Greco-Roman, see Cresswell 2015, pp. 135-143.

⁶⁰⁸ Feltmate 2017, p. 11.

throughout human history, but it has done so through the interpretations and actions of human beings, not by occurring independently as a force of nature. To say that religion therefore is constructed and controlled by human beings is in itself not a political statement, it is a matter of empirical fact.

What makes it a political statement, however, is that religion is also often a political entity. Criticism or questioning of its absolute authority or the interpretations extrapolated from it have often resulted in very real political consequences from micro level to macro level, for individuals, families, groups of people, cultures, nations, groups of nations, and the world in its entirety. To state that religion is created by man (in the sense of human, but for the most part literally by representatives of the male gender) is perhaps no longer as controversial as it once was, but in many countries over the world, arguably a majority, questioning the origin of religion could get you in trouble, and the United States of America has proven to be one of them. Reiterating the United States of America in a television show aimed at young girls and leaving out one of its major conservative institutions from a moral and political perspective might not be a conscious act of resistance, but it does subvert expectations of how we are used to see it.

The absence of religion in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* was most probably not made with subversive political intent, but the effect of it is still interesting from that perspective, and it leads us into other interesting aspects of the show. The absence of religion creates spaces for other belief systems to take on greater importance. Science and academia through the key role of the magic of friendship that is taught and studied at schools and universities in Equestria. Friendship and co-operation as central aspects of all life and communication in the country, where everyone helps each other and there are no homeless ponies, nor ponies in dire poverty. Health care and schools are universal, and law enforcement is as good as redundant. In S05E01-02 *The Cutie Map parts 1 and 2* the Mane Six visits a distant village in Equestria where a pony named Starlight Glimmer has manipulated all citizens via magical muffins to dress, act, and speak the same and to have no distinctive cutie marks which is what sets every pony apart from each other. By having no-one stick out everyone is on the same level, and everyone is worth the same.

This uniformity is revealed to be totalitarian and the Mane Six manages to break Starlight Glimmer's control over the citizens, who gladly go back to what made them unique before being lured in by Starlight Glimmer. The message is of course that everyone should embrace their unique abilities and that uniformity is totalitarianism, which is a popular description of socialism in right wing punditry, but the interesting part is that equality in terms of gender, class, and ethnicity is much more prevalent in this fictionalized version of the US than in the real version. In fact, Equestria is more equal than in any country in the real world, and even though some ponies are depicted as more affluent than others and the country is ruled by monarchs, there are few to no poor or unemployed ponies, educational

opportunities are abundant, and your passion dictates what you should do with your life. To call it a socialist utopia might be taking the interpretation to an extreme, but what the show does is create spaces for alternative readings of how a country can be run and what a country can entail for the citizens inhabiting it. In the absences of restrictive authorities and with a clear stance against totalitarian dichotomies *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* allows different, even subversive, perspectives on how the United States of America can look and how it can be run. Furthermore, creating spaces for alternative readings also include other aspects of life in Equestria and its representations in the show.

National Representations and Queer Readings

In 1915, the Supreme Court of America decided that the film industry was “a business, pure and simple”. This meant that cinema was denied the protections of free speech granted to other media. In order to avoid federal regulation and in fear of losing income due to censorship during strenuous financial times, the film industry established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) in 1922, which in turn formed the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 to enforce a kind of self-censorship on the industry. The guidelines that the PCA enforced came to be known as the Production Code or the Hays Code, restricting sexual content, nudity, language, alcohol and drug consumption, depictions of religious content and political perspectives, certain stereotypes, criminal activity, and other content to varying degrees, forcing producers to alter character types, storylines, and design elements in order to have their films distributed.⁶⁰⁹ In 1952, the US Supreme Court reversed its decision from 1915, and as a result, films could once again be produced without the risk of federal censorship.⁶¹⁰ As with the Hays Code, television deemed it prudent to self-censor in order to ensure minimal external censoring. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) initiated the Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters as a set of ethical standards for television.

In the 1980s, networks took over the duty of monitoring content in the Broadcast Standards and Practices Department. In response to changing standards and stretched rules in the areas of language, violence, and sexual content, the US television industry, in conjunction with the FCC implemented a ratings system known as “TV parental guidelines” in 1997.⁶¹¹ The studios under the Hays Code

⁶⁰⁹ The stereotypes enforced were mainly related to countries that purchased US films, but did also include race and ethnicity in general, Furniss 2016, pp. 116-117.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid, p. 258.

⁶¹¹ Ibid, p. 227.

era applied strict self-censorship in order to avoid government censorship on studio films with rules emanating from a long list of “don’ts” and “be carefals” that had been suggested by conservative forces. Even though there were shortcuts around the regulations, and they were lifted in 1968, the norms and recommendations they entailed have lingered, and television applied their own self-regulations of what not to say or do on the small screen.⁶¹² The foundation of the production code was the moral stance that there is good and evil and that motion pictures always need to be on the side of good, against sin which is not clearly defined but probably falls into the category of “crimes against divine law”, which is mentioned as something different but equally important as “human law”. Home, family, and marriage are in this view considered essential to morality, and the love of a man for a woman within the confounds of marriage and therefore permitted by the laws of God and man, was considered pure love and the rightful subject of plots.⁶¹³ The concept of degenerates in popular culture trying to seduce and corrupt the population, especially the youth, is neither something new nor something unique for America, but it does play a significant role in shaping American society and the American nation. The moralism expressed in the Hays production code lingers to modern day America and its conservative pundits. In what David Holloway describes as Michael Medved’s “conservative culture-wars classic” *Hollywood vs America* (1993), core American commitments are marriage, religion, and patriotism, and to him this is what film and television are undermining.⁶¹⁴

Sean Griffin, in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens*, writes about the contradiction of the Disney franchise being built on conservative family values where sexuality is never present and offspring are raised by aunts or uncles instead of parents, and the iconic status Disney characters, stories, and merchandize have with a substantial gay audience.⁶¹⁵ Disney is also one of many entertainment companies making films and TV shows for children who have been the target of organized campaigning, protests and boycotts for “pushing a homosexual agenda” by arranging or even just accepting gay themed events, advertising in gay magazines or simply not speaking up against homosexuality.⁶¹⁶ The backlash in the USA by conservative and religious groups against perceived “homosexual propaganda” for even implying that homosexuality exists is real, wide-spread, and yields serious consequences financially and politically for the parties involved. Griffin states that

⁶¹² Including the seven curse words that George Carlin used during his standup routine which caused him to be arrested for disturbing the peace after a performance at Summerfest in Milwaukee in 1972.

⁶¹³ Mintz et al 2016, pp. 122-133.

⁶¹⁴ Medved 1993, quoted in Holloway 2011, p. 112.

⁶¹⁵ Griffin 2000, p. xi-xiii.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid p. xiii-xv.

“modern Western society has worked ceaselessly to naturalize heterosexuality and demonize or pathologize all other conceptions of sexuality”. It is especially true for fiction directed at children where Disney is a prime example of a company that has been molded by a conscious heterosexual and capitalist agenda in order to be able to make cartoons and animated films and to profit from them, and it is a factor that needs to be taken into account for a company that is dependent on its profits.⁶¹⁷ *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is a TV show made by toy company Hasbro for the primary purpose of selling as many toys as possible. The financial risk of having explicit LGBTQIA+ characters on a show targeted at young girls is still a major factor when deciding what is allowed and not allowed in the show’s storylines.

Richard Dyer writes about noir films of the 1940s and 1950s, with a stylized world and storylines written around sexuality and perversity which contained many characters that can be read as gay or queer. Because of the restrictions laid upon movie production by the Hays Code and societal norms at the time no character was allowed to be openly gay, but obvious clues could be inserted into storytelling, mise-en-scène or acting. Dyer suggests that it is the uncertainty in the reading that is important and characteristic for film noir, the notion that it might be queer.⁶¹⁸ The purpose of a queer reading of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is not to expose a “true” or “right” way of reading the text. It is to examine the possibility of a queer space, the possibility of a queer reading, understanding, and identification, the possibility of a queer potential as outlined by Sean Griffin. Giti Chandra argues that “queer desire is an act of resistance against dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality, and for the subversion of heteronormativity”.⁶¹⁹

In the *My Little Pony* fanbase there is an abundance of queer readings and queer fanart, from combinations of slash fiction and shipping culture to pair up characters romantically to outright erotic depictions (dubbed clop fiction or clopfic). Rainbow Dash, one of the Mane Six and thus one of the main characters in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, features prominently in examples of queer fanfiction and lesbian shipping including erotic imagery, and in the version from the show she is a popular figurehead to use as a queer symbol for gay clubs or gay events.⁶²⁰ To be fair, there is also significant resistance to the notion of Rainbow Dash being anything other than heterosexual just because she is depicted with masculine or even butch lesbian traits. Critics of a queer reading often cites creator Lauren Faust emphasizing that Rainbow Dash is simply another facet of what it

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, p. xvi-xvii.

⁶¹⁸ Dyer 2002, Dyer 2004.

⁶¹⁹ hooks 2000, p. 15, Chandra 2020, p. 44.

⁶²⁰ Ellis 2015, pp. 304-306.

can mean to be a girl, describing her as a tomboy without specifically defining her sexuality as she also refrains from doing with the rest of the characters.⁶²¹ So who is Rainbow Dash and why is she important?

Rainbow Dash is a Pegasus with wings and the ability to fly who was born in the Pegasi capital of Cloudsdale but lives in her cloudominium with classical columns and rainbow waterfalls outside Ponyville, where she is responsible for creating and maintaining the weather. She is a fierce flyer, one of the very best in all of Equestria. She is competitive, boastful, loves racing and a good prank or practical joke. She is also brash, blunt and mischievous, and wary of performing perceived feminine traits in public, like needing medical attention or expressing emotions towards her pet. Of the six elements of harmony representing the magic of friendship that keeps the nation together, she represents the element of loyalty. Rainbow Dash's voice is deep, brash and raspy, and she usually talks fast and loudly. She is voiced by Ashleigh Ball who also does the voice of Applejack.

Fictional narratives can expose potential queerness in perceived heterosexual relations, even if it is not explicitly addressed.⁶²² Jeffrey P. Dennis points out that "[...]where no characters are specifically identified as gay or lesbian, we can locate same-sex desire in an interaction between two characters of the same sex, which is elsewhere coded as romantic but is not an obvious parody of heterosexual desire" giving examples such as living together and sleeping in the same room, turning down romantic relationships and engaging in social activities as a couple, but also the absence of other substantive relationships, not exclusively romantic, especially with the opposite sex.⁶²³ The lack of heterosexuality creates a space where queer readings are made possible. Clues about a character's sexual orientation can be subtle or not so subtle, but it does not need to be shown explicitly. Sexual relationships with partners of the same gender do not need to be followed to conclusion, as Lynne Joyrich puts it. By holding the question in permanent suspension, much like the will they/won't they of protagonists, knowing viewers are encouraged to make their own readings where "creators acknowledge the centrality of sexual ambiguity to [a] show's campy [...] appeal".⁶²⁴ Rainbow Dash lives alone in her cloudominium, and like Applejack she does not have a romantic relationship in the series and shows little interest for any male ponies at all. Above all, she loves flying free and her biggest nightmare is to be permanently grounded, but what she likes sometimes clashes with her cool and tough tomboy persona. In S02E15 *The Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 2000* her obsessive love for Applejack's farm's cider is laid out, in S06E10 *Applejack's*

⁶²¹ Ibid, ppp 305-306.

⁶²² Boonin-Vail 2019, p. 8, where he quotes Davies and Funke 2011, p. 1.

⁶²³ Dennis 2013, p. 133.

⁶²⁴ Joyrich 2001, p. 453.

“Day” Off she is revealed as a frequent patron of the local spa, and in S04E08 *Rarity Takes Manehattan* she expresses a distinct fondness for musicals.

Rainbow Dash’s design was crafted from previous generation ponies where the former iteration of Rainbow Dash had the same color scheme and name, while Firefly from the first generation shared her personality traits. Her cutie mark was changed from a rainbow to a rainbow lightning bolt, and she was given messy hair and straight eyelashes to “hint at her dynamic nature”.⁶²⁵ Even though this is the explanation given for the haircut it does have similarities with hair styles popular within the queer community. Rainbow Dash’s mane and tail are rainbow colored, and when she flies fast enough to induce a sonic boom depicted in S01E23 *The Cutie Mark Chronicles* it is rainbow colored and referred to as a “sonic rainboom”. The rainbow holds important meanings in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* lore. It is the symbol of the elements of harmony and the magic of friendship where each of the Mane Six represents a color and a quality that together form magic powerful enough to defeat any foe. Each color, each element, is needed to invoke this power. The rainbow has been a part of *My Little Pony* from the very start as something that is considered appealing to young girls, so it is not a new iteration but making it the key power structures for the heroes of the story centers it in a new way. Rainbow Dash has rainbow in name and appearance because she is drawn from previous iterations, but the combination of rainbow color, queer coded hairstyle and a tomboy persona combined with the lack of heterosexual romantic interest throughout the show provides plenty of space to read the character as gay, bi or at least queer.

In S02E07 *May the Best Pet Win!* Rainbow Dash is the last of the “Mane Six” (the six main characters of the show) to get a pet, Tank the turtle, who travels through air using a propeller. In the episode, a number of potential pets compete in categories which are important to her. These are speed, agility, guts, coolness, awesomeness and radicalness. When friend Twilight questions if awesomeness and radicalness are not the same qualities, Rainbow Dash replies “You would think that, Twilight. And that’s why you would never qualify to be my pet.” Citing Arbunoth and Seneca, Alexander Doty writes about a queer or lesbian reading of female characters in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks 1953). He invokes a butch/femme dichotomy for female leads Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe who claims the roles of musical and dancing partners normally reserved for heterosexual romantic relationships at the time, Russell’s character also “adopts a ‘masculine’ stride and stance” and lets Monroe play the lady by opening doors and embracing her protectively.⁶²⁶ Doty states that “frequently the most conventional codes of queerness as heterosexualized cross-gender identification will be

⁶²⁵ PonyCon 2016 Character Development Panel with Lauren Faust,
<https://youtube.com/watch?v=0ZD23--3fmY&t=1135s>, retrieved 251017.

⁶²⁶ Doty 1993, where he quotes Arbunoth and Seneca 1982.

juxtaposed or will coexist with more progressive queer reworkings of the masculine and the feminine”.⁶²⁷ Rainbow Dash neither dances nor open doors for her female friends, but she is consciously coded with traditionally masculine traits like athletic prowess, competitiveness, difficulty in expressing emotions, and love for practical jokes, and she repeatedly shows disdain for traditionally female chores, activities, and interests.

One of the most popular shipping duos in all of Equestria, from the very beginning of the show, is Rainbow Dash and Applejack (dubbed AppleDash).⁶²⁸ Applejack is the farmer pony responsible for Apple Acres Farm together with her brother Big Mac who rarely speaks other than muttering a “yep” now and again, little sister Apple Bloom who is still at school and together with friends Scootaloo and Sweetie Bell spend several episodes trying to find their cutie marks, and Granny Smith who is the siblings’ grandmother. The farm produces anything edible, and drinkable made from apples and is a core part of the Ponyville food market. During the show’s run, Rainbow Dash and Applejack are friends and have adventures together and even though they are similar in that they like to compete and have a good loving banter between them, there is little hint at a romantic relationship between them. When Applejack tells the story of how she got her cutie mark in *Cutie Mark Chronicles* it was because she had moved to the city and saw the sonic rainboom Rainbow Dash made, making her realize that what she loves is Ponyville and the apple farm, signaled by a tearful longing glance at the rainbow over Ponyville calling her home. Applejack’s most precious memory with her friends was shown in S02E02 *The Return of Harmony part 2* to be running through leaves in the woods with Rainbow Dash. But it is not until the very last scene of the very last episode of the show, either confirming a laid-out plan or allowing a little fan service, that the show confirms a connection between the two. The scene takes place years in the future when Twilight is the new ruler of Equestria and the Mane Six gather from their respective habitats each month to discuss the dealings of the nation. Rainbow Dash and AppleJack arrive together and bicker lovingly about doing chores on the farm together, implying that they now live together and have done so for quite some time. They do not share a kiss, but they are undoubtedly represented as a couple, ticking of boxes of “living together”, “engaging in social activities as a couple” and “uninterested in romantic relationships with the opposite sex”.

In public discourse there is often a limitation placed on fictional characters described as LGBT where their sexuality or gender identity is the one defining trait they are allowed. Instead of being a fully developed individual with personal interest, goals and ambitions, they become “the gay character”, “the trans character” or in all too many cases “the weird character”. Outing a fictional

⁶²⁷ Doty 1993, p. 83.

⁶²⁸ For further definition and discussion on shipping, see Mittell 2015, p. 128.

character too soon may risk placing them in restraints, especially if they are the only representation of their sexuality or gender in a show. An easy way to avoid this is of course to have several characters who break norms in shows, thus enabling them to be more than their norm-breaking, or to write multidimensional characters who overcome initial pigeon-holing.

As for *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, I believe that outing Rainbow Dash as a gay or bi character would have made her “the gay character” in a show that is centered around diversity in the female experience. Explicitly not commenting on her sexuality but insisting that she is simply a tomboy to allow tomboy girls to identify with her does exclude a gay audience at first glance, but the many doors left open to queer readings of Rainbow Dash as a character and the series as a whole, I would argue is not a coincidence. The show’s use of queer iconography and the conscious ambivalence in the absence of heterosexual desire leaves plenty of room for queer viewers of all ages to make a queer reading and self-identify with queer characters and storylines. In a show produced by a toy company in order to sell toys to little girls living in a capitalist, conservative and religious nations, perhaps this is still the extent to which a queer potential can be truly fulfilled. There is, however, an interesting example in the show of where the creation of queer spaces and possibilities of queer readings conflate with parodic representations and American national identity.

Daring Do and Indiana Jones Parody

Stories of national identity have always been told through the means of film and television, and it has been one of the most effective ways to do so. Mintz et al summarizes the importance of moving images in American society by describing it as “a mixture of art, business, and popular entertainment”, and that “the movies provide a host of insights into Americans’ shifting ideals, fantasies, and preoccupations.”⁶²⁹ One aspect of American national identity that seems to be stronger than in many other countries is the focus on individuals as bearers of national identity. It is not uncommon for sport stars to enjoy this status since they literally represent the nation in international competition, but the USA is brimming with other celebrities that are tied to some notions of America and Americanism. Film studio MGM once famously claimed that their actor roster contained more stars than there are in heaven, and America is truly the home of the star. Stars in the film industry, but it can also apply to stars from the fields of sports, music, television, or celebrities in general. The USA has many individuals to imbue with national importance. John Wayne certainly is one of them, a role that he enthusiastically embraced throughout his film career and personal life. An avid

⁶²⁹ Mintz et al 2016, p. 3.

and vocal patriot and anti-communist, Wayne was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal at the time of his death with an image of the actor and the legend “John Wayne – American” as its only print. There is a long line of film stars who have been given national importance, but more interesting perhaps is the connection between Elvis Presley and America. The myths surrounding Elvis, his life and death and the unmatched iconic status he has as an American musician means that he holds great value to a lot of people not only in America, but all over the world. He is one of the first and most commonly mentioned names when people are asked to talk about what constitutes America, and so is Marilyn Monroe, despite neither of them expressing the kind of devotion to nation that John Wayne did. National identity is sometimes chosen or embraced, and sometimes attached to you, whether you like it or not.

Actors and actresses have been used to symbolize the American nation, but even more so have their characters on film and television been used to form American national identity that has been exported all around the world. The importance of western gunslingers and action heroes will be addressed more specifically in chapter 8, but heroic every-men like George Bailey, Lou Gehrig or Chaplin’s The Tramp, advocates for justice like Atticus Finch, Woodward & Bernstein, or Jefferson Smith and swashbuckling adventurers like Zorro, Luke Skywalker, and Superman despite his alien origin all make up the mosaic of film heroes that constitutes the story of American national exceptionalism. National origin does not exclude representing American national identity and its defining traits, Oskar Schindler, Spartacus, Moses, and Johnny Weissmüller’s version of Tarzan are all strong embodiments of American heroism and legal and moral pathos.

Even antiheroes or outright gangsters such as Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942), Tony in *Scarface* (Hawks and Rosson 1932, De Palma 1983), or Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* films (Coppola 1972, 1974) are major parts of the story of the American nation. In the tradition of American swashbuckling adventurers, few other heroes have made a more lasting impact than Indiana Jones with his first outing in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981). The archeology professor moonlighting as a treasure hunter is a rugged individualist who solves problem with a combination of wit, muscle, and street smartness. He battles foreign enemies, finds priceless artifacts imbued with religious magic without financial motivation, and he seduces women without really trying. Indiana Jones is a part of American cinematic history and in the construction of American national identity. He embodies important traits of American national identity as a masculine embodiment of Manifest Destiny and the American frontier spirit of exploration and the domestication of wilderness and its hidden treasures, and as such he constitutes an interesting source text for parody.

Parody, pastiche, pop culture references and other forms of intertextuality are very common in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. They range from references to famous movie characters, music stars or other animated shows to actual movie

parodies, even from perhaps unexpected sources like *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) in S01E04 *Applebuck Season* when some ponies are knocked to the ground by a bunny stampede, and trembling with fear can only exclaim “The horror... the horror...”, but also by referencing or parodying historical film techniques or tropes like training montages or the widescreen eyeline extreme closeup from spaghetti westerns. The intertextuality can vary from a throwaway gag like *Rick and Morty* ponies waiting in a line in the background of one of the episodes to narrational intertextuality that can influence an entire episode. Indiana Jones is used as an example of parody for comedic purposes in S04E04 *Daring Don’t* where the “travel by map”-sequence from the Indiana Jones movies is reiterated. When the ponies go on a journey, it is illustrated by a red line moving on a map just like in the source text, but in a match cut from the red line on the map we realize that it has been Pinkie Pie painting a real red line on the ground for their entire journey. It is a classic example of misdirection and a pretty funny gag. However, a recurring parody in the series based on Indiana Jones as a source text has more interesting implications for an alternative reading of the show.

In S02E16 *Read it and Weep* Rainbow Dash is forced to bed rest at the hospital after a crash. Twilight Sparkle suggests she should read a book, but Rainbow Dash replies that “I soo don’t read, I’m a world class athlete, reading’s for eggheads like you, Twilight”. Twilight nevertheless leaves a copy of *Daring Do and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone*, the first book in the series about the adventures of Daring Do, written by author A. K. Yearling (a parodic reference to J. K. Rowling), at Rainbow Dash’s nightstand. Due to sheer boredom, Rainbow Dash finally gives the book a try and reluctantly realizes she loves the thrilling adventures of the story. When she reads in the episode her voice turns into narration that accompanies film sequences showing what transpires in the book. The first scene starts with the frames at the top and bottom of the screen shrink and be replaced with a black bar, what is referred to as “letterboxing”, to emulate a cinematic frame ratio adjusted to screening on television. Daring Do, wearing a dark olivine vest and a tan pith helmet with a dark olive band and just like Rainbow Dash stranded after injuring her wing in a crash, tries to find her way out of the jungle when she is attacked by different wild cat species. A tiger, a panther, a lynx, and a cheetah take turns growling and swiping their claws at Daring Do as her face expresses increasing distress shown in crosscuts with the animals.

The music is loud and dramatic and it, combined with the increasingly unrealistic danger of the situation, makes for a parodic exaggeration of adventure film source texts like the Indiana Jones franchise. This turns into a parodic inversion and misdirection when another feline predator threatens Daring Do, this time a white fluffy house cat with large eyes whose growl is a squeaky meow, and Daring Do can easily make her escape jumping over the small cat. After the escape, she finds herself outside the ancient temple she was searching for all along. In a scene reiterating the opening scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Daring Do

encounters oversized insects and a series of dangerous traps. This time it is turned into parody by exaggeration and extraneous inclusion by making her fend off flying axes, a pit of fire, crocodiles suspended from the ceiling, a swinging scythe, poison darts, sharp spikes, and a slowly closing stone gate in less than half a minute. She lets out a sigh of relief on the other side of the stone gate, but when the walls start to crumble, she growls with an exasperated look that functions as self-conscious commentary on the amount of obstacles she needs to face.

The next scene also reiterates a scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where a strain of light slowly moves across a room towards a staff fastened in the floor and when the lights hit the staff, the source of the treasure is revealed. This is followed by a reiteration of the scene from the same movie where Indiana Jones finds the treasure, needs to avoid trigger points on the floor that makes poison darts shoot from the wall, and exchanges the small statue he is after with a bag of sand of the same weight to avoid activating its weight trigger, which he famously fails at and is subsequently chased through the corridors of the cave by a large boulder. This is made into parody by exaggerating the amount of poison darts, by having Daring Do carefully examine the pedestal where the sapphire statue is placed and, after sweating profusely with an expression of anguish, in a parodic inversion simply grab the statue with her teeth, and by turning the floor to literal lava after the trigger point is activated. Her escape from the room is accompanied by triumphant music emulating the style and tone of *the Indiana Jones* franchise.

In later episodes it turns out that the Daring Do character is built on Yearling herself, and the adventures that she encounters throughout Equestria. Daring Do is a parody of Indiana Jones, but there are hints of Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series (2001-2024) and winks to the *Harry Potter* franchise (2001-2011) outside of the author's name. A classic adventurer seeking ancient fortunes in competition with flamboyant villains trying to foil her plans. Daring Do is created from the same animation template as Rainbow Dash with the same figure and haircut but with a different color palette. Apparently, this was due to the lack of time allocated to designing the character when she was introduced for the first time, but it also serves as a connection between the two, mirroring the same penchant for action and adventure.⁶³⁰ Where Rainbow Dash has a rainbow mane, Daring Do has seven shades of gray, creating a monochrome rainbow.

Their first actual meeting comes in S04E04 *Daring Don't* where Rainbow Dash realizes that A. K. Yearling is the real Daring Do. She tries to help her on a new adventure, but it all goes wrong, and Daring Do is very reluctant to receive any help and even less so partner up with someone new on her adventures, until the very end when Rainbow Dash is able to save Daring Do in distress. The episode

⁶³⁰ Storyboard artist and supervisor Jim Miller on twitter, responding to a question about the similarities between Rainbow Dash and Daring Do:
<https://twitter.com/TheBiggestJim/status/595314622258814976>, retrieved 251017.

ends with them making up, becoming friends, and sharing what can only be described as a passionate embrace. It is only a hug, but it is longer than a conventional hug, Daring Do rubs her nose against Rainbow Dash's cheek and their lips come within millimeters of each other before Rainbow Dash turns away.

In fiction created for the purpose of selling toys and with the risk of alienating audiences sensitive to non-heterosexual content, especially with entertainment directed at a young audience, the possibility to show romantic relationships between two female characters is limited. What is possible is to not close the door on the possibility of queer characters and queer relationships. During the era of the Hays Code when studio films were not allowed to show same-sex relationships, it was alluded to by signs, metaphor, *mise-en-scène*, acting, and the absence of heterosexual relationships, in order to create spaces for queer readings. What was important was the uncertainty, the fact that a character might be queer. By not having Rainbow Dash be interested in heterosexual romantic relationships throughout the show the possibility of a queer reading is made possible. By letting her show keen interest in Daring Do and letting her express her fondness physically, albeit with tight hugs and not with kisses, the show can allude to a romantic relationship between the characters. I would argue that what the show does is to consciously keep the door open for the possibility of queer characters and relationships, it consciously creates spaces for queer readings and for queer identification to be made by the audience, young and old.

In S06E13 *Stranger than Fan Fiction*, Rainbow Dash attends a Daring Do convention, which works as a self-conscious nod towards the *My Little Pony* conventions that had sprung up all over America by the time the sixth season was airing. The episode is full of parodic exaggerations and inversions of real-life conventions and their representations in media. New character and superfan Quibble Pants is voiced by famous actor and fan culture enthusiast Patton Oswalt in a conscious nod to nerd culture and the gatekeeping practices of fandom, when it turns out the character believes that no true fan of Daring Do would appreciate the new books in the series. His sardonic commentary on the outlandish events that take place in the episode work as a parodic literalization and inversion of the *Indiana Jones* source text, infused with the self-conscious placing at a fan convention. What the parody does in this episode is to poke fun at fan culture in a celebratory way regarding its existence and creativity and in a critical way regarding its gatekeeping. What the parody in the show does generally for a queer reading of Daring Do and Rainbow Dash is firstly to gender swap a reiterated *Indiana Jones* character that go on adventures like the original but becomes parody not through the gender swap but through comic inversion, misdirection, and exaggeration of the original source texts to highlight and play with their fantastic nature.

The concept of play is important. The parody increases the distance between source text and reality and destabilizes its rigidity, by having fun with the concepts

of adventure, of exotic travels to foreign destinations, and of over-the-top villains and scenery, more room for play is made possible. To play with an Indiana Jones character and what that character can look like and perform, and to play with the limitations and possibilities of storytelling. Parody allows an audience to either identify with an alternative version of the Indiana Jones character, or to find the spaces where the creation of entirely new characters and ways to play is made possible. Indiana Jones is a character that is embedded in American film history, and as such it is a bearer of a masculinized version of American national identity, an ideal to live up to and an icon and representative. Parody allows a young audience to reshape that representative of national identity and to create something new and personal, to play dress-up with concepts like gender and national representation without the need for theoretical knowledge on performance or national identity. Parody loosens the frames for a young audience to re-arrange. Parody creates play. Gendered recasting can change identification, but parody destabilizes the presets and enhances the possibility of participation and influence. In who gets to be the hero, in who gets to represent American national identity. Through the reiteration of American cultural icons and therefore bearers of American national identity like Indiana Jones and Sam Spade and the subsequent parodying of their characters, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* creates new territory for a young female audience to use for identification and play. The parody of *Indiana Jones* in *Daring Do* and the implied or at least possible love affair between her and Rainbow Dash creates spaces for queer readings by a young audience.

Noir Costuming and *Rarity Investigates*

On a different side of the spectrum of American film heroes, the darker side laden with criminality and antiheroes, are the male protagonists from noir or crime films of the 1940s and 1950s. Walter Neff from *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944), Philip Marlowe from *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946), or Roger Thornhill in *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock 1959) and L. B. Jefferies in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) are all staples of American national identity through their longevity and impact on American culture. The most enduring and influential hero from the film noir era, however, is arguably Sam Spade, played in his most famous iteration by Humphrey Bogart in what is perhaps the quintessential noir film, *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941). Like Indiana Jones, Sam Spade is an icon of American cinematic history and through that, a symbol of American national identity, and they are both parodied with interesting results in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

Film noir should, according to many scholars and film workers, not be considered a genre defined by conventions of setting and conflict but rather

defined by tone, mood, and style. What we consider to be film noir is a collection of films made in the 1940s and 1950s, defined and categorized in retrospect, that share common traits of mood and style that set them apart from the classical cinema of Hollywood at the time. Place and Peterson lists some of the most important differences that defined film noir as low-key high-contrast lighting, imbalanced lighting, night-for-night, deep focus, wide angle focal length, dissymmetrical mise-en-scène, extreme low and high angles, and foreground obstructions.⁶³¹ Jeremy Butler adds black-and-white filming as one of the key traits of film noir even though that did not set it apart from the conventions of Hollywood at the time, but when referencing film noir today in homage, pastiche, or parody, black-and-white filming is compulsory. He also adds thematic distinctions like the hostile universe often embodied by a woman, the impossibility of moral purity, and “questions of identity that often involve a Doppelgänger”.⁶³² The film noir style became famous for using lighting and shadows from German expressionism of the 1920s accentuated most commonly by blinder shadows, the voiceover narrating by the main character, and often a smooth jazz nightclub ambience in music and settings. Some of the most famous examples from the era include *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Third Man* (Reed 1949).

At the beginning of S05E15 *Rarity Investigates*, Rarity has designed a new line of exclusive clothing called Femme Mystique Chic for her fashion boutique, inspired by the adventures of Shadow Spade whose stories are “always full of mystery and suspense and best of all... fabulous costumes!”. The name Shadow Spade is derived from the main character of *The Maltese Falcon*, Sam Spade. Huston’s 1941 film was based on one of several novels by Dashiell Hammett with Spade as the main protagonist. In the movie he is played by Humphrey Bogart, and he has come to symbolize the leading role of a noir storyline. From the start, we are presented with the notion of costuming and performance based on the fantasy world of a favorite character. The plot of the episode centers around Rainbow Dash who is in Canterlot for the grand opening of the new Royal Gardens where she is the reserve for the Wonderbolts, a daredevil aerial acrobatics team assigned to perform a show during the ceremony. Rarity wears a stunning silk gown for dinner the night before, and when Rainbow Dash spills a drink on the dress, Rarity whips out her dressing coffin and changes outfit in two seconds into another elaborate and beautiful dress. During the night, a member of the Wonderbolts receives a note informing her that her mother is ill, and she must leave Canterlot, making room for Rainbow Dash in the aerial show. When it turns out the note was fake, suspicion lands on Rainbow Dash for taking her place.

Convinced of Rainbow Dash’s innocence, Rarity decides to investigate the case and when doing so she needs to look the part, so she dresses up in her best Shadow

⁶³¹ Place and Peterson 1976, pp. 325-338.

⁶³² Butler 2010, pp. 72-73.

Spade uniform complete with a burgundy trench-coat with folded up lapels, an apricot belt and scarf, and a black hat with apricot sash tied together with a cute knot at the back. The darker trench coat and hat and the lighter details not only complement each other perfectly, they also make for great contrast in black-and-white. Because as soon as the investigation starts with Rarity as lead detective, the episode changes to black-and-white, the non-diegetic music changes from the usual upbeat melodies to a downtrodden soft melancholic jazz tune much like the ones used in noir films. The cinematography also reiterates noir tropes, blurring and darkening the corners of the frame to make it look more like film stock from the 1940s and camera panning and close-ups reminiscent of noir style. Rarity also starts to use voice-over narration to explain what is going on, something that is rarely or never used in the show in other episodes but is a frequent and easily recognizable part of a noir film.

The episode uses several noir tropes. The black and white interrupted by rainbow hair, the serious voice-over narration, the shadows, a lonely trumpet player in a windowsill in the rain, even the very conscious fashion choice from Rarity shows that she knows that if you are going to be a detective, you need to be a noir detective. For Rarity the investigation to clear her friend's name is important but looking good while doing it is also imperative. The voice-over narration tells us: "There I was surveying the crime scene... and looking *tres chic* while doing it!" Rarity discovers the envelope that the fake note came in and finds a strand of rainbow hair in the envelope. The hair is rainbow in contrast to the black-and-white surrounding it, suggesting that the noir style that has been used during the investigation thus far can be changed if it is needed for the continuation of the story. If the rainbow hair needs to be seen it can be shown as rainbow, even though Rainbow Dash's own mane is as black-and-white as the surroundings. This suggests that the noir coloring is subjective and works as a part of the manifestation of Rarity's detective re-enactment fantasy. When she wears the costume of Shadow Spade, she imagines the world in black-and-white just as in the original texts that she has drawn inspiration from. As an audience we get to see her point of view of how she sees the world when she plays investigator.

This is somewhat confirmed when Rarity is interrupted in her voice-over narration, whilst mysteriously looking into a mirror, by Rainbow Dash asking what she is doing. "Oh, just thinking thoughts!", answers Rarity, as the scene turns all color again before moving back to black-and-white when the investigation and voice-over narration continues. At a later instant Rainbow Dash answers a question that Rarity poses rhetorically in voice-over narration, which prompts her to say "Oh, did I say that one out loud?" Rarity even uses archaic words like calling Rainbow Dash "antsy" and saying in a 1940s screwball comedy intonation that "I'm on this case like a chaaarm on a bracelet!". The self-consciousness in voice-over narration, the exaggerated emphasis on costume, the temporal misplacement

from present day to the 1940s, and the shifts from black and white to color and back is what makes it parody more than pastiche.

Rarity Investigates is obviously a noir parody but would the intended audience aged 3-8 recognize this? Of course not. I would however argue, since the noir style has been so established and connotated to the detective genre, that a younger audience could recognize the style of the clip as “detective style” and that Rarity therefore enacts the persona of a film detective because that is what they look like and that is how they act. Studies of preadolescents recording videos for online use show that they often re-create and rework popular films, television shows and characters in order to try on and enact multiple identities and in doing so make important decisions about their self-presentations.⁶³³ So even if a young audience might not recognize it as parody, they could very well identify it as play, as dress-up, as performance. Rarity is playing detective and that is what playing detective looks like.

Central to the episode and to the concept of performance and play are the costumes. Rarity’s profession is fashion designer. She owns a boutique that expands throughout the show, and she is often seen designing clothes for customers and for her friends. In one instance in *Suited for Success* that became one of the most used phrases in *My Little Pony* fan culture, Rarity designs dresses for all her friends despite a short time frame and Rainbow Dash says to Rarity that her dress “needs to be about 20% cooler”. Throughout the series’ run, costumes play a central part in signaling special occasions like holidays, parties, celebrations, and ceremonies. However, they are not only used for dressing up, but they are also used for dress-up.

In *Rarity Investigates* costumes signal the possibility of play and dress-up, not necessarily wearing clothes or garments that are the prettiest but wearing costumes that are suitable for what the situation demands. This includes dressing appropriately for reiterating film and television tropes or genre staples. So when a training montage is required in S01E12 *Call of the Cutie*, Rainbow Dash and Apple Bloom dress in matching headbands, when Pinkie Pie needs to sell something at a market fair, she does so by first putting on a straw hat, bow tie, and fake moustache in a parodic reiteration of the fast-talking hard-selling Flim Flam brothers introduced in *The Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000*, who in turn are a parodic reiteration of the grifters from *The Music Man* (DaCosta 1962), when Rarity reluctantly agrees to go camping in S03E06 *Sleepless in Ponyville* she does so in 1950s inspired pink dress with matching kerchief and sunglasses and does not forget to bring her divan, and when a mystery needs solving on a train in S02E24 *MMMystery on the Friendship Express*, Pinkie Pie dresses in deerstalker hat and pipe in a parodic reiteration of Sherlock Holmes.

⁶³³ Ivashkevich 2013.

The only competitor to Rarity and Pinkie Pie in playing dress-up is the flamboyant villain-turned-ally Discord, whose name fits in that he revels in disrupting rules and order. He is, however, usually true to the task at hand when it comes to costume. When he needs to be an archer, he dresses up as Robin Hood, when he cleans the house before a tea party he wears a French maid uniform, and when he paints an American pastoral motif, he reiterates the costume and hairstyling of Bob Ross, host of *The Joy of Painting* (1983-1994). There are countless examples from the show where costumes play an integral part in storytelling and style. Moreover, the parodic reiterations of specific costumes like the Indiana Jones costume of Daring Do and the Sam Spade costume of Rarity, and the countless other examples of references in costume that the show uses, enhances the sense of dress-up as play.

A big selling point for toys specifically aimed at a young female audience has been the possibility to dress up and change costumes of the toys, and *My Little Pony* is no exception. Dress-up and play is part of the experience, and the show shrewdly uses this with its emphasis of costume. Costume in the sense of dress-up rather than dressing up enables experimental play and when the show uses costumes reiterating specific examples from film and television history with a distinct emphasis on the importance of dressing up and changing costume, it enhances the possibilities of play and encourages that kind of experimentation. In parody lies the possibility of lodging a costume from its origin and trying it on for size even though the source text lies outside the known realm of references. Parody can create distance, and in the case of costume in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, it is a distance and a space that can be filled with play and experimentation and subsequently move the boundaries of identification.

In the next scene in *Rarity Investigates* Rarity and Rainbow Dash gather the three guards who might have seen something from the other night in an interrogation room. Rarity starts in black-and-white and focused lighting centering the three interviewees, but she is interrupted by an impatient Rainbow Dash who needs quicker results. This prompts the scene to turn color again when Rainbow Dash aggressively shouts questions into the interviewees' faces, much more akin to interrogation tropes from police procedurals or action movies with Rainbow Dash as the bad cop trying to get answers by any means necessary. When Rainbow Dash is unsuccessful in her forceful attempts, Rarity realizes that another strategy might work better, and she instantly changes costumes from the Shadow Spade detective persona to a femme fatale character with a black coat with fur linings, white dress shirt, and a black mourning veil hanging from an intricately designed black hat. Another parodic reiteration of a classic noir trope, and again built primarily on the importance of costume, even though acting in voice and movement plays a role here as it did with voice-over previously in the episode. Instead of forcing the guards to speak she lures them in by acting empathetically and is understanding to their plight asking if they perhaps took a well-deserved

break during their shift, which it turns out they did. The shot where Rarity leans in close to one of the guards' ear and whispers "boring" elicits the erotic double entendre of the femme fatale originals trying to lure and seduce their male counterparts, but here played out in a very self-conscious and innocent manner. Rarity switches effortlessly between a male coded performance to a female coded performance, even though in this world they are both based on female led origins, since Shadow Spade was a female character. Rarity is both gritty detective and femme fatale, and she chooses through costume changes and play when and where she wants to be which.

So what does the parody do here, apart from functioning as a parody for an audience familiar with noir tropes? As we have established, the role that Rarity embodies is a parodic inversion of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, but what the parody then does is that it turns the original cynical male detective into a cynical female detective that Rarity then actively and knowingly performs, creating a distance to the original. Sam Spade is a male role traditionally imbued with masculinity and American national identity through its central role in American cinematic history and the subsequent iterations and reiterations that the character has influenced. Having a female character play it creates subversion. Juxtaposing gravitas and seriousness with the joy of wearing fabulous costumes, of playing dress-up, furthers subverts the source text. What the show does in this is that it creates a space for a young audience to identify firstly with the role of a female detective, the possibility of a female detective, and secondly with the notion of playing detective, of performing detective. The distance created by the parodic mode makes it clear that this is play, this is performance, and therefore it is something that can be owned and emulated by a young audience.

Conclusion

In the coda of the last episode of the show, Twilight Sparkle is the regent of Equestria. Once a month, she calls upon her friends in the Mane Six to help her govern the realm and to make sure that the magic of friendship is allowed to prosper. The Mane Six therefore functions as the de facto rulers of Equestria and the enforcers and embodiments of Equestrian national identity. What that national identity is and how it is maintained is perhaps less interesting than the fact that this is a country that is ruled by a coalition of six female ponies, albeit with one distinct monarch, that the audience has followed through nine seasons of adventure. The embodiment of national symbolism and power is therefore female, a rare possibility of representational identification for the young girls that the show initially intended as an audience.

As I previously stated, both animation and parody have a built-in potential for subversion, where one clear example is that of queer subversion. Dyer has stated

when analyzing noir films from a queer perspective that what is important and characteristic is the uncertainty in reading, the notion that it might be queer. Dennis and Joyrich conclude that through a lack of heterosexuality, by holding the question in permanent suspension, queer readings are made possible.

Through the reiteration of American cultural icons and therefore bearers of American national identity such as Indiana Jones and Sam Spade and the subsequent parodying of their characters, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* creates new territory for a young female audience to use for identification and play. The parody of *Indiana Jones* in *Daring Do* and the implied or at least possible love affair between her and Rainbow Dash creates spaces for queer readings by a young audience. Parodying noir films and the Sam Spade character connects the show to an iconic American national past while simultaneously reconfiguring it into a female-led role. Even though a younger audience does not recognize the specific source texts used, they can recognize and identify with the style and tone used in the *Rarity Investigates* episode. The parody creates spaces for play with the detective persona, for literal dress-up using the costuming of the detective and the many dresses that supersedes it, and identification with its female embodiment, subverting the norms and tropes of traditional detective stories and play.

In this chapter, I have shown how Equestria works as a reiteration of the United States of America and that its depictions and representations of national identity are derived from its real-life counterpart or are juxtaposed with them. Therefore, a nation with places like Manehattan and Neighgara Falls, with apple pie and doughnuts, and with American accents and famous movie stars, can also include universal health care and education, female leadership, the absence of religion, and a general understanding that nature is important and should be preserved.

Parody is used for many purposes in the show, often simply to elicit a comedic response, but as we have seen it can be used to offer subversion of existing societal structures, albeit perhaps not in constructing the image of Equestrian utopia that we are left with at show's end. What it does is create spaces for alternative interpretations and for play. It twists loose the pieces used to build a familiar puzzle and points to new ways in which they can be used, one can even say that it incorporates a bit of discord into the mix, and for a young audience like the one intended for *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, that can make all the difference in the world.

Chapter 5 Brand America

How many companies are there now, four? – Guy, the cameraman

Apparently, slavery was pretty awesome. – Cheryl Tunt

I know enough to exploit it. – Eric Cartman on religion

One common and recurring theme of American comedy is the concepts of the *American Dream* and *American exceptionalism* and the comedy that can be extracted from the incongruity between the weight of these ideals and the impossibility of living up to them.⁶³⁴ Avi Santo quotes Joe Feagin talking about three different ways to explain causes of poverty which are individualistic, structural or fatalistic, where Americans “generally favor the first, which supports the myths of romantic individualism and meritocracy while blaming the poor for their continued problems”.⁶³⁵ It is the notion of The American Dream, that anyone with two empty hands can build their own success and their own fortune, rooted in a history of generous immigration and a job market requiring new labor. As time has passed, the generosity of immigration and the ease to enter the job market have both diminished, but the importance of the American Dream as ideal lingers, the idea that anyone (not everyone) can make it big in America. The gap between ideals and reality, the contrast between for instance the declaration of independence or the bill of rights and the very real occurrence of slave ownership, or between the idealization of the common man and the reality of the rich man, has been satirized by American humorists for many centuries, often using depictions of violence to critique these flagrant discrepancies.⁶³⁶ The source of humor in the American Southwest of the early to mid-1800s up until the Civil War, often referred to as native humor, were divisive partisan political conflicts, the American market economy, and American religion. American market and religious culture have always had close ties and tension, which according to Kaine Ezell makes it

⁶³⁴ Kaine Ezell 2016, p. 3.

⁶³⁵ Santo 2009, p. 261, quoting Feagin 1975, p. 95.

⁶³⁶ Kaine Ezell 2016, pp. 3-4.

ripe for comedy and satire.⁶³⁷ Native humor relies heavily on the carnivalesque, the physical functions of the body and the triumph of the temporary market culture of the carnival over dominant culture. Like native humor, modern animated television shows often critique “crass commercialism, an unstable and violent market culture, and the elevation of ne’er-do-wells and confidence men to positions of social prominence”.⁶³⁸

As a pervasive myth and common story, the American Dream has been satirized and parodied extensively throughout American comedic history. Gray writes about how *The Simpsons* through its use of genre mixing and sophisticated parodic techniques forces a renegotiation of myths like The American Dream and offering a more critical perspective towards the myth and its foundation in capitalist logic by shifting our frame of reference. In this chapter I look closer at the intersections of capitalism and national identity in the TV shows and how they use parody to offer critical perspectives. The focus is on case studies from *BoJack Horseman* and *South Park*, but I will also discuss examples from the other three shows and how they address the pervasiveness of capitalism in American national identity. Before doing so, I give a background to the emergence of American capitalism and its influence over nation, society, and culture, and how it has been used as fodder for American humorists and satirists for centuries.⁶³⁹

According to Gournelos and Greene the decade after 9/11 saw a shift in American politics towards brand management more than political content, from political action and activism to consumption, and from a focus on labor, employment, and the pursuit of The American Dream to negotiated media images of patriotic performance.⁶⁴⁰ Gournelos argues that the war on terror, the mobilization of American fear of a “shadowy and endless Other” into nationalism, ushered in “a reactionary domestic and foreign policy agenda” that ultimately ended the possibility of middle-class financial mobility and with it broke the American Dream.⁶⁴¹

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the American government expressed an outright need for Hollywood to produce pro-American mobilizing films in the vein of Frank Capra and the *Why We Fight*-movies made during World War II to boost citizen moral and recruit new soldiers for the war.⁶⁴² This echoed the combined pursuits of the government and companies like Ford Motor Company to initiate campaigns of citizens and work force *Americanization* during and after World War

⁶³⁷ Ibid, p. 22.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, p. 13-14.

⁶³⁹ Gray 2006, p. 47, Gournelos 2009, p. 20.

⁶⁴⁰ Gournelos and Greene 2011, p. xi-xv.

⁶⁴¹ Gournelos 2011, pp. 82 and 86.

⁶⁴² Prince 2009, p. 80.

I. This referred to an “active and sometimes coercive campaign to *make* new immigrants into *good* Americans”, just like cars could be made at the assembly lines of the factories.⁶⁴³ The purposes of Americanization was to get efficient workers to increase corporate and industry profit, but also to recruit men to the Marine Corps.⁶⁴⁴ By using public speakers and producing and screening movies with a patriotic and nationalistic message contrasting the ideal American as Anglo-Saxon, hard-working, Christian, family-oriented, self-made, and free against the racial and ethnic “others” that threatened the American way of life, a message of conditional unity was delivered and incorporated.⁶⁴⁵ Participation in these Americanization courses and efforts was often mandatory for workers to acquire or sustain employment and gain citizenship in the USA. National community was as much coerced as it was formed on the basis of liberty for new immigrants, who for their claims to citizenship “relied on their ability to prove their whiteness or to become white”.⁶⁴⁶ Americanization was closely connected to the notion of family; Ford educational films defined it as “loyalty to home as well as country” and showed images of a middle-class family spending time together as an ideal and a symbol of America.⁶⁴⁷

The combination of escapism through the means of cinema and building national community and unity to control workers and their mandatory families was a torch that Walt Disney readily picked up when constructing fantasy worlds for his animations and theme parks. The Disney world of which one could be allowed to take part could lift your spirit and make you think of something else than your everyday life, but it was, as Klein phrases it, “a world solidly grounded in the tradition of free enterprise, rugged individualism, and self-help” as a direct continuation of the Americanization efforts made during and after the first World War, where dissent and refusal to participate came with a cost. Klein continues: “Disney had won the nation’s heart and firmed the moral boundaries of a fantasy world in which those who did not stick to the rules or trust the tried and true got burned.”⁶⁴⁸

Alexis de Tocqueville provided a description of America and Americans in 1840 in the second volume of his *Democracy in America*, where he highlighted Americans’ fixation with “purely practical objects” and “exclusively commercial habits” that took precedence over other endeavors like science, literature, and the

⁶⁴³ Stanciu 2022, p. 4, cursive in original.

⁶⁴⁴ Stanciu 2022, p. 34.

⁶⁴⁵ Stanciu 2022, pp. 1 and 15. Stanciu references Dahlquist and Frykholm 2020, pp. 1-2, for the social and political roles cinema has played historically.

⁶⁴⁶ Stanciu 2022, p. 8.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 18-19.

⁶⁴⁸ Klein 2016, p. 84.

arts. The proximity of and relationship with Europe was, according to de Tocqueville, what enabled the young nation to still maintain a veneer of civilization despite its lack of those fundamental cornerstones.⁶⁴⁹ In the introduction to *Hollywood's America*, authors Mintz, Roberts and Welky describe a development towards the end of the 19th century where American values shifted from the Victorian self-restraint and self-denial that had been dominant up to that point. The proliferation of industry, commercial industry, and commercials as an industry “transformed Americans from ‘savers’ to ‘spenders’ and urged them to satisfy their desire for luxury” in a cultural shift towards “self-fulfillment, leisure, and sensual satisfaction”.⁶⁵⁰ Of all the differences, Mintz et al continue, between the 19th and 20th centuries, “one of the most striking involves the rapid growth of commercialized entertainment”.⁶⁵¹

Although many American corporations collapsed and individual businessmen were bankrupted during the depression of the 1930s, there were others to take their place and seize the opportunity of reduced government fiduciary regulations increasing the financial gap between the richest and poorest in the country even further. Thomas Pauly concludes that “the absence of checks and balances in the marketplace which was supposed to provide the ordinary citizen with opportunity seemed only to be making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Everywhere, big business seemed to be prospering.”⁶⁵² This capitalist logic permeating all of society is as integral to the American nation as consumerism has become for the individual citizen.⁶⁵³ Klein describes cartoons from the cinematic era of animation as folklore about the rituals of daily life, and in the case of American life it is often focused on the everyday life as a consumer.⁶⁵⁴ The chase sequence works as a satire of American violence, imperialism, and naivety, but it was also used for military propaganda during the second world war, where animated features focused on ridiculing the enemy, thus enforcing the chance of winning the war.⁶⁵⁵ Increased prosperity in Europe and the USA in the 1950s made individuals less dependent on political entities in order to consume what they wanted, which made them more susceptible to a neoliberal development where the market treats people more like consumers than citizens and where, with the aid of commercial media

⁶⁴⁹ De Tocqueville 1998, p. 190.

⁶⁵⁰ Mintz et al 2016, pp. 4-6.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p. 7.

⁶⁵² Pauly 2016, p. 102.

⁶⁵³ Monje 2011, pp. 182-185.

⁶⁵⁴ Klein 1993, p. 39.

⁶⁵⁵ Klein 1993, p. 164, Furniss 2016, p. 148.

conglomerates, the central freedom of the modern world turned into the right to choose between competing products.⁶⁵⁶

While shows like *The Flintstones* offered a mild critique of American consumer culture, and, unusually, offered a representation of working-class culture in a period when television privileged middle-class aspirant values, it ultimately reinforced the social status quo.⁶⁵⁷ This changed drastically with the introduction of *The Simpsons* and its successors. When Apu Nahasapeemapetilon in *Bart Mangled Banner* (S15E21) joins Springfield's desperate displays of extreme American patriotism he announces that he has renamed his octuplets Freedom, Lincoln, Condoleeza, Coke, Pepsi, Manifest Destiny, Apple Pie and Super Man, which constitutes an interesting and telling cross-section of American national identity. In present day what Kaine Ezell calls the "post-modern American marketplace" with the contrasting demands of insatiable consumption and thin waistlines is another source of American hypocrisy that is a ripe target for humorists and satirists of our age.⁶⁵⁸ What animation does, both in television and in short form during the cinematic era and in independent animation, is to use graphic and often over-the-top violence in their jokes, relying on the absurd while, as Kaine Ezell puts it, "maintaining an ironic realism at their core", exploring among other things the "changing expectations of manhood within their culture".⁶⁵⁹ What is distinctly American given the nation's relative youth is the way the language of the market culture has become the dominant form of communication not only in political systems but also in mythical depictions of the American dream, with its promise of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and climbing the financial ladder. Many animated television shows expose and highlight this discrepancy.⁶⁶⁰ The choice between a giant douche and a turd sandwich and the rise of the Trump Garrison character in *South Park* are two examples, and this chapter provides more in-depth examples of the intersections between capitalism and American national identity in the material.

Archer, Class, and National Identity

A television show like *Archer* that moves all over the world and places itself in the middle of national and international political, financial, and cultural structures and the threats that they pose or that are posed against them of course show plenty of

⁶⁵⁶ Dwyer 2010, p. 118.

⁶⁵⁷ Wells 2003, p. 30.

⁶⁵⁸ Kaine Ezell, p. 36.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

examples of the intersection of capitalism and national identity. At the start of season twelve the agency is mocked for its lack of branding and profiling by new PR firm CloudBeam and at the start of season 13 the agency visits Clandesticon – the fair for spy agencies from all over the world. Having an elite group of international spies hob-nob with the jet-set in high stakes capers tends to skew the class perspective to focus on the rich or, in the case of the Tunt family, insanely rich. The vast fortunes and socialite upbringing of Cheryl Tunt often yield interesting takes on the differences of official and unofficial rulebooks of national and class behavior, often with a stark racist undertone. However, in some cases like in S12E08 *Mission: Difficult* Cheryl offers a precise insight into capitalist logic when she describes the concept of tourism as “developed by the British to drum up support for the expansion of an increasingly destructive empire. Its violent, cannibalistic success is basically the reason why the world is going to end in fifty years”.

In S1202 *Lowjacked* it is revealed that the Tunt family owns six islands and the private prisons/hunting reserves on those islands and in *Mission: Difficult* Cheryl scoffs at the idea that she might contract gonorrhea as it is a “poor people disease” and that she is “strictly spirochaete”, which is a disease historically more common in the upper classes of society. The excessive representation of wealth and disdain of less affluent people is exaggerated to a point where it turns to satire of the upper class and a parodic exaggeration of numerous representations from film and television. The Tunt family fortune is built on railroads and the 19th century legacy of railroad tycoons competing for market share and one-upping each other with faster and more efficient locomotives is reflected in Cheryl’s desire to beat the speed record to Montreal in S03E06 *The Limited*. She is an heir of an old-time fortune, and her behavior reiterates an old-time approach to wealth and status, a temporally archaic representation of “old money” in a time and place where that is usually no longer important.

The amassing of wealth in American history is also intersected with notions of ethnicity when in S05E03 *A Debt of Honor*, it is revealed that Cheryl’s great great great uncle built underground tunnels to “get in on the underground railroad racket”, but instead of helping people escape slavery he wanted to catch slaves and sell them back to their previous owners. On a map detailing the tunnel systems, two minstrels are printed as decoration on each side reiterating that less proud part of American history and simultaneously referencing the origins of American animation. Connecting Cheryl and the parodic and satirical representation of her as an extremely wealthy person to one of the most famous iterations of American entrepreneurship and cut-throat competition, the railroad tycoon, expands the satirical impact. Cheryl is rich and upper-class precisely because her ancestors have used and misused financial opportunities in the land of opportunities that is America, but the parodic exaggeration and inversion of her ancestor’s crimes work in two ways. It connects wealth and status in the present to American history and

key developments in the construction of the American nation, and it satirizes contemporary Americans of wealth and status by highlighting and parodying their inevitable connection to the actions of their ancestors, more often than not atrocities performed in the name of financial growth, of taking advantage of opportunities. The parodic exaggeration is what exposes the hypocrisy of natural wealth, without it the satirical edge would not be nearly as obvious and sharp.

There are plenty of other examples where *Archer* draws attention in other ways to class perspective, and it is usually connected to storylines about American society. Malory executes the cleaning staff trying to unionize in S01E08 *The Rock*. In S14E06 *Face Off* Pam is allowed room to express dismay and disdain for the toxicity of a plastic surgeon retreat where the super wealthy fix small superficial things in their appearance for an extreme amount of money. In S02E09 *Placebo Effect* Archer goes on a rage-fueled rampage when he, in an uncharacteristic display of empathy, seeks revenge on criminals who have sold fake medicine to his friend and fellow cancer patient Ruth. The episode comments on the exuberant pricing of medicine in the US which is what makes it possible for a criminal enterprise to turn such a great profit from it. The criminals in this case turn out to be the Irish Mafia and when Archer captures them to torture them for information, they try to dodge responsibility by deflecting blame on American society and say of the Honduran janitors that Archer needed to tie up in the same room that “those beaners take our jobs”. In an intersectional analysis of class and ethnicity, however, Archer bursts their bubble by informing the Irish criminals that for a long time in American history, Irish people were considered the filthy immigrants that swarmed the US and took all jobs and that beaner is a pejorative term for Mexicans, not Hondurans that these janitors obviously are. Archer only ties the janitors up due to necessity because they were present in the room, he has no beef with them and say to them that he is “assuming you don’t know anything about this” and that he hopes that this “doesn’t sound racist or anything”, since he draws conclusions based on their ethnicity and uniform. Archer is generally a morally deplorable character, but he has several moments when he shows great nuance and subtlety in knowing and expressing the differences in life situation based on class, nationality, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, including chastising Irish criminals trying to use a racist stereotype to explain the class-based motivations of their actions. In another example of satirical commentary on the economic state of American society in S13E06 *Bank Run at Mr. Bank’s Bank*, an elderly African American security guard say that Ray and Archer “are just like the sons I would have had if I hadn’t predicted that end stage capitalism would make it impossible to support a family on my salary” in a parodic literalization of representations of contemporary American society.

Archer often uses fictionalized villains in episodes, like the New Scotland Front in chapter 3, but even more frequently the show turns to eco terrorists as antagonists in episodes. In S02E04 *Pipeline Fever* a famous eco terrorist want to

bomb America's largest natural gas line, in S04E12-13 *Sea Tunt Part 1 & 2* eco terrorists want to fire missiles against large American cities as payback for polluting the oceans, in S12E02 *Lowjacked* eco terrorists are once again the villains, but when they explain to Archer that they want to stop global warming, and that Siberia has had multiple days over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, he agrees that someone should probably do something about that. In S06E08 *The Kanes* Lana's father is the target of assassination attempts because of his research on algae used as biofuel and only producing water as a byproduct. Using eco terrorists so often allows the show to address ecological concerns, real or hypothetical, that are genuinely understandable as motivation for violent action. In a nation like the US permeated by capitalism and corporate logic, highlighting the ramifications of capitalism in corporate greed and pollution leading to climate change constitutes substantial resistance to that hegemonic notion.

Rick and Morty and the Taste of Capitalism

Rick and Morty often comments on structures of consumerism and capitalism, sometimes as part of the narration, sometimes as a self-conscious gag like frantically advertising fictitious websites at the end of S01E01 *Pilot*, using a corporealized metaphor for capitalism as defense mechanism in S05E10 *Rickmurai Jack* and in the same episode scoffing at another metaphor for capitalism as even more on the nose. S04E06 *Never Ricking Morty* ends with Rick hyperbolically celebrating the benefits of capitalism and encouraging everyone to consume more, since this rather than spirituality or religion is the meaning of life. When Morty is unsure that he made the right decision in buying a toy train, Rick delivers the following rant:

You did the most important thing. You – you bought something. You bought something with money. God, I love money so much, Morty. Merchandise Morty, your only purpose in life is to buy and consume merchandise. And you did it. You went into a store – an actual honest to God store – and you bought something. You didn't ask questions or raise ethical complaints. You... you just looked straight into the bleeding jaws of capitalism and said "yes, daddy, please". And I'm... I'm so proud of you. I only wish you could have bought more. I... I love buying things so much, Morty.

This is delivered with obvious ironic exaggeration but the *Rick and Morty* brand does sell a lot of merchandise for the studio and the creators. The effects of capitalism can be seen in the somewhat blunt criticism of human oblivion of how the meat industry works in S07E04 *That's Amorte*, in S01E09 *Something Ricked This Way Comes* where Pluto is made to collapse by deep drilling of plutonium,

and in S05E03 *A Rickconvenient Mort* where Morty falls in love with eco-superhero Planetina. The episode works as a parody of the kids cartoon show *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (1990-1996) and Hellman describes the episode as especially interesting since it parodies the individualistic perspective of combatting climate change from the source text and shows what actually saving the planet as an eco-superhero would look like.⁶⁶¹ Planetina is freed from the Tina-teers that controlled her actions when they are slain by an enraged Morty, which leads her to fire-bomb the mansion of a US congressman and destroy a coal mine, killing 300 workers in the process. Hellman concludes that the parody of the toothless and individualistic source text turns into interesting satire and criticism when the usual outlandish and outlaw villains are replaced by the real and ordinary, albeit affluent and influential, people that cause the majority of climate change in the world and do so well within the boundaries of the law.

The Citadel of Ricks is a society that Ricks from innumerable alternative dimensions have built and like any society it has leaders, followers, those who profit from the system and those who do not, even though all citizens are either Ricks or Mortys. In a commercial for Citadel television in S03E07 *The Ricklantis Mixup*, a simple guitar melody is played as a narrator imitating the deep sonorous voice of actor Sam Elliott explains that “Sixty iterations off the finite curve there’s a Rick that works more with wood than with polarity plating. His name is Simple Rick, but he’s no dummy. He realized long ago that the greatest thing he ever created was his daughter.” He constructs a wooden toy for his daughter Beth who opens it and exclaims “I love daddy!” which prompts Simple Rick to shed a tear of happiness. The narrator continues:

“We captured that moment. We run it on a loop through Simple Rick’s mind, and the chemical that makes his brain secret goes into every Simple Rick Simple Wafer wafer cookie. Come home to the impossible flavor of your own completion. Come home to Simple Rick’s.”

The wafer company responsible for the commercial mines Simple Rick’s happy memory for flavor while he sits strapped in a chair oblivious of what goes on around him. The scene references dystopian films about selective memory like *Brazil* (Gilliam 1985) and *Total Recall* (Verhoeven 1990), but most of all it is a parody of commercials drawing connections to nostalgia and rurality as a simpler and more attractive life for the consumer of their products. The parody uses a form of exaggeration in calmly explaining the procedure of making a wafer cookie even though it crosses any reasonable line of ethical behavior, thereby providing a comment on the hidden parts of corporate cynicism. What is instrumental for this parody to be effective is the reiteration of tone and style of this kind of commercial,

⁶⁶¹ Hellman 2024.

with the calm music usually played in them and the Sam Elliot-type narrator that reiterates commercials he or actors with similar voices have voiced in the past. Without a reiteration that successfully evokes the right style and tone of the commercial, it would not be as effective in its messaging. In the last part of the episode, a worker at the wafer factory has had enough, kills his foreman and takes Simple Rick hostage in order to escape. When the guards hand him a portal gun he uses it on Simple Rick who is instantly killed since the portal leads to the blender dimension. Just as he is about to throw down with the guards, the owner of the factory, a Rick donning Willy Wonka style clothes, pardons him and walks him out of the factory to the applause of the rest of the employees. Just as he can taste real freedom the Sam Elliott style narrator is heard again and explains:

“We captured that taste of freedom, and we keep giving it to him so he can give it right back to you in every bite of new Simple Rick’s Freedom Wafers Select. Come home to the feeling of shattering a grand illusion. Come home to Simple Rick’s.”

Once again, the reason this parody works so well is because it reiterates a certain style of commercial appealing to a sense of nostalgia, rurality, and patriotic Americana in the consumer. To be effective, it needs to be so close to its original source text that the only real difference is in its science fiction misdirection and its dystopian exaggeration. It needs to feel like a real commercial in the world of *The Citadel of Ricks* where it is supposed to exist, and to an audience watching *Rick and Morty*, it needs to be understood as a specific kind of commercial with a reiteration that hits close enough to its source text to feel real, which is no mean feat.

Flim and Flam and the Parodic Grift

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is a TV show created with the expressed purpose of selling toys. The brand *My Little Pony* came first, and the TV show is an offshoot of that. With that said, the show generally does not treat capitalism or capitalists kindly and places greater importance on values like friendship and co-operation. The character personifying affluence in Ponyville is named Filthy Rich, with moneybags as cutie mark, and together with wife Spoiled Rich (born Milk) they have a daughter Diamond Tiara who is a classmate and the antagonist to the Cutie Mark Crusaders in early seasons. The jet-set bourgeoisie of Canterlot appear snooty and arrogant with character Prince Blueblood spitting out Applejack’s food after tasting it because he did not know it was “common carnival fare” in S01E26 *The Best Night Ever*. The most interesting depiction of capitalism in the American stand-in nation of Equestria, however, are the Flim Flam Brothers.

Flim and Flam are two grifters always ready to close a sale in order to make some bits, the currency of Equestria. They debut in S02E15 *The Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000* when they try to sell an apple picking machine to Applejack, in S04E20 *Leap of Faith* they make a lot of money selling a miracle tonic consisting of just apple juice and beet leaves, and in S08E16 *Friendship University* they start a competing friendship school that promises to teach friendship in half the time as Twilight Sparkle's school in Ponyville. Their first song in *The Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000* is a parody of the *Ya Got Trouble* song from *The Music Man* (DaCosta 1962), and their appearance is based on old time carnival conmen with striped shirt, bowties and straw hats. They are charming, persuasive, musically gifted, and talk rapidly and in sync to confuse and beguile an audience. Flim and Flam are used as representatives of people and businesses that take shortcuts prioritizing profit over quality, and their plans to maximize profit margin always come up short when pitted against the honesty, quality, and co-operation of the mane six and their friends and family. Small businesses run with passion more than profit is the ideal, with the Apple Family Farm and Rarity's fashion boutique as prime examples.

What is interesting about Flim and Flam's grifting in all three episodes mentioned above is that their schemes and contraptions actually work at first. The cider squeezing machine makes cider with the same quality as Applejack but three times as fast, the miracle tonic has a placebo effect that really helps people, and the university offers the chance for more people to study the magic of friendship, free of charge. Their plans fail only when they push the margins, as when they turn the miracle tonic sales into an industrial effort, or when it turns out they charge exorbitant sums for compulsory student worksheets at the free university, funneling the funds into their Las Pegasus resort. Most interesting perhaps is in *The Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 6000* when they forgo the quality control of apple picking and crank up the speed and thrust of the machine so that it sucks up leaves, branches, and rotten apples to make an inferior product to their competitor, who needed the combined force of nine employees to keep up with the pace of the machine controlled by two people. If Applejack and the Apple Family had taken stock after the competition that they lost on speed but won on quality, they might have remembered that the machine actually worked better than their old manual system until it was pushed too hard, and the quality control was turned off. With the machine, apple picking on the farm would have been far easier and more streamlined, yielding either more leisure time or a higher profit margin, but the message from the family and the show is that it is better to stick to the manual labor you know and to not trust machines that try to replace it. Community and small businesses are preferred over urbanity and industry, tradition over modernity, and co-operation and giving is highlighted over consumption and profit margins, which is an interesting take for a show that is owned and operated by an international toy manufacturer.

Basing Flim and Flam on famous source texts from musical history instead of more realistic grifters certainly makes them more entertaining, but the parody adds a layer of historic context. The archaic and anachronistic look and behavior that the parody reiterates places Flim and Flam outside modern society, juxtaposing their reliance on modern machinery. In this sense, the idea of grifting or conning, a common crime in contemporary society, is made to feel old-fashioned and at odds with reasonable modern thinking. The parody emphasizes the otherness of grifters but simultaneously highlights the allure their messaging can have when packaged right, and through the use of parody that warning to the characters of the show and to the audience is made more to the point.

BoJack Horseman and the Hunt for Whitewhale

The first deeper look at the intersection of capitalism and national identity is lifted from *BoJack Horseman* and S06E03 *Feel-Good Story*. Throughout *BoJack Horseman* the characters of the show sometimes interact with businesses and larger companies that are subsidiaries to the mega-corporation AOL-Time-Warner-Pepsico-Viacom-Halliburton-Skynet-Toyota-Trader Joe's, which in season five after the real life Disney/Fox merger changed to Disney-Fox-AT&T-AOL-Time-Warner-Pepsico-Viacom-Halliburton-Skynet-Toyota-Trader Joe's, and in season six adds Philip-Morris to the lineup before announcing that the company now has changed its name to Whitewhale, a reference to a large animal that devours large schools of smaller fish, but also to Henry Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick*. The name itself is of course a parody and/or satire of real-world conglomerates like AOL-Time-Warner and the more concisely named Disney and Nestlé, with large ownerships of subsidiaries in many corporate sectors. Using Halliburton as one of the companies signals a connection to the military-industrial complex with the company being used for controlling oil wells and constructing internment camps during the Iraqi war and being one of the largest oil service companies in the world. For American companies tied to military contracts or dependent on foreign natural resources, there is a strong financial incentive for waging war. Many American companies made enormous profits from the war in Iraq from government contracts and oil drilling rights among other things, commonly referring to it as "the war for cheese".⁶⁶² Halliburton is also responsible for most of the world's fracking operations, which is satirized mainly in season four of *BoJack Horseman* and especially in S04E07 *Underground* where Diane's and Mr. Peanutbutter's house sink through the ground due to intense fracking.

However, the most notable inclusion of the many conglomerates that are sucked up into the mega conglomerate that becomes Whitewhale is Skynet. While the

⁶⁶² Prince 2009, p. 201.

other companies have equivalents in the real world, Skynet is a reference to *Terminator* (Cameron 1984) and the subsequent films and TV series of the franchise. Developed by Cyberdyne Systems on the behalf of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) under the United States Department of Defense, Skynet is an artificial intelligence and neural network-based conscious group mind that gains self-awareness and after humans try to deactivate it launches a nuclear attack on humanity, killing of the majority of Earth's population and waging war on the survivors. Skynet has come to be synonymous with the consequences of corporate and military hubris and greed through its depiction in the *Terminator* franchise and it works as a representation of the unrelenting evil that can be created by humans obsessed with progress and growth without regard for risks or consequences. Adding Skynet to the line of corporate names is of course a comedic gag, but it offers satirical acidity by putting it on par with the other companies in the group. The parodic inclusion of Skynet turns the gag into a comment on unchecked corporate growth but also on developments in AI technology and the consequences that could mean, a public discussion that had become prevalent when the episode aired.

The most interesting example of the intersection of capitalism and nation in *BoJack Horseman* is the episode where Philip-Morris-Disney-Fox-AT&T- AOL-Time-Warner-Pepsico-Viacom-Halliburton-Skynet-Toyota-Trader Joe's is acquired by Whitewhale Consolidated Interests, or Whitewhale for short, in *Feel-Good Story*. Diane is tasked with easing up on her recent "cross-country exposition of the ugly underbelly of American capitalism" to instead focus on finding feel-good stories for online content creator Girl Croosh together with photographer Guy. When he proposes they interview the girl who paid for her dad's cancer treatment by opening a lemonade stand, Diane vehemently protests that it is feel-good to say "Hey America! We're the only developed nation without subsidized health care so this child joins the workforce in a desperate bid to keep her father alive!" They choose instead to interview Every Animal Girl Company, a small doll manufacturer with the expressed intent of empowering little girls by offering dolls outside the norm of unrealistic beauty standards. When Diane start pressing the women who started the company about recycled materials, they disclose that they have been acquired by Toys Galore, a subsidiary of Whitewhale, and that they will close their Chicago factory right before the holidays to relocate it overseas in order to increase profits.

The next day after posting the video that did not turn out as feel-good as intended, Diane is told that Girl Croosh also has been acquired by Whitewhale. Or rather, as Diane's boss explains, that Whitewhale have acquired Fuddrucker's and merged it with Dow Chemical to create new media venture Spronk! which in turn acquired Univision which will include Girl Croosh in its Gizmodo-branded mist of advertorial, albeit renamed Content Spew. Using exaggerations that are just slightly more absurd than real life corporate acquisitions, *BoJack Horseman* offers

a quick satire of the capitalist system and the havoc it can wreak on the everyday life of ordinary people through what often seems like whims of invisible entities, with the satire made even more ironic and poignant by the inclusion of multinational chemical producer Dow Chemical, responsible for among other things production of napalm and agent orange used in the Vietnam war, in the purchase of female-centered online content creation.

The cliché caricature capitalist never became a universal stereotype in American movies, but they are sometimes shown to neglect worker's needs and defend their exploitation. There are plenty of anti-capitalist movies in early American cinema, but capitalism itself is rarely attacked.⁶⁶³ Fictional billionaires like Scrooge McDuck can be liked and respected because they built their fortune from scratch, and in doing so provides a template that still contains the illusion of possibility for the common man to fulfill. Capitalism and freedom are two of the most common ways to describe America and Americans, along with "arrogance, ignorance, insensitivity, and self-absorption".⁶⁶⁴ One unique aspect of American nationalism and the spread of American values is the importance of global American brands like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Ford, General Motors, Levi's, Marlboro, McDonald's, Disney, Nike, Starbucks, Amazon and tech giants like Microsoft, Facebook, Google, IBM and Apple. Capitalism not only feeds American national identity, but it is also itself a part of the proliferation of American national identity on a global scale.

As new Whitewhale employees, Diane and Guy sit through an introductory meeting in the Whitewhale building, a giant skyscraper in downtown Chicago, and are subjected to the orientation film *The Whitewhale Way* (directed by Brad Bird) where the CEO of the company, Jeremiah Whitewhale, interact with cartoon characters designed in vintage style to explain how the company got started. The video parodies lackluster corporate videos by literalizing the usually insipid corporate lingo, explaining that Whitewhale was able to grow exponentially thanks to the free market and "the Whitewhale strategy", which is defined as vertical integration and oligopoly and represented by cartoon characters Vert and Ollie. The success story, the literalized manifestation of The American Dream, begins with Ezekiel Whitewhale, grandfather of current CEO Jeremiah. According to the film, he "started small with a minor petroleum refinery he inherited from his father" and expanded the business by building oil rigs and acquiring gas stations to control the market and force his competitors to sell to him, achieving vertical integration. This is illustrated by a snake-stretching plasticized Vert gobbling up neighboring gas stations. It satirizes one of the cornerstones of the American Dream where anyone can start from scratch and "pull themselves up by the bootstraps" to amass wealth and prosperity. By claiming that this is what Ezekiel

⁶⁶³ Schull 2016, p. 35.

⁶⁶⁴ Martin 2007, quoted in Dubinsky 2023, p. 107.

Whitewhale did when he started with only a minor inherited petroleum refinery, it pits the myth against the reality of wealthy people in the USA, who to a great majority have inherited their wealth.

Like the animated depiction of the vertical integration process, it is saying the quiet part out loud and offering an unrealistically honest explanation to the Whitewhale success. Having cute and bouncy animated characters re-enact what probably was a ruthless process yielding considerable human suffering enhances the hypocrisy in American corporate narration. The parody of in-house corporate messaging, especially by alluding to Disney as a franchise and Walt Disney as a corporate leader, gives the satirical message a sharper edge highlighting the hypocritical communication and processes.

Although Disney themselves have proclaimed that their intention is not to teach or implant morals, the Disney corporate image of family, patriotism, free enterprise and innocence permeates all creative output, and they rely on discourse homogeneity, predictability, and stability so that the Disney iconography can remain for present and future generations.⁶⁶⁵ Disney as a company and an aesthetic was one of the key targets of animated resistance in the post war era. Animation studio United Productions of America (UPA) with its modernist aesthetics and explicit political content was one of the worst inflicted by blacklistings from The House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) in the 1950s, whether or not they had anything to do with actual communist politics or affiliations, which as with many of the accused by HUAC was rarely the case.⁶⁶⁶ Among the witnesses deemed friendly to HUAC, who named names, was Walt Disney.⁶⁶⁷ The consequences of the actions of HUAC for the cultural industry in America was television content purged of progressive or subversive content from representatives of the Civil Rights Movement, trade unions, or feminist movements that could challenge traditional family values and reactionary politics resulting in a status quo that turned the fifties family into a transhistorical universal reality and any objection to that stamped as communist or un-American.

Continuing the film into the 1980s, Whitewhale under the guidance of Jeremiah bought up media outlets and sports teams to improve the company's reputation and silence critical voices, which Diane realizes is exactly what has happened with Girl Croosh after her video criticizing one of Whitewhale's subsidiaries. The film concludes with Jeremiah Whitewhale explaining that "Here at Whitewhale we do it all. Through the free market magic of the Whitewhale way." The animation style of the orientation movie is reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s, with sharp contours on Fleischeresque bouncing characters including a smiling and puffing

⁶⁶⁵ Crafton 2012, p. 227, Sandler 1998, p. 7, Furniss 2016, p. 264, Sammond 2015, p. 211.

⁶⁶⁶ HUAC was not led by senator Joseph McCarthy, but very much part of the McCarthyism era of American politics, see Doherty 2003, pp. 15-16.

⁶⁶⁷ Furniss 2016, pp. 214-215.

metamorphized oil refinery. The equally and in-sync bouncy Ezekiel Whitewhale, who wears a brown three-piece suit and a cowboy hat but also white minstrel gloves like his contemporaries Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny, is front-facing with arms out to the sides reiterating crude early animation where not only the animation technique is 2-D, but also the spatial geography. He has big eyes and simple facial expressions accentuated by eyebrows and mouth.

When the movie fast forwards to the 1980s the new CEO Jeremiah Whitewhale is animated in the same manner as his grandfather, complete with bounciness and minstrel gloves, although his suit is eighties style blue with a light blue tie. The shift to the 1980s is reiterated with visual scratches at the top and bottom of the screen, akin to the wear and tear we usually associate with used VHS tapes popularized in the 1980s. Moving on what looks like a platform video game, Jeremiah and his companion Ollie Oligopoly gobbles up a telephone company, a sports team, and a newspaper in order to turn its critical scrutiny into sycophantic celebrations of the company and its owner.

Inspirations from Fleischer and 1980s video games aside, the movie is a clear reference to the Disney style and franchise. Jeremiah Whitewhale with his “old-timey” phrases and cadence and his distinguished moustache, interacting as a real person with animated figures in an information snippet, draws inevitable comparisons to Walt Disney. The actions of the Whitewhale company, using vertical integration and oligopoly to corner the market and buy up other companies in order to grow, is a satire of how modern conglomerates and mega-companies operate. Disney is one of many culprits and the style and references of the movie directly parodies classic animation generally and Disney orientation films specifically. It is through parody that Jeremiah Whitewhale and his company become more than just a general evil corporation and turns into a specific satire and critique of Disney, albeit as an evil corporation among many others.⁶⁶⁸

After the orientation, the Whitewhale assistant hands Diane and Guy two heavy binders of sister companies and asks them to be mindful of them going forward, insinuating that they should not receive criticism or scrutiny. On the list is Every Animal Company, which prompts Diane to ask the reasonable question if Girl Croosh was acquired in order to silence their coverage of the consequences of American corporate capitalism. Diane and Guy decide to do one final piece where they try to bring Whitewhale down. They meet a journalist who has tried to take

⁶⁶⁸ Stabile and Harrison 2003, p. 8, where they quote numbers from Coontz 1992, that 25% of all Americans in the 1950s was poor, that teenage pregnancy was at its peak in 1957, that the risk then as now to be subjected to sexual abuse is greater by a member of one's own family, and that the suburban family in the 1950s was made possible or even created in large part by a centralized government and its financial programs such as beneficiary loans and soldier's salaries with the purpose to boost the white middle class, see also Fariello 1995, Schrecker 1998, and Schultz and Schultz 2001 for how the purging affected cultural institutions.

on Whitewhale for a long time. The meeting takes place in an art museum, and the journalist presents herself with the familiar phrase “Call me Isobel.” as a parodic inversion of the opening line of Melville’s novel. Like standardized depictions of Captain Ahab, she dons an eyepatch and silvery hair and says that the hunt for Whitewhale has consumed most of her life. She says, “You might even say that Whitewhale is my... green light at the end of the dock.” The obvious reiteration of *Moby Dick* is misdirected into another classic of American literature, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, where the green light emanating from the other side of the docks famously symbolizes longing unable to be realized, goals that are pursued but never possible to achieve.

The conversation between Diane, Guy, and Isobel takes place on a bench in the museum where the characters face different directions, meaning that they have different art works in the background when they are in (cinematic) frame. Diane and Guy get the leisurely pasture of Georges Seurat’s *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte*, while Isobel is framed with a parody of Winslow Homer’s *The Herring Net* with a shark instead of herrings transforming it into a reference to another futile hunt for aquatic game in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Although the original paintings referenced here can be seen in the Art Institute of Chicago where the meeting takes place, they do not hang in the same room, so the positioning and framing of them in this conversation is a conscious decision, tying Isobel even further to classical stories of sea captains and hunters chasing an illusive bounty, and perhaps also tying Diane and Guy to what ultimately yields as much of a result as a picnic in the park. Through the means of parody and intertextuality, the quest to bring down the mega corporation, of critiquing and disrupting the influence that capitalism has on American society, is equated with stories of loss and futility where a successful mission is never a possibility and the only hope is to survive the ordeal.

In their research, they unearth the story of Matt Minnowman, aptly named after the small fish and popular fishing bait. He was a Whitewhale employee who wanted to turn whistle blower. Diane finds out that he died on the factory floor under mysterious circumstances, his body left out the next day while work continued. After an extensive search for more information Diane and Guy argue about the reasons for a company leaving a dead body on the corporate floor. Guy says that it cannot be attributed to intentional cruelty, but to callousness, to which Diane wonders why it cannot be both. Guy says that “Whitewhale is not evil, they’re just capitalist.” and Diane replies “What’s the difference!?”. Diane as the investigating journalist reiterates the filmic tradition of journalist heroes like Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President’s Men* (Pakula 1976), Lowell Bergman in *The Insider* (Mann 1999) or the team from The Boston Globe in *Spotlight* (McCarthy 2015), but where those cinematic representations of real-life events depicted journalistic work that made a difference, the reiterated version in *Feel-Good Story* takes a more cynical turn. Diane and Guy have enough evidence

to confront Jeremiah Whitewhale and expect to bring the whole company down with this scandal.

However, Jeremiah Whitewhale is fine with them publishing a critical video of the company, since showing the company as evil or callous or “whoever the bad guy in *Harry Potter* is” shows them uncompromised by morality which makes the stock prices surge. When Diane demands answers on the mysterious accident of Matt Minnowman, Jeremiah not only accepts responsibility but flatly comes out and says that they murdered him for taking too many bathroom breaks, which set a bad example as other employees might also take bathroom breaks. He is able to do this without fear of consequences from the conversation being filmed since congress recently decided that it is legal to murder someone if you are rich, specifically a billionaire. A skeptical Diane realizes after googling that it actually is true, and that even though they have a confession of murder on tape, there is no way for them to take down Jeremiah Whitewhale and the Whitewhale company. Her objections that the senate or the president or the supreme court will stop this are all met by Jeremiah simply stating “Really, Diane?” and she begrudgingly accepts defeat.

The episode takes the implied fact that it is easier for a rich person to avoid legal consequences for their actions due to access to expensive legal counsel and insulation through connections to people and structures of power and makes it explicit. The “immunity” of billionaires is made into actual immunity and the string of checks and balances that are supposed to keep this from happening are shown as impotent due to their innate inability to exact responsibility from corporations and their leaders. It is a bleak satirical look at an American society heavily invested in the preservation of capitalism no matter how many ordinary lives it ruins. The parody of the episode in the representation of Jeremiah Whitewhale and the orientation video that Diane and Guy watch as new Whitewhale employees use literalization and exaggeration to emphasize corporate hypocrisy. By saying the quiet part out loud, the parody comments on corporations saying one thing and acting another, when the less sanitized and more honest version of orientation video comes off as absurd while still playing on the same aesthetics, style, and messaging of its source texts.

South Park and Gentrification

There are plenty of examples of direct criticism of capitalism in general and capitalists specifically in *South Park*. Starbucks bullies the local coffee shops in S02E17 *Gnomes*, Walmart represented as a sentient malicious entity that comes to town in S08E09 *Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes* and causes mass casualties among local stores, British Petroleum apologizes for their wrongdoings in triple episode S14E11-13 *Coon 2: Hindsight, Mysterion Rises, Coon vs. Coon and*

Friends but continues unabashed with further oil spills, opening a portal to another dimension and awakening Cthulhu by drilling on the moon. Meanwhile, the unfair system with college athletes is dealt with in S15E05 *Crack Baby Athletic Association* when Cartman starts making big money by filming a league of crack babies competing for crack balls. Jeff Bezos is a malignant presence with telepathic abilities looking to turn every human on earth into an Amazon consumer, thwarting the threat of unionization and strike led by a communist Amazon box in season 22. Mark Zuckerberg shows up in S21E04 *Franchise Prequel* as a petulant and immature nuisance with bad lip-syncing reminiscent of 1970s martial arts films, crashing into people's home without respect for privacy and starting fights with the children in their superhero costumes. The Disney corporation is led by Mickey Mouse as a CEO and he is deployed whenever there is a need to reign in one of their properties, like when the Jonas Brothers talk of discarding their purity rings in S13E01 *The Ring*, or when he tries to rig the 2012 election in favor of Mitt Romney in S12E14 *Obama Wins!*, or in S23E02 *Band in China* when Marvel and other Disney characters need to be lectured on the importance of good relations with China, culminating in the assassination of Winnie the Pooh due to his infamous likeness to Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The consequences of profit-centered capitalism can be found in episodes such as S04E06 *Cherokee Hair Tampons* where the grift of alternative medicines at the cost of real medical treatment is dissected, or in S16E02 *Cash for Gold* where shopping channels specifically and scamming the elderly of their life saving generally, a crime that has become even more common since then with further developments in technology, are heavily criticized, and in the triple episode S17E07-09 *Black Friday, A Song of Ass and Fire, Titties and Dragons* where the manic commercialism surrounding the increasing importance of the Black Friday sale is criticized and parodied by comparing South Park Mall employees with the defenders of The Wall in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), fending off bloodthirsty nameless hordes of shoppers even though it leads to literal carnage.

To my mind, however, the most interesting example of the depictions of capitalism and American national identity in *South Park* is the seasonal arc in season 19 where notions of consumerism and gentrification intersect with national and local politics, law enforcement and state sanctioned violence, censorship and freedom of expression, and the new face of corporate American nationalism. The season starts with the announcement that the principal of South Park Elementary, Principal Victoria, who has been a recurring character since the start of the show, has been fired due to her inability to contain students referring to rape as a "hot Cosby". A new principal is hired to install a sense of political correctness in the school, and he is aptly named the literalized PC Principal. The character may be controversial at times but nevertheless constructed in an interesting manner which is important to understand in order to place his role in the intersection of capitalism and national identity in the seasonal arch. PC Principal is a vehemently PC person

cracking down on any infringes he can find to political correctness, including deadnaming, using “black” instead of African American, or using spokesman instead of spokesperson.

He is depicted as a white heterosexual jock bro with broad shoulders, bulging muscles with arms to the sides or crossing the chest in a constant aggressive stance, Oakley shades, and a goatee. He is the embodiment of what the show sees as aggressive policing of people’s views and activities through the lens of political correctness from feminist and anti-racist movements. He is an exaggerated version of and a satirical take on the people telling you what you cannot say or do because it might offend or hurt other people and making him a frat bro jock turns the moral superiority of these groups into physical superiority, where he is able to bully people into being more cautious and mindful in their interactions with other people. Apart from his physical intimidation and aggressive demeanor and behavior, he is also very rigid in his interpretations and enactments of both the literal and unwritten rules and dogmas he believes in and adheres to. The rule book comes first, no matter the situation or the circumstances. PC Principal being white, heterosexual, able bodied, and male, all of which come to play parts in his representation in the show, signals him as a person oblivious of his own privileges (which is all of them) in chastising others for not checking their privileges.

South Park is once again calling out the hypocrisies they see in regulating speech and behavior in other people while ignoring your own privileges in society. The arguments that he makes are articulate, loquacious, reasonable, and transformative and often pretty much in line with how many of the dominating feminist and anti-racist talking points are formulated. He is familiar with correct vernacular and often expresses reasonable objections to the insensitivities of South Park people accustomed to their unchallenged privileged status. Being PC for PC Principal means “you love nothing more than beer, working out, and that feeling you get when you rhetorically defend a marginalized community from systems of oppression”. By making PC Principal a character with deep knowledge of these talking points and phrases and by situating him as a person of immense privilege, the show manages to avoid the pitfall of representing him as a stereotypical straw feminist exaggerating or inventing talking points for comical effect. He is still a version of a straw feminist, or a straw PC person literally literalized in his name, but he knows what he is talking about, and the exaggerations come in his aggressiveness and bullying, turning realistic ideas and theories into bullying and censorship, and it makes the character a far more interesting aspect of the show for it.

In S19E03 *The City Part of Town* the Trumpian presidential candidature of Mr. Garrison has turned South Park into the laughingstock of America and a rebranding is deemed necessary. In order to accomplish that, Randy Marsh suggests that the town needs to do everything possible to attract the establishment of a Whole Foods store, where the first step is the launching of SoDoSoPa (South

of Downtown South Park), a new urban development that would turn the most dilapidated part of South Park into a quaint center of artisan shops and cafés. The entirety of existing structures in the SoDoSoPa area before the new plans is the home of the McCormick family, and when Kenny's father Stuart asks the town council, architects and city planners outside their house what they are doing there, they answer "oh, don't worry, we're gentrifying!". Soon, the "Historic SoDoSoPa" region is constructed with hip restaurant Steed, fashionable pub the Stag, high end vintage clothing shop Brighton's, café Savor the Goodness, and between the McCormack house and garage is a neon sign advertising the tastefully lit Rusty Alley leading to the Sodo Space multi-level bar and eatery, and by the garage is Bi the Garage, a bar with a top level deck directly attached to the McCormack garage. The abandoned car on the front lawn of the McCormick place has been turned into a monument, complete with placard, lighting, decorative plantings, and an encompassing low brick wall and seating place.

What really sells the gentrification satire of SoDoSoPa are the video commercials advertising its stages of developments. In the first instance we are informed of the artisanship and uniqueness of the region, but infused into the animated presentation, including a camera pan confirming the "mixed income crowd" by showing Kenny and his father disgruntled on the sidewalk, is live-action stock film that claims to accentuate the unique vibe, quality, and energy of SoDoSoPa. The generic gentrified blandness of corporate buzz words and ambient house background music of course has the direct opposite effect, highlighting its vapid nature. The aim of the commercial is to sell flats in the newly constructed apartment building The Lofts at SoDoSoPa with 2000 square feet apartments "right in the heart of it all". The juxtaposition of animation and live-action and the use of stock video contrasting the many claims of uniqueness makes it an obvious parody, but the reiteration is made to look and sound very close to what commercials of gentrified areas and accommodation opportunities in these areas actually look and sound like. Had it not been inserted into a satirical comedy show and included animated parts, there would not have been much to separate it from common and generic real estate commercials, including architectural plans, the font and design of the area and the residences, and the narrator describing the opportunities in a subtle and seductive baritone.

Placing the parody so close to the source text where the transformation mainly stems from our preconception of Kenny and his family's house, enhances the satirical edge. An over-the-top exaggerated parody would not have the same effect. This parody only needs to reiterate its source text to pass as parody and as such it directs a sharp polemic edge towards its source text, the commercials of gentrified areas and gentrification in general.

The icing on the cake is when the commercial pivots to the even more luxurious and exclusive The Residence at The Lofts at SoDoSoPa, "complete with state-of-the-art finishes, balconies, and views of historic Kenny's House". The once

dilapidated house of the McCormack family is now the quaint center and alibi of the urban industry project, but it is still in the same state of decay and dilapidation. It makes a satirical point of who stands to gain from gentrification and who does not, emphasizing the skewed class perspective of gentrification. Another commercial suggests the plans for construction on the most exclusive real estate in all of South Park “for the very privileged few”, it is “The Villas at Kenny’s House”, a group of exclusive houses directly surrounding the McCormack house including jacuzzi placement with direct view of the McCormacks arguing inside, described as “meeting the mixed culture”. Kenny’s family as representatives of the working class are used as props to provide authenticity and cultural allure to the new projects, they are represented as quaint accessories devoid of any humanity or agency, which is what the show suggests that gentrification does in these areas.

In an attempt to compete with the new popular area, the owner of City Wok, a pigeon Chinese stereotype, makes his own commercial highlighting his district CtPaTown, where, as always when City Wok is included, the joke is the similarity in his pronunciation of City and shitty which turns CtPaTown to Shitty Part of Town.⁶⁶⁹ Included in the commercial are Red Lobster and Skeeter’s bar who have been present in *South Park* since the start of the show, and of course City Wok itself, which is presented as “South Park’s Asian landmark”, serving “City chicken” and “City soup”. The film also uses stock video interlaced with architectural plans and animation, and when filming the exterior of run-down bar Skeeter’s, the “camera” is intentionally hand-held and shaky to give the film an urban, live, and vibrant style. Placing the reiteration of hand-held camera in animation, where it must be recreated to emulate its source text, turns it into a parody that exposes the artificiality of the technique.

Skeeter’s, the main drinking hole for the (mostly male) residents of South Park during the first 18 seasons of the show is transformed into Skeeter’s Wine Bar in S19E04 *You’re Not Yelping*. The bustling restaurants, quaint coffee shops and artisan patisseries have all moved from SoDoSoPa to the newly named Historic Shi Tpa Town to be close to the new Whole Foods store. Perhaps the most shrewdly named restaurant symbolizing the artificial appropriation of every-day people is high-end (vernacular) with its academic paraphrasing of “folksy”, its modern font, and its lower casing and parenthesis suggesting pseudo-humility, making it an excellent parody of gentrified eateries claiming authenticity of the common people while pricing them out of ever visiting.

What is subtly implied through looks and facial impressions in the ending of S19E03 *The City Part of Town* is that the Whole Foods store is very popular with the white part of South Park, while the people of color who visits the store seem

⁶⁶⁹ The owner of City Wok, Tuong Lu Kim, is shown to be a white man with personality disorder in S15E06 *City Sushi*, but in all other episodes of *South Park* he is represented as a Chinese man with stereotypical accent and behavior.

much more skeptical. The clientele of the new restaurants and shops are decidedly white Anglo-Saxon while the new Rodriguez family try to get their Mexican style restaurant Nueva Familia up-and-running, causing the son in the family David Rodriguez to curse white gentrifiers in general and Cartman as a Yelp critic in particular. Gentrification is represented as an exclusively white middle class phenomenon which treats working class people, people of color, and especially working-class people of color as backdrop or collateral damage.

The Yelp critics in *You're Not Yelping* literally take to their guns and start riots destroying restaurants not allowing them to eat and review them. In a parody of an ISIS execution video, the disgruntled yelpers remove the head of the Whistling Willy's mascot who started to refuse service to yelpers. This is followed by the insertion of real live-action videos of generic "Middle Eastern terrorists" in the vein of ISIS training, fighting, and firing guns at an enemy. The segment is presented as a newscast broadcasted live by Channel 4 News, the primary news channel in South Park. The parodic exaggeration and extraneous inclusion of "documentary" material further ridicules the self-importance of the yelpers in South Park and in the real world. They are finally disarmed when the town grants them all a medal, tricking them to think that only they are special, since they all think that the world revolves around them. It is a description of modern America in which everyone is a consumer but where there are degrees in consumption and where there is stock in being someone who can influence others to consume, a notion which the show through the use of parody and satire gleefully mocks. In that, the episode presents an interesting and astute analysis of the intersection of capitalism, technology, national identity, and everyday life that influencers have had and continues to have on America.

Creating safe spaces online and political correctness are described in the show as parts of the general gentrification of society. S19E05 *Safe Space* what starts as an attempt by PC Principal to create safe spaces for select students, ends with the newly founded organization Shameless America enlisting impoverished children to sanitize comment sections for famous people for one dollar. The character Reality, represented as an old-time burglar villain complete with moustache, cape, top hat and a nefarious outlook, is executed by hanging in the town square to cheering crowds. Reiterating the silent era burglar type manifests through parody the irrational fear of something unfamiliar and sinister which in this case is the self-consciously heavy-handed Reality character that is made to suffer the consequences of people's fear of the unknown and the uncomfortable.

In S19E07 of *South Park* called *Naughty Ninjas*, gentrification from an overreliance on capitalism and consumerism and the willingness to shy away from anything uncomfortable stemming from PC Principal as the manifestation of political correctness intersects with notions of ethnicity and national identity. The citizens of South Park decide that as they become more PC, there really is no need to have such a large police force in town, and they decide to defund the police who

do not want to continue with their job if they are not allowed to beat up minorities anymore. The bartender at Skeeter's Wine Bar say to a police officer just trying to have a glass of Pinot after work that "We don't take kindly to folks who impose their authority on the underprivileged." The police officer replies: "Now look, not all cops are racist trigger-happy assholes." to which Randy angrily exclaims: "Really? I'll bet you don't even know what farm to table means." The police officer is subsequently forced to leave. The scene parodies the film and television trope of an outsider or dissenter visiting the local bar where the locals remonstrate through verbal or physical abuse, as seen in *Bad Day at Black Rock* (Sturges 1955), *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Leone 1966), and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999) and parodied in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* (Burton 1985) and earlier seasons of *South Park*. Using the trope against an authority figure like a local police officer emphasizes the parodic mode but also signals the power shift in the town, where the local population feel empowered enough to stand up to and dismiss the police force and its representatives.

Meanwhile the kids build a ninja fort in the now abandoned SoDoSoPa area around Kenny's house as an attempt to scare away the homeless people that are squatting in the abandoned buildings there. The kids dress as they perceive ninjas would, wearing all black with obscured faces except around the eyes. When they are spotted by parts of the local population, they are mistaken for Arab terrorists, causing a panic among affluent residents but also the homeless population who were squatting nearby the newly built ninja fort. Their fearful reaction when seeing the kids playing is emphasized by a parodic version of non-diegetic music in the exotified generic Middle Eastern style common in American film and television depictions of the Middle East. The parodies poke fun at Hollywood's exotification of these places, which is often accentuated with music in films and television shows to highlight their otherness.⁶⁷⁰ The parody is deployed to signal the otherness of the kids in costumes, but also to work as a sonic manifestation of the process of othering that the citizens of South Park are guilty of. The music mirrors their thoughts and feelings and that what they see is something that is decidedly not American and thus dangerous. Xenophobia and nationalism is literalized through the use of sound and the parody not only manifests this connection but also highlights its history and tradition by evoking source texts from American film and television where this kind of music has been used in earnest. Later in the episode when Randy connects the dots between the threat of terrorists and the kids playing ninjas, his doubts and thoughts are accentuated by switching between the "Middle Eastern" music and a parodic version of an "East Asian" or "Japanese" music style. The "Middle Eastern" music is connected to terrorists and is therefore

⁶⁷⁰ See Prince 2009 for further discussion on musical orientalization and exotification in Hollywood movies.

scary, while the “Japanese” music is connected to ninjas and therefore not scary, but they are both something other than what is American.

When the kids talk about the code that a ninja is expected to follow, it sounds to the terrified white middle class public like ISIS warriors defending their world view. Scared by the imminent threat of terrorist attacks, homeless people move to other parts of town, including the newly gentrified Historic Shi Tpa Town, settling outside the prestigious Whole Foods store. The presence of homeless beggars in the gentrified parts of town causes the town council to react, since the citizens of South Park in Gerald’s words now “don’t have anywhere to eat or shop” since they are too scared or put off by the homeless population, which is vast for a town of South Park’s size and has increased with the increased gentrification. When the homeless people kept to the other part of town there was no interest from the City Council or from the other people in town to do anything about it. As long as they kept their poverty and distress invisible to the eyes of the white middle class, nothing needed to be done about it.

The juxtaposition of the once so popular but now derelict SoDoSoPa with endless empty apartments and the homeless population squatting outside it comments sharply on the treatment and prioritization of homeless people in the US. Expensive apartments built for the white middle class but now empty and unused are kept empty rather than used to help people back on their feet. The mayor and the citizens of South Park strike a deal with the police force to remove the homeless people from the nicer parts of town in exchange for the promise that the police once again will be allowed to beat up minorities. The deal is sealed when the mayor and Randy turn their backs to the smiling police officers who happily starting to beat up the homeless once again to the tunes of an uplifting melodic soundtrack. Music is once again used for parodic purposes when it juxtaposes through ironic inversion the violent actions of the police and the conscious ignorance of authorities and the white middle class with a happy and cheerful pop song.

In the episode, the mere visibility of the poor and homeless is enough for white middle class America to abandon all sense of social equality and human decency. The political correctness that had the townspeople mock the police for their overt violence and bigotry does not extend across the class barriers and the fear of other ethnicities and the poor is stronger than any sense of right and wrong. As long as white middle-class America does not have to look at homeless people and does not have to fear people that look foreign, the police can do whatever they want. The episode highlights an interesting development in South Park mirroring developments in America. Officer Barbrady is fired for accidentally shooting a 6-year-old kid, notably Latino and unarmed. This aspect is specified by the City Council apparently to distinguish him from other armed 6-year-olds. Barbrady reminds everyone that he used to be the only cop in town, which should be quite fitting for a small mountain town of South Park’s location and size. Now, however,

as observed in this episode, the South Park Police Department consists of dozens of police officers, a S.W.A.T. team, at least ten police cars, a Zamboni used to round up homeless people from the street, and state-of-the-art weaponry for every single police officer. It is a satirical jab at American overspending on police departments and its propensity to shoot and kill citizens, more than a thousand each year which is by far the most of any OECD country, especially people of color and specifically African Americans who are three times more likely to be killed by police than Caucasians.

Continuing the gentrification plotline in the last three episodes of the season, the focus shifts to advertising and sponsored content where the artificial intelligence used for them has evolved and is now a threat to mankind. This is accentuated by numerous references to the *Terminator* franchise and Skynet throughout the episodes including quotes like Officer Barbrady using “come with me if you want to live” from *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron 1991) and musical references to the *Terminator* soundtrack. Jimmy Bulmer is the editor of the school newspaper, and he refuses to censor his writers using the word “retarded” or to let PC Principal have the final say on the content of the newspaper, just as he refuses to include advertisement or sponsored content. When he is banned from distributing the newspaper on school grounds, he writes a scathing editorial on the hypocrisy and abuse of power of PC Principal and distributes it throughout town, causing people to appreciate the long-lost art of ad-free news. A segment where Mr. Stotch laments the difficulty in chasing after real news is illustrated by a combination of parodies. The first references the night-time bar crawl montage from *The Lost Weekend* (Wilder 1945) with neon signs passing a disoriented main character as hallucinations or dream manifestations, a scene which has become a trope and has been parodied many times, including iterations in *Futurama*, *BoJack Horseman*, and at least six instances in *The Simpsons*. The second reiteration is *Vertigo* (Hitchcock 1958) with the famous circular spinning background signaling disorientation and dispatchment from reality. In the scene in S19E08 *Sponsored Content* Mr. Stotch’s search for actual news is disrupted by non-animated advertisements and listicles floating past him while his disorientation is emphasized by the spinning background. He contrasts this feeling of dizziness and frustration with the comfort of reading actual news and only news in the school newspaper, which is also how he finds out that the town police have beat up homeless people and cleared them from Shi Tpa Town.

Meanwhile, the consequences of gentrification are starting to catch up with people when they can no longer afford the high-end restaurants, quaint wine bars, and artisan craft shops, not to say shopping at Whole Foods every day. Randy realizes that the sweeping gentrification that has happened in South Park is happening all over the world in an effort by artificial intelligence to price humanity out of existence by making all of Earth too expensive. Nathan, a character who is usually an antagonist to Jimmy or Timmy, has sided with the artificial intelligence

and connects political correctness to gentrification when he says, "What is PC but a verbal form of gentrification? Spruce everything up, get rid of the ugliness in order to create a false sense of paradise? Only one thing can live in that world - ads." In the end, the physical manifestation of gentrification, the Whole Foods store, is chased away by an angry crowd influenced by advertising, and it dislodges from its surroundings and flies away, it too acting as a sentient being. The season ends with a video message from the PC community with PC Principal as narrator, after he has slain the sentient ad Leslie for mis-using PC language for nefarious purposes. It warns of the ads taking over young people's lives over a backdrop imagery of the American flag waving proudly against a clear blue sky, but then obscured by pop-up ads, while "America the beautiful" plays in the background.

PC Principal evokes these overtly American symbols to rally the school children against ads as a common enemy, and says that the only thing separating those who wants to kill us from those that do not is "a burning desire for social justice" and that the only way to win this war, as he calls it, is "to be as understanding, non-biased, and politically correct as possible" to which Stan gets the closing line of the entire season, lamenting to the other boys that "this is going to be really hard". It is a meta commentary on the struggle that the *South Park* creators face with public discourse on the show's content that keeps pushing boundaries in all directions, but it also works as a parodic inversion of the standardized rallying speech common in film and television history, where the leader or the hero gathers the troops for one final battle. It is most commonly traits of co-operation, sacrifice, bravery, and survival that are invoked in these kinds of speeches, but when PC Principal uses overt symbols of American national identity like the national flag and a famous patriotic song to rally his followers, it is in the name of political correctness. Whether or not it resonates with real life events with the same efficiency and accuracy as other political comments in the show might be up for debate (I would argue that it is not), but it is still the use of parody as a means to subvert and offer resistance to what the show sees as a hegemonic societal discourse, in this case the gentrified speech of political correctness.

South Park, Capitalism, and Religion

South Park has addressed religion many times during its run, and it is one of the most common themes for analysis of the show.⁶⁷¹ There are plenty of depictions of different forms of religion in the shows. The Mormon faith gets a satirized examination in S07E12 *All About Mormons*, which in turn inspired the creation of the full musical *The Book of Mormon* in 2011 which runs to this day and is one of the most successful musicals of all time. Scientologists get more than one slap on

⁶⁷¹ Gournelos 2009, pp. 123-145, Cogan 2012, p. 73-120, Feltmate 2017, pp. 8-9.

the mouth, but the most famous episode with most far-reaching consequences with Isaac Hayes, the voice of Chef and devout Scientologist, leaving the show in protest, is S09E12 *Trapped in the Closet*, where the satire for a few moments is just reading actual Scientology scripture with the caption “this is what Scientologists actually believe”. Even atheists in S06E08 *Red Hot Catholic Love* and agnostics in S15E14 *The Poor Kid* are brutally mocked and ridiculed for being smug, hypocritical, and just as totalitarian as any religion. The notion of movements or people telling other people how to live their lives is a favorite pet-peeve of the *South Park* creators. In *South Park* and according to *South Park*, religion and censorship “both depend upon an actively hostile regulation of counter or alternative viewpoints”.⁶⁷²

South Park has often been critical towards religion, but their polemic edge is usually not directed at religion per se but against the structures and hypocrisies of organized religion and its consequences for people. The moral message of S05E03 *Super Best Friends* is that religion can be valuable and that struggle between religions is unimportant, instead the satirical edge is directed at religions that are more interested in financial gift than spiritual guidance. Stan says in his closing monologue in the episode that “any religion that require you to pay money in order to move up and learn its tenets is wrong. You see all religions have something valuable to teach, but just like the Super Best Friends learned, it requires a bit of them all.”

Most common are parodies and satire of and about Christianity and its hegemonic position in American society and as a foundational staple of American national identity. The argument championed by many conservative pundits in the US that Christianity has helped form and support modern values like freedom of expression and individual freedom in Europe and North America is undermined by its vast history of censorship as both ideology and institution. Meyhoff Brink suggests that contrary to what contemporary conservative politicians and intellectuals express, modern identities of Europe and North America are rooted in critique and ridicule of Christianity at least as much as in Christianity itself.⁶⁷³ Religious satire has helped weaken the ideological notion of Christianity as people led by a strong leader, as a flock guided by a shepherd, and it is a tradition that *South Park* has continued this into the 21st century.⁶⁷⁴

In the double episode of S04E09 *Do the Handicapped Go to Hell?* and S04E10 *Probably* the boys start to question Christianity because they get no satisfying answer to the reasons behind performing rituals like the communion, but increasingly because they wonder if their friend Timmy with cerebral palsy will go to hell since he cannot speak and therefore cannot take confession, to which the

⁶⁷² Gournelos 2009, p. 126.

⁶⁷³ Meyhoff Brink 2015, p. 211.

⁶⁷⁴ Meyhoff Brink 2021.

priest answers that he probably will. When they catch the priest having sex with a parishioner in the confession booth, they realize they need to take things into their own hand, leading to Cartman becoming a preacher and the leader of a new church. Cartman being Cartman he quickly turns the new church into a money-making scheme in the vein of real-life American megachurches with private jets and enormous accumulated personal wealth. He is stopped by Jesus who says that the right way to honor God is to be kind to others and live a good and happy life.

The episode also reveals Mormons to be the winning religion that get to go to Heaven and that God is a Buddhist. In S03E13 *Starvin' Marvin in Space*, Christian missionaries are more concerned with spreading Christianity than food to a starving Ethiopian population. In S03E16 *Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus*, *South Park's* interpretation of the Christian God makes his first appearance as a morph of a squirrel, elephant, cat, and hippopotamus with a reptile tongue, even though he assures people that this is just the way that humans perceive him. Jesus is a recurring character in the *South Park* universe dating back to the very first short films by Parker and Stone, *The Spirit of Christmas* (1992, 1995), where he first fights Frosty the Snowman, and then Santa for the domain of Christmas. In *Red Hot Catholic Love* the show exaggerates a wide-spread phenomenon to make a satirical point when Father Maxi is disgusted to realize that all Catholic priests except him have sex with young boys. Father Maxi's closing speech warns against turning the stories of religious scripture like the bible into literal translations of hierarchy and power, because it will alienate the faith from those who practice it. *South Park* also takes jabs at the religious aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous twelve step program and the hysterical search for miracles in S09E14 *Bloody Mary*, the Christian gay camps and general homophobia in S11E02 *Cartman Sucks*, and the Catholic church and the Pope telling people what to do and the connections between faith and traditions like eggs and rabbits during Easter in S11E05 *Fantastic Easter Special*.

In this section, however, I look more closely at two examples that literalizes the conflation between religion, capitalism, and national identity, and the way they use parody and satire to convey a critical message of American society. S13E03 *Margaritaville* first aired in March 2009, six months after the Lehman Brothers' crash and in the midst of the escalating financial crisis. The extensive consequences of the housing bubble and irresponsible banking activities take hold in the town of South Park, illustrated by Stan depositing 100 dollars in the bank for his savings account only to have the money invested against his will and consequently evaporated just seconds after being invested, for which the bank holds no responsibility. The banks blame the government, politicians blame Wall Street, and Cartman blames the Jews. Reactions to the financial crisis take on cult-like properties when Randy amasses a following to his "don't spend"-message to replace consumerism as the de facto religion of everyday American life. The economy is instead treated as an ancient deity who craves sacrifices and rituals to

be pleased and bestow financial bliss upon its worshippers. Citizens must relinquish their possessions and stop their reckless spending, they must limit it to water, bread, and margaritas.

The deified manifestation of the economy constitutes a conflation between religion and state, and Randy takes the role of prophet and preacher, appropriating archaic English and classic ecclesiastical rhetoric in a parodic reiteration of religious rituals and communication. “The economy is our shepherd, we shall not want”, he muses to a doting and populous crowd. When Kyle disagrees and starts preaching the benefits of spending, he quickly becomes a Jesus figure to the ones who follow him, but also to the reigning religious oligarchs vying for control over the town and economy with Randy as leader and Father Maxi, the Catholic priest of South Park, as one of the council members. The young Jew speaking truth is a threat, which the episode shrewdly plays with through its parody of bible scripture and delivery. Kyle says to an increasing crowd listening to him give a sermon from a nearby hill: “Faith is what makes the economy exist. Without faith, it is only plastic cards and paper money.” This causes the council to speculate that he might be the economy’s son sent to save them, but that notion is quickly shot down by Randy who instead enlists the skillset of Cartman, posing as rugged fisherman Quint from *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975), to betray Kyle and have him executed. Cartman in Quint’s role becomes a Judas stand-in, treating religion and film history as intermingled by the show.

Stan meanwhile tries to return his father’s Margaritaville blender, which takes him on a journey to the store where Randy purchased it, to the financier who was responsible for the payment plan, to Wall Street and the brokers who created equity funds with thousands of Margaritaville payment plans, and to Washington where Stan discovers that all financial decisions by the government are made by cutting off the head of a chicken and making them run around a *Wheel of Fortune* (1983-) style boardgame with suggested recourses. This is the final straw in his disillusionment of the financial and political structures of American society, and he gives up his quest. Kyle manages to receive a limitless Amex credit card and by literally accepting everyone’s debt on his card, he absolves the town from the burden of financial ruin and is carried in procession accompanied by his weeping mother to his bed, where he is laid to rest. Conflating capitalism and religion to represent the reaction of the American population to the financial, state, and judiciary system handling the wake of the 2009 financial crisis is no coincidence of course. Both religion and capitalism are tightly connected to the fabric of American everyday life and the combination and conflation of the two in the construction of national identity is almost unique to America. By parodying biblical scripture and storytelling, televised preacher rhetoric, and unscrupulous daytime commercials, and by satirizing ruthless banking methods and the financial incompetence of the American government, *Margaritaville* manages to offer scathing criticism of how the country, and its institutions of power are run and the

consequences it has on ordinary citizens. In a way, American citizens have all come to live in a village defined by its brand association, even though it is not always margarita.

In S17E01 *Let Go, Let Gov* Cartman talks loudly on speaker phone about how the NSA is listening in on everyone and that the government always knows what you are doing. Butters interprets this as the government being the new deity who, like the benevolent interpretation of the Christian God, watches over you, keeps you safe, and is worthy of worship. He starts to pray to the government before bedtime and visits the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) as an extension of the government to confess his sins in a parodic conflation between the catholic church and the American nation state. Butters states that he already has pledged the allegiance fifty times and sung *My Country 'Tis of Thee*, the patriotic song with lyrics written by Samuel Francis Smith in 1831 to the British national anthem and used as an unofficial American national anthem until *The Star-Spangled Banner* was adopted as the official national anthem in 1931, a hundred times. He also watched *America's got Talent* (2006-) twice but asks the DMV clerk what more he can do. Performing rituals of American national identity akin to the rituals of religion is for Butters, pledging allegiance instead of praying, singing a national anthem instead of a hymn, and finally participating in the most powerful manifestation of shared national identity that America has to offer, watching television. The nation becomes Butters' religion and his zeal to be a good American to atone for what he has done aligns well with the intensity that both patriotic and Christian zealots expressed in the aftermath of 9/11 up to the Fall of 2013 when the episode was first aired. Butters uses his newfound faith to convert two Jehovah's Witnesses who knocks on his door, and together they start spreading the word of the government and the DMV in very much the same manner that the Jehovah's Witnesses try to spread their message.

Meanwhile, Cartman infiltrates the NSA to disclose how they listen to the private conversations of citizens. When he accompanies the manager of NSA to visit someone who has tweeted threats of blowing up the Lincoln Memorial and who asks if listening in to private conversations does not violate the freedom of speech, the NSA manager replies with ferocious speed and accuracy that:

There's a lot of people out there who think like you, people who think their government doesn't have the right to go around poking their noses in the e-mails of its citizens. That is until a plane flies into a couple of towers and a little girl loses her life. You wanna live in the land of the free and the home of the brave. But the brave can't be free if the land isn't home and that land won't be home as long as folks out there wanna take that American flag and shove it so far up your anus 'til you crap stars and stripes for a week. And as you sit there on the toilet with a star-spangled Montezuma's revenge, there's one thing I can guarantee you. You won't care who's checking your twitter account then.

This might be the most succinct and honest summary of the domestic policy spearheaded by a majority of American politicians in the aftermath of 9/11, and the disgruntled citizen changes his mind when he realizes that he “never thought of it that way”. Meyhoff Brink writes that the unifying and stabilizing force of religion comes in handy when European or American identity is perceived to be threatened by Muslim immigration or universal globalization because it can easily be reformulated in terms of identity.⁶⁷⁵ The conflation of religion and nation is interesting in this episode as it does not depict a nation state that uses religion to build an imagined community and/or exclude others from participating, but here the nation is the religion and follows practices used by different religions today, including confessions from Catholicism and canvassing from the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They read and extrapolate meaning from the DMV brochure which contains quotations from the leader of the nation at that time, Barack Obama. Since the DMV sports the same type of regalia as a church would with depictions of their leader on the wall (framed Obama picture) and colorful robes (the American flag) decorating the premises, the movement has no problem continuing and even growing. However, when the DMV decides to embrace this new movement and offer real confessions and become a place of faith and worship, it quickly deteriorates into having sex with young boys because it “sort of comes with the territory”.

Apart from the jab at the omnipresent sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, the episode succeeds in satirizing people’s willingness to tolerate increased surveillance and decreased freedom for a sense of greater security through the use of parodic inversions of religious rituals and traditions. The episode also satirizes the ease of establishing a new religion and gathering followers willing to listen to stories to experience greater comfort and a higher purpose. What unites the two strands of thought; religion and, depending on the point of view, nationalism or patriotism, is the lack of critical thinking required to accept them at face value, and it is a harsh and poignant judgement on contemporary American society.

Conclusion

The nation state has become so accepted as a starting point of how we divide our world politically and culturally that it in many ways stands beyond contention, sedimented as truth rather than alternative. Much in the same way, capitalism has become so ingrained in our society that at least since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 it has become ossified to the point where the phrase “there is no alternative” is a viable argument. In this chapter we have seen some examples of how animated television shows use parody and satire to comment on capitalism in the United

⁶⁷⁵ Meyhoff Brink 2015, p. 210.

States and how monetary logic influence and decide so much of what we do or say.

BoJack Horseman connects the oligopoly of the present, with few mega conglomerates ousting all competition and gobbling up smaller companies to solidify their power and status, with a history that at all points has facilitated this development. The orientation video parody with animated manifestations of vertical integration and oligopoly says the quiet part out loud and gives a frank description of how the US became corporate America by satirizing mega corporations generally and the Disney franchise including Walt Disney specifically. Jeremiah Whitehouse as a Walt Disney reiteration literally and legally gets away with murder and there is little anyone can do about it. In America it is the corporation and the capital that rules and any resistance to the present order yields the same futile result as joining Captain Ahab on a fishing trip. It is a bleak depiction of a society that has allowed capitalism and national identity to conflate to the point where one is undistinguishable from the other, and where people with power will stop at nothing to preserve their way of life.

Corporate America is used and scrutinized on many occasions in *South Park* and one of the more interesting examples is the connection between gentrification and the technological developments of advertising and the consequences it has for a small mountain town in the seasonal arch of season 19. *South Park* is gentrified through investments in derelict areas and sold via commercials where the reiteration hits so close to their source texts that the parody is almost entirely contextual by placing them in a *South Park* episode and using a blend of animation and live action stock footage. The parody does not need to be exaggerated or misdirected in order to convey the message of capitalist logic through commercials that are absurdly generic. Gentrification is revealed as a white middle class endeavor where working-class families like Kenny's are turned into props for quaint backdrop while never invited to take part in the development due to financial restrictions. The people of color in *South Park* show little interest in the new developments and the content of the Whole Foods store which was the original motivation for gentrifying *South Park*. For the white middle class, gentrification is a good and desirable thing since it allows them to experience a commodified version of authenticity that is safe and generic but something different than what they are used to. It also allows them to turn a blind eye to the signs of dilapidation and human suffering in town, sprucing up parts of town that were previously run-down and removing the homeless population so that they are rendered even more invisible than they were.

Confidence in the successful gentrification of the town allows the white middle class citizens to even offer resistance to the police and their gratuitous use of violence against minorities and homeless people, but this is quickly reinstated when the xenophobic fear of Muslim terrorism shatters the pristine image of gentrified *South Park*, and the homeless population move into the nicer parts of

town becoming visible once again. American capitalist society is represented as created by and for the white middle and upper class and the fear of the white middle class to be exposed to poverty or to people of color is enough for them to once again strike an alliance with the police and their sanctioned monopoly on violence. Once again, the quiet part is said out loud when the police agree to disperse the homeless out of sight of the white middle class in return for the explicit approval to beat up and shoot minorities. Even though the season ends with the citizens of South Park rejecting gentrification and the deified Whole Foods store that is chased away into the sky, the violent ramifications of capitalist America still linger and are not subject to possible change.

The religious undertones of the town's worship of the Whole Foods store are made more explicit in the *Margaritaville* and *Let Go, Let Gov* episodes where capitalism and its incarnations are not only conflated with religion, but are literally turned into religious movements and artifacts. In the wake of the patriotic surge of 9/11 and the ramifications of the financial crisis of the late 2000s the show uses parodic representations of religious rituals and traditions to emphasize the permeation of capitalism in American society and for American national identity. In the US as represented in *South Park*, capitalism is religion and religion is capitalism, and that unholy alliance makes excellent fodder for parodic activity. Religious rituals are parodied by worshipping alternative deities like capitalism in *Margaritaville* and the intersection of capitalism and government in *Let Go, Let Gov*. What the parody does here is to offer alternative perspectives for sedimented notions of everyday life, to offer resistance against norms taken for granted to the point where they might seem compulsory.

The conflation of capitalism, religion, and national identity is unique to the US and *South Park*'s parodies and satires expose their hypocrisies and inconsistencies and the consequences that they have for ordinary citizens. As we have seen, capitalism and American national identity are tightly intertwined. American comedy has over centuries used the discrepancies between the lofty mythical ideals of the American Dream and American exceptionalism and their scant impact on reality. Shows like *South Park* and *BoJack Horseman* continue in that tradition and draw from its history and application through parodic uses with a combination of comedy and sincere political commentary to offer alternative perspectives on the dominant and sedimented notions of capitalism and American national identity. Another show, *Archer*, also offers subversion to dominant notions of American national identity, but in slightly different ways. The next chapter focuses on *Archer* and how it uses temporality and play with national identity to subvert expectations and offer resistance to sedimented structures.

Chapter 6 The International Temporalities of *Archer*

Why do the people that hate us have the best arguments? – Pam Poovey

What is it, the Alabama of Europe? – Sterling Archer

I mean, what year is this? – Malory Archer

The film *Jerry Maguire* (Crowe 1996) starts with an image of the world and a voice-over narration by Tom Cruise playing the titular protagonist stating “So this is the world and there are almost six billion people on it. When I was a kid, there were only three. It’s hard to keep up.” There is a cut to a satellite image of North America, where Canada and the Central and South American parts are covered with clouds. The narration continues, “There. That’s better. That’s America. See, America still sets the tone for the world.” The film then continues to show young American sports stars that the sports agent Jerry Maguire has as clients and then continues into the main storyline, but the opening is interesting in many ways. There is a degree of irony in place here, especially since the film then goes on to criticize the extreme commodification of American sports and show a somewhat healthier possible version of it, but America is still very much in focus throughout the film. It is an American film about American sports and the cut from the world that can be a bit overbearing to the borders of the USA with veiled neighbors to focus the perspective on what is known and familiar for an American audience is a telling nod to the concepts of *American exceptionalism*, *the city upon a hill*, and America as norm and as a beacon of hope for the rest of the world. In this chapter, I look closer at notions of American exceptionalism and of America as norm by analyzing the television show *Archer* and how it uses, disrupts, and subverts these notions in its portrayal of international espionage. Specifically, I focus on how parody and satire are used to create disruptions in temporality and in the play with nations and national identity that the show uses, and what effect this has.

The term city upon a hill originates from a 1630 lecture by John Winthrop before his group of Puritans left Southampton on the *Arabella* to colonize what

would become Boston. He interpreted a phrase from the bible where Jesus warns that a city on a hill cannot be hidden, that it is the light of the world and that all eyes would be on it and scrutinize it, to admonish their own behavior as colonizers of the new world to set an example as true servants of God. Winthrop's lecture almost fell into oblivion until it was revived in the 20th century by historians and political leaders as the basis for the notion of American exceptionalism. The merit of this connection and its alignment with the original interpretation have been thoroughly challenged, but the idea of the USA as the city upon a hill where all the world's eyes are directed towards it was used frequently during the later half of the 20th Century.⁶⁷⁶ Presidents like John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama have all used the term in official speeches, either as a word of caution for the USA to act as a role model since all eyes are on them, or as a celebration of the USA as the promised land, the land of opportunity. In political vernacular it has come to describe the USA as the light of the world and as the beacon of hope for the rest of the world, the country that everyone admires and where everyone would choose to live if given the choice.⁶⁷⁷ The perspective was not without merit. Amanda Lagerkvist writes about how Swedish travelers to America in the 1940s and 1950s created a fictionalized and idealized "cinematic" version of America in their writings for a Swedish audience.⁶⁷⁸ During the 1950s and 1960s, America and American culture was a beacon of hope and possibility for Germans like filmmaker Wolfgang Petersen who stated that "to us, America was something like a paradise".⁶⁷⁹

The idea of the city upon a hill has worked as a foundation in the construction of the concept of American exceptionalism, the notion that the USA is a global outlier and that its values, political system, and historical development are unique in human history. Seymour Martin Lipset was one of the leading architects behind theorizing the phrase when describing its origins and construction and he states that Americanism, or American exceptionalism, is based on liberty, individualism, republicanism, democracy, meritocracy, and laissez-faire economics.⁶⁸⁰ It further suggests that not only does America have a superior culture than the rest of the world and is the norm that the rest of the world needs to adjust to, but that America has a responsibility to change the rest of the world according to its own views and culture. *Manifest Destiny* is a perception of a built-in promise in the Declaration of Independence that guarantees its citizens the possibility to go out West and

⁶⁷⁶ Gamble 2012, Rodgers 2018.

⁶⁷⁷ Cmp Squires 2018, pp. 62-63.

⁶⁷⁸ Lagerkvist 2005.

⁶⁷⁹ Mehring 2010, p. 3.

⁶⁸⁰ See for example Lipset 1979 and Lipset 1996.

make their claim on the frontier wilderness and its “promise of an inexhaustible abundance of resources”.⁶⁸¹

The combination of the promise of riches and the moral responsibility to civilize the rest of the world is important to understand when discussing American foreign policy. The Republican party in the USA has used American exceptionalism as an official pillar of their politics since 2012. Their 2016 platform begin with the words “We believe in American exceptionalism” and in a later definition of the term they state: “We believe that American exceptionalism - the notion that our ideas and principles as a nation give us a unique place of moral leadership in the world – requires the United States to retake its natural position as leader of the free world”.⁶⁸² The tongue-in-cheek delivery of *Jerry Maguire* yields a result that is equally true and foreboding. Undoubtedly, America still manages to “set the tone” for the rest of the world today, for better or worse, but the sense that the light of the world and the city upon the hill are challenged rings truer for each passing year.

All presidents between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 attacks in some form have described America as the greatest country on earth and Americans as unbiased, morally right, and providing a fair representation of international law and morality. Using this rhetoric means that an enemy of America can be an enemy to international morality, to the world, and as Billig puts it, “[t]he global goodness of America is constantly to be defended.”⁶⁸³ Billig distances himself from scholars who make the distinction between bad nationalism and good patriotism, especially in the context of Americanism. American patriotism is rarely described as nationalism just as Christian religiosity is seldom described as religious extremism.⁶⁸⁴ This is what allows films like *Bagdad ER* (Alpert and O’Neill 2006) to be described as not having a political agenda but “simply meant to celebrate the heroism and bravery of the men and women in uniform”.⁶⁸⁵

Patriotism in the form of celebrating heroes in national uniform is rendered unproblematic and unpolitical because it is American patriotism and the invisibility of those kinds of political statements is emblematic of the concept of American exceptionalism and America as the norm of the world. Without focusing on specific parts of the country, patriotic songs often refer to “America the beautiful” and sing its praise as a whole, more exceptional and with more God-given perfection than any other country. Billig contends that in these utterances, “America is not beautiful because it offers a stunning waterfall near Buffalo or a

⁶⁸¹ Mehring 2010, p. 1.

⁶⁸² 2016 Republican Party Platform, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/2016-republican-party-platform>, retrieved 2025-10-17.

⁶⁸³ Billig 1995, pp. 88-92 and 152.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 55-57.

⁶⁸⁵ Prince 2009, p. 207, quote from Sheila Nevins, president of HBO’s documentary division.

canyon a couple of thousand miles away in Arizona. The country as a totality is praised as special, as ‘the beautiful’.”⁶⁸⁶ America the beautiful, the greatest country in the world, from sea to shining sea, these are common ways do describe the country in positive tones, but what is important to remember is that it does not encompass the view or experience of all Americans. Earle and Clarke comment on the structural powers of American nationalism by stating that “the truth of the nation matters very little as long as the image of Americanism and ‘American values’, whatever they may be, is upheld”, but makes the point that “‘America as a unified ideal exists as discourse, in the minds of her citizens and each citizen’s ideal is different.’”⁶⁸⁷

Taking into account the many different ways American citizens perceive America and American national identities; it is possible to identify discourses that are more dominant than others. Samuel Huntington gives a pertinent summarization of American self-image and its position in the world by emphasizing that America is seen as the land of opportunity and that American institutions “are seen to be open and democratic”. It is the land of the free and the home of the brave and it is led, in reference to the famous Kennedy speech, by a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. When the USA commit atrocities domestically or in other countries, Americans shape their perception so “they cannot see any gap between the unpleasant facts of political institutions and power in the United States and the values of the American creed”. The discrepancies, according to Huntington, are strained out and avoided and the perceived image of the United States is that it “not only should be the land of liberty, equality, and justice for all; it actually is”.⁶⁸⁸

There has been a lot of research on humor and satire after the 9/11 attacks. One finding was the common usage of American symbols in visual jokes attacking Bin Laden after 9/11 such as the Stars and Stripes, the American eagle, Uncle Sam, McDonald’s golden arch, the Statue of Liberty, but also references to the *Terminator* and *Star Wars* franchises, who are imbued with a sense of national importance.⁶⁸⁹ A global popular culture that transcended national boundaries emerged through the popularization and proliferation of Internet culture after the millennium and subsequently in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Like with the comedy and satire culture that emerged after 9/11, however, it has its basis in American culture and most of its references are also American.⁶⁹⁰ Hall points out that globalization is not an abstract force, the global, transnational culture is

⁶⁸⁶ Billig 1995, p. 75.

⁶⁸⁷ Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 6.

⁶⁸⁸ Huntington 1981, quoted in Mehring 2010, p. 6.

⁶⁸⁹ Kuipers 2011, p. 35.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

predominantly American, presenting “what is essentially an American conception of the world”.⁶⁹¹ Billig states that “[t]he global culture itself has a national dimension, as the symbols of the United States appear as universal symbols”, and that American scholars often forget that they write about the nation of America and not universality when they do research on different aspects of the USA.⁶⁹² This is evident in the use of “The World” as meaning just America, like in the World Series of baseball which is a national championship but stakes a universal claim, and it harkens back to the seemingly self-conscious cut from the world to America in the opening of *Jerry Maguire*.⁶⁹³

The American cultural domination over the world is made evident if you look closer. An American star is a star, a French or Italian star is a French or Italian star.⁶⁹⁴ America as place in movies and TV is “here” where “we” live and the omnipresence of Americanness in American texts is so universal that it is often rendered invisible.⁶⁹⁵ These notions of American exceptionalism and America as norm are dominant structures in America but influences large parts of the rest of the world. American cultural outputs like film and television generally enhances these connections, but there are exceptions that offer subversion and resistance to these notions.

Archer and Temporality

Changes that connote the passage of time are rare in animated sitcom, but they do occur. Animation allows child characters to stay the same age if needed, without the hassle of child actors aging out of their roles. In the thirty-six seasons of *The Simpsons* that have aired to this date, Lisa has become a vegetarian, Ned Flander’s two wives have passed, and Apu and Manjula have had octuplets, all permanent changes to the narration of the show, but exceptions more than regular occurrences.⁶⁹⁶ Davis et al uses TV Tropes to explain different time structures in animated sitcoms when they distinguish between a show being “frozen in time” when neither characters nor setting evolves, and in “comic-book time” the illusion of time passing is constructed where characters stay the same age while settings

⁶⁹¹ Hall 1991, p. 28 and Hall 1991a, quoted in Billig 1995, p. 149.

⁶⁹² Billig 1995, pp. 11 and 144-145.

⁶⁹³ Ibid, p. 148

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 149.

⁶⁹⁵ Billig, p. 150, McKee, p. 179.

⁶⁹⁶ Davis et al 2015.

change. This is also referred to as a “floating timeline”, but Davis et al nuances that phrase to mean a lack of fixed timeframe for both period and duration.⁶⁹⁷

This can cause problems and continuity errors for a show like *The Simpsons* that has been on the air for almost four decades when they decide to include temporal references in their episodes, as with the flashback episodes of Homer and Marge’s life before the children that took place in the 1970s in season 2 and in the 1990s in season 19.⁶⁹⁸ The difference between temporality in *The Simpsons* and in *Archer*, however, is that *The Simpsons* employs a floating timeline that uses very few specific temporal markers, while *Archer* uses numerous temporal markers that are distinctly from different time periods simultaneously. *The Simpsons* tries to keep the show temporally indistinguishable apart from a few nods here and there, while *Archer* is consciously and self-consciously temporally specific, but where the temporal specificities do not line up with realistic time. Joe Thorogood quotes Neal Holman describing *Archer* as “set in a ‘vague, endless Cold War Era’ which allows it to ‘cherry pick the stuff we like and ignore the elements that we don’t. We can have muscle cars from the Seventies, computers from the Eighties and cellphones from the nineties.”⁶⁹⁹ Elements from different time periods in *Archer* are not examples of continuity error, they are a conscious choice and that has many interesting implications.

When discussing the concept of hybridization, Ihab Hassan concludes that postmodernism with its loose relationship to frames, borders, and logic, can quote from different temporalities, meaning that it can become a mixture of different time aspects simultaneously, something that Fredric Jameson, according to Hassan, misses in his description of postmodernism as something exclusively contemporary. Hassan highlights the comic and absurdist ethos of postmodernism that like Bakhtin’s notion of carnival “riotously embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, selflessness, irony and hybridization”.⁷⁰⁰ He continues to state that “what Bakhtin calls novel or carnival – that is, antisystem – might stand for postmodernism itself, or at least for its ludic and subversive elements that promise renewal.”⁷⁰¹ Bakhtin uses the phrase chronotope to describe how configurations of time and space are represented in language and discourse and how the carnival reveled in opposing existing structures of time and space and disrupt the “protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal”, despite the carnival

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 176.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid, pp. 178-180.

⁶⁹⁹ Thorogood 2020.

⁷⁰⁰ Hassan 1987, p. 171, cmp Rose 1993, pp. 212-213.

⁷⁰¹ Hassan, pp. 10-11.

being bound by a specific temporality in its limited time frame.⁷⁰² It is worth noting the emphasis that Hassan and Bakhtin places on the disruptive potential of dislodged temporality. Stam writes of the chronotope that it is ideally suited for moving images where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole”. He also makes the interesting point that animation is specifically suited for discourse on the chronotope and temporality because “animators specifically construct the spatial and temporal indicators in their films in order to achieve a predetermined effect and their audiences adapt the films to their own uses”.⁷⁰³

At first glance, time in *Archer* passes regularly as the seasons progress. The characters do not change much in appearance for a show of fourteen seasons, but Lana and Archer’s daughter Abbiejean is born and grows up in time with the show, with roughly one season dropping every year. There is a temporal hiatus in seasons 8-10 where Archer is in a coma and the show allows itself to explore geographical and temporal locations outside of canon. Season 8 *Archer: Dreamland* is placed in late 1940s Los Angeles and is influenced by noir style, season 9 *Archer: Danger Island* is a jungle adventure set somewhere in French Polynesia during the 1930s, and season 10 is a retro-futuristic space opera indicative in the title *Archer: 1999*. When Archer wakes from the coma in the first episode of season 11, however, three years have passed in the story, and he has to adjust to the changes that have occurred during his absence. It does not take long watching the show to figure out that time does not work in the same way as it does in real life. The temporal setting of the show is never explicitly established but the default is present-day New York judging by buildings and architecture, pricing of character’s clothing, technology available like infra-red goggles and cell phones, and references made to modern pop culture and Internet phenomena like Wikipedia and Kickstarter.

In S03E04 *The Man from Jupiter* Burt Reynolds who dates Malory in the episode has gray hair and is modelled on the real-life actor’s appearance in 2011 when the episode was made. In S04E04 *Midnight Ron* Archer needs a passport to cross the American/Canadian border, which was not required until 2008. This, however, is just a starting point for the temporal elements of the show that often do not logically connect. Cars on the street and those used by the characters are often models from the 1970s. Archer’s butler Woodhouse fought in the First World War, which would make his birth fall somewhere around the turn of the century and mean that he is a good deal over 100 years old at the start of the show. Archer’s mother Malory is shown in a flashback to help the US government overthrow the Guatemalan regime when Archer was six years old, and since this happened in 1954, Archer would be over 60 when the show starts. Many efforts have been made by fans and online communities to pinpoint exactly when *Archer* is supposed to

⁷⁰² Gardiner 1992, p. 32.

⁷⁰³ Stam 1992, p. 11, see Crafton 2012, pp. 103-104 for further discussion.

take place, but the temporal fluidity in the show is a conscious choice and part of its aesthetic, comedic, and political delivery. *Archer* is not supposed to be a show that is set firmly in one time and in one place, it borrows from different historical eras and from different places as it sees fit, even using futuristic elements when needed.

Archer constantly uses parodic tools like self-conscious dialogue, exaggeration, misdirection, literalization, fourth wall breaks, and source text reiterations that go beyond pastiche. In S01E02 *Training Day* Archer keeps a gun in his underwear, which turns out to be a Chekhov, Russian made, 25 caliber, as a reference to the Russian playwright that said that if a gun is shown in the first act it must be fired in the third act. In S01E06 *Skorpio* Archer pulls out a grenade that was “hanging from a lampshade” as a reference to the concept of lampshading, which is when a film or television show consciously draws attention to a trope or a cliché, like pulling out weaponry from strange places whenever there is a need for it. In S04E11-12 *Sea Tunt 1 & 2* the supposedly non-diegetic music in the episode is recognized by Cheryl, who even draws attention to it by saying, “relax, it’s non-diegetic” and at one point shouting “Shut up John Williams!”. This parodic inversion of non-diegetic music turns diegetic when it functions as a subjective experience for Cheryl. We as an audience hear the music and filmic tradition teaches us that it is for emphasis and stylistic effect as it is commonly used, but through this parodic inversion, we hear it as it is playing in Cheryl’s head since she is the only one reacting to it in the episodes. There are many examples of self-conscious commentary on the show’s temporality, like in S02E03 *Blood Test* where Malory’s comment “My God, what year is this?” is met by Archer with a double layered “I know, right?” as response. In S03E08 *Lo Scandalo* Malory once again asks “What year to you think this is?” and Archer responds “I... yeah... exactly.”. The characters on the show acknowledge through these small hints that there is something unbalanced in the show’s temporality.

One interesting and telling aspect of the shifting temporality permeating the series is the use of technology from different parts of history. In S01E01 *Mole Hunt*, Malory is revealed to be having an affair with Nikolaj Jakov, head of the KGB (that was dismantled in 1991). They use landline phones, Jakov’s with a design popular in the 1960s, not cell phones. The use of satellite phones in the show is more common than regular cell phones, and when cell phones are used, they usually look like models used in the 1990s. However, later in the season Jakov talks about life in the Soviet Union while on video call, with great image quality and real time rendering, with Malory in America to entice her to move in with him. Computers are used, but they are often stationary and use graphics and designs that are reminiscent of the early 1980s and works as reiterations of computer-based films like *WarGames* (Badham 1983) and *Tron* (Lisberger 1982). When Malory issues a burn notice on Archer at the end of the first season, it is done by telex machine, and in S02E01 *Swiss Miss* the assignment is to protect Konrad Schlotz,

who has made his fortune on controlling the Videotex industry in Europe. However, satellite surveillance, radar technology, microphones and communication devices on missions, hologram technology, and video communication are all based on contemporary technology and in some cases even futuristic technology. The show is a media historian's dream, with media and communication technology from several different eras and periods used simultaneously, sometimes for aesthetic purposes like in the reiterations of retro 1980's era computer graphics, sometimes for parodic purposes like having a millionaire client with a fortune based on the obsolete Videotex industry or the inclusion of sentient copy machine and toaster robot Milton in season six.

When transportation is used in the show, it is also reiterated from different historical eras. Cars on the street of New York or the cars of President Gustavo Calderón in San Marcos which are shown in S05E11 *Palace Intrigue Part 2* are rarely newer models than from the 1970s, and Archer drives a 1978 Ferrari and a 1970 El Camino. In S02E11 *Jeu Monegasque* the agency is on an assignment in Monaco during the Formula 1 Grand Prix and the cars that are competing are far from the contemporary versions, but not the versions that ran the Monaco Grand Prix in the 1970s either. The cars in the race in that episode are reiterations of models used in the late 1950s and early 1960s. When trains are shown in the show, they also reiterate different time periods, this time with a personal connection to Cheryl, whose Tunt family fortune was built on railroads and who still owns a railroad company. In S03E06 *The Limited*, the train they ride on is reiterated from versions from the 1970s and there are mentions of the original Orient Express that shut down operations in 1977. In S01E07 *Skytanic* the ISIS agency is sent on a mission to locate and defuse a high-tech bomb which is to be used to blow up a mode of transportation. The temporal kicker is that the mode of transportation is an airship taking the passengers on a luxury air cruise, with its buoyancy stemming from helium and not hydrogen gas, which is a constant source of confusion to Archer who is absolutely certain that it will explode in a fiery inferno like the Hindenburg. Helium has been the preferred gas used in airships since the 1960s, but since they were supplanted by airplanes due to their slow pace, airships have not been used for personal transports. Instead, they have been used when a long airtime and a stationary position are important, such as for aerial observations, camera platforms, geological surveys and for advertising purposes.

In *Skytanic* the luxury airship Excelsior takes its maiden voyage, and the interior is more reminiscent of the 1920s or 1930s with retro wooden furniture and vintage maps on the walls, reiterating the airship scene from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Spielberg 1989). Another vehicle for air travel, the Goldhawk in S12E02 *Lowjacked*, is a luxurious airplane that used to contain a pangender brothel but is now repurposed for luxury trips. Its interior also includes a sauna and massage area, a casino and a pet spa and dog hotel, which temporally hits closer to the modern day. The plane is introduced through a parody of a luxury product

commercial, which in style, tone, and appearance and hairstyle of the hostess on screen is also very modern. If the different communication and transportation technologies are plucked from different parts of the past, however, the same cannot be said about the weaponry in the show.

If media and transport technology are often archaic and nostalgic, weapons technology usually remains contemporary and even futuristic on many occasions. All manners of semi-automatic and automatic guns, rifles, machine guns, missile launchers, smart bombs, time bombs, remote detonated bombs, hand grenades, and drones are used during the series' run. More often than not there is a futuristic weapon of sorts, in a slight parodic exaggeration of the Bond franchise and its fascination with weapons and gadgets, that is about to be used or change hands in order to be used and therefore drives the plot in the episode. In the two-part closing storyline of season three, S03E12-13 *Space Race part 1-2*, the M41 Plasma Rifle is described as the futuristic weapon "that is here today". In S11E03 *Helping Hands* the agency tries to steal an experimental exoskeleton from inventor billionaire Hands, and in S12E07-08 *Colt Express* and *Mission: Difficult* a working fusion reactor could solve the world's energy crisis if it just falls into the right hands.

The undisputed Master of Technology, however, is series' regular and resident mad scientist Algernop Krieger. He is revealed to be a descendant of a former nazi scientist who escaped to Brazil which explains his ability to speak fluent Portuguese. Throughout the show, his various scientific experiments usually wreak some kind of havoc and often drives the plot along either as he facilitates or obstructs a solution to the problem at hand. Examples include his hologram girlfriend Mitsuko Miyazumi, bionic legs and arm for Ray, constructing the robotic frame for antagonist Barry in a *The Six Million Dollar Man* (1974-1978) parody, resurrecting Archer's love interest Katya as a cyborg, constructing a hover craft and a U-boat, a magnetic pulse generator, a thermostat that goes rogue in a parodic reiteration of HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick 1968), a modified Ludovico brainwashing technique parodying *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick 1971), crypto currency Kriegerrand, brain implants, cloning technology, and radioactive pigs. Outside the retrofuturism of season 10 *Archer: 1999*, the show revels in parodying not only the techno-gadgetry play of the Bond franchise, but also specific examples of futuristic technological depictions like *The Six Million Dollar Man*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *A Clockwork Orange*.

Older versions of futurism are often thankful targets for parody since the discrepancy between vision and reality often has been established at the time of parody, but parody is used in an additional capacity than comedy with a polemic edge here. By specifically referencing source texts speculating about the temporality of technology, *Archer* makes a self-conscious comment on its own dislodged temporality and signals a revelry in its uncertainty. The temporal flux is the point. It is both style in its retro aesthetics and function in its comment on how

things can always change at the same time as it has always been the same. The weaponry of *Archer* and the technological experiments of Krieger stretch the show's temporality into the future and further destabilize normative readings of time, but also of space and place. This comes to the forefront in the show's depiction of international politics.

A temporality in flux has interesting implications and where it gets more interesting from the perspective of national identity and American national identity is in the representations of geopolitics in the show. The exoticized version of foreign locations from the Bond films or action films in exotic locations like *Fast Five* (Lin 2011) or *Bad Boys II* (Bay 2003) is often parodied in *Archer*, sometimes through outright parody and sometimes through subtle changes. Cuba is a recurring example that is used in different ways depending on the needs of the episode in question. In S01E03 *Diversity Hire* Cuba is used as ground zero for a new missile crisis. Wilhelm Schmeck, the inventor of silent submarine propulsion system the Whisper Drive, plans to sell it to Cuban Naval Intelligence in South Beach, Miami, which would enable them to place undetected missiles "right off Miami Beach". This is a reference to the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 where mid-range missiles were found in Cuba with the capacity to hit targets in the USA, leading to a standoff between the USA and the Soviet Union which was resolved before turning into outright nuclear war. Moving the threat of the missiles from the Cuban mainland to the shores of Miami Beach is a parodic escalation of a threat that was sufficient in its original form, and in the episode, Cuba is acting independently from Russian influence. Instead, it is China that is invoked as an external threat and potential buyer of the Whisper Drive when the Cuban hit squad is neutralized. In S01E05 *Honeypot* and continuing in S05E02 *A Kiss While Dying*, Cuba is used as a centerpiece in the modern drug trade. Season five is dubbed *Archer: Vice* and it is where the agency is no longer an espionage agency but instead try to sell off an enormous load of cocaine that they somehow possess.

In *A Kiss While Dying* they travel to Miami to meet a buyer, which is introduced by Lana exhaustedly asking: "What's in Miami?" and Malory responding, "Besides 90% of all mosquitos and Cubans on Earth?" to which Archer replies, "Sounds high." Outside exaggeration and understated response, the episode describes the tight relationship with the American city of Miami and the Cuban population there and in Cuba in present day. Cuban secret agent Ramón Limón, who is introduced in *Honeypot*, is the contact that wants to buy 20 kilos of cocaine with the promise to buy more for the Cuban government if the quality is sufficient, but he double-crosses Archer and steals the drugs after a convoluted plot where he fakes his own death. The death scene is a parodic reiteration of action movie death scenes where Ramón receives a kiss from Archer as his last wish, and the final scene where Ramón's partners comments on the stupidity of the plan works as a parodic inversion of heist film codas like *The Sting* (Hill 1973) or *Ocean's 12* (Soderbergh 2004). In *Archer*, Cuba can represent the Batista and American

casinos in the early 1950s, Castro with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the missile crisis and keystone of the Cold War from the 1960s to the 2000s, and the present-day drug trade and Guantanamo Bay detention center, and it can be all those things simultaneously and in parallel.

Archer not only quotes from different time periods, as an example of the postmodern lucidity that Ihab Hassan talks about, but it exists in different time periods simultaneously. Sometimes this makes for a neat gag or a self-conscious nod, but sometimes it has further implications. In the world of *Archer*, the Cold War is simultaneously a thing of the past and highly contemporary and relevant in present day. The KGB and Stasi both exist and are deemed as probable culprits in an attempt on Archer's life in season 1, suggesting the existence of the Soviet Union and East Germany. In the headquarters of the KGB are portraits of Lenin, Stalin, and Nikolai Khrushchev who was head of state in the 1960s and died in 1971. The country is generally referred to as Russia, and there is a presence of Russian oligarchs that made their fortune with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989-1991. In the last episode of the series the final showdown is in Sochi post Winter Olympics (held there in 2014) and the villain plan is to bring back the cold war between Russia and the USA to bring back order and stability in the world. The country in the show is not first the Soviet Union and then modern day Russia, it is the Soviet Union and Russia simultaneously, just as it is the Soviet Union during the first cold war with the Cuban missile crisis and European buffer states, the Soviet Union during the second cold war with armed space race and invasion of Afghanistan, Russia of the 1990s with anarchic flash sale of state assets and the rise of Russian oligarchs, and the contemporary Russia of the final episode, all simultaneously and not only correlated.

The representation of the Soviet Union and Russia is an amalgamation of different parts of its history, reiterated on the basis of narratological need rather than temporal accuracy. The reiterations of the Soviet Union and Russia are examples of parody of their representations in historic film and television, and they are used to elicit a specific time and place like the 1980s Soviet Union or 2020s Russia, or even modern day Turkmenistan in S04E06 *Once Bitten* where Archer, Ray, and Cyril are on a mission to pay off the country's leader Gorbagun Gorbanguly, a direct reference to real life President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow who rose to power in the country in 2007, to destroy a pipeline running through the country that is essential to Russia. It ties into how Hassan describes hybridization in the sense of postmodern storytelling, that it has the possibility of taking simultaneous quotations from different time periods "not to imitate but to expand the past in the present", which in several of these examples from *Archer* is highlighted and played with.

In constructing temporally destabilized storytelling in the representation of national identities like Cuba and Russia, they are contrasted to American national identity. The US becomes the Cold War antagonists to the Soviet Union, the

military industrial behemoth vying over political and cultural control over the world. At the same time, it becomes the modern-day law enforcement protecting its borders and waging a seemingly unending war on drugs against exotified countries like Cuba and regions like Central America. San Marcos in season five is a stand-in for Central American countries in general and specifically Nicaragua during the Iran-Contra affair. This situates the fictional country not only geographically as it is placed in Central America through several mentions of its location, but also temporally as a Central American country in the 1980s due to its underhanded political affiliation with the American government and the Reagan administration specifically, even though Reagan is not mentioned outright in the episodes. Archer's quip about Iran being involved in this and if they "at least got some hostages out" refers directly to the Iran-Contra affair.

As a parody of the spy genre, action movies, and the Bond franchise specifically, *Archer* highlights how the use of exotification and international travel in the source texts work to emphasize notions of American exceptionalism, and by exaggeration, inversion, misdirection, and plain reiteration, it changes the way we view the USA and how we view the rest of the world. I argue that through the use of temporal and spatial instabilities, the parody of *Archer* decentralizes the USA as the obvious focal point of the world. Reiterating different historic eras and specific places and countries in those eras dislodges the temporal stability of the show. It is replaced by the possibility of temporal play that can be all eras and none at the same time, expanding the past into the present and subsequently undermining the stability of American political sovereignty. In a world where time and space are refused stability, who is to say that the institutions and nations depending on temporal and spatial stability and the sedimentation of tradition cannot also be denied stability.

Archer and Internationality

Even though it is based in the US and uses it as the most common backdrop for episodes, *Archer* is a thoroughly international television show. Throughout its run, *Archer* has had missions in Cuba, San Marino, Monaco, Polynesia, Colombia, Canada, Turkmenistan, North Korea, Morocco, Italy, Vatican City, Japan, Argentina, Russia, Switzerland, Liberia, England, Moldova, Transnistria, Singapore, The Cayman Island, Antarctica, Central Africa, and on Ibiza. The agency confronts adversaries from Ireland, Germany, Russia, Spain, Cuba, Nova Scotia, Albania, Mexico, Pakistan, Belgium, South Africa, Canada, China, Nigeria, and also fight with the Irish mafia, the Yakuza, and the Cali Cartel. They try to save targets from the UK, Sweden, and Greece and travel to fictitious countries in Polynesia (Pangu), Latin America (Manatina), Central America (San Marcos), and the Arab Peninsula (Durhan). The internationality of the show goes

beyond visiting other countries, though. Even though the US is the starting point and base of the show and of the spy agency, the perspective that is used is international in a way that is rarely seen in American television. It is important to remember that internationalism is not the opposite of nationalism, since it takes for granted a world of national borders, but in presenting alternatives to the hegemony of American nationalism and America as norm, *Archer* shows through its internationalism that subversion of and resistance to that norm is possible.⁷⁰⁴

Using the last episode of the series S14E09 *Into the Cold* as an example, it is remarkable how much international politics it contains, even if it ranges the length of three regular episodes. The episode starts with Ray and Pam watching a televised press conference where the Secretary General of the United Nations talks about a motion to ban all private spy agencies. When Pam asks why they are the target of ire once again, Ray says “Well, the North Koreans said we’re an excellent example of the fatal contradictions of capitalism.” to which Pam replies “Damn! Why do the people who hate us have the best arguments?” Ray then says: “I mean... the easy answer is because they’re right. But the correct more complex answer is... uhhh... very complex?”. Joining them are British former Interpol agent Zara Khan and Archer, waking up with two escorts in the next room. After receiving a brief from Lana over video, he asks “What’s the mission? Also, what country is this?” It turns out they are in Brazil, where a bunker buster bomb developed by Chinese scientists is to be sold to the highest bidder of international terrorist groups. The gang manages to make the Chinese and Brazilian representatives shoot each other and get their hands on the bomb, which is then supposedly turned over to the CIA via helicopter, but it turns out the CIA operative Slater (voiced by Christian Slater) has gone rogue to steal the bomb. He tells Zara Khan to “act like your government, stand behind the Americans and nod while your influence steadily wanes.” Archer realizes that Slater is not CIA and crashes the helicopter on the Copacabana, decapitating the Jesus statue in the process, prompting Pam to state “Well, it’s not like it’s the worst thing that ever happened to him.” Former KGB agent and now cyborg Katya shoots and catches Archer on the beach, and Slater along with a former head of the KGB tortures him. They are part of a group of disgruntled former intelligence operatives from all over the world gathered under the name Silverwolf. Their plan is to bring back the tension and relative stability of the Cold War to infuse some purpose and meaning into the world once again, and they plan to do this by blowing up the Sochi dam in Russia, killing Russian and Chinese diplomatic delegates gathered at a luxury hotel there, and blaming it on the Americans.

The final showdown takes place on top of the dam, but prior to that in a previous scene a representative of the American government commenting on the ban on private spy agencies conclude his statement with “In the words of my people: how

⁷⁰⁴ Billig 1995, p. 61.

‘bout them Cowboys!’”. Meanwhile, in a scene where the gang crashes into the meeting of diplomats and dignitaries from all over the world, their question of “Who here speaks English?” is met by a forest of hands, to which Zara quips “Wow, thanks cultural imperialism!”. The episode concludes with an epilogue where the gang spread out, Krieger and Cheryl planning to populate the moon with werewolves and Lana packing up the agency when she is offered a fee by the CIA and MI6 to search for Archer, who is in the very next room playing with their daughter AbbyJean. Archer leaves and meets Pam at the elevator, convincing her to join him as shadow players on the international scene. The episode, and the entire series, concludes with Pam asking Archer “So, where to?” Archer replies: “Tangers.” while Pam asks: “What have we got there?” to which Archer replies: “Not a fucking clue.” to which Pam comments: “Perfect.” and the elevator door closes on them, and the credits roll. Even with this run-through of the massive number of different nations and nationalities in play in a single episode, many are still left out as they are only mentioned, referenced, or alluded to in passing. However, it is a poignant example of how present the concept of nations and the crossing of borders is in the series. At first glance, this would seem to emphasize and strengthen the presence of and need for nations and national identity, but I believe it is something worth examining in more detail, to see what the show actually does with its depictions of nationality on a global arena.

International Sports

American sports is a giant entertainment industry, but it has a narrow scope and is constituted by relatively few disciplines. The four traditionally major American team sports are (American) football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey, where at least football and baseball have historically been tightly connotated with American national identity, baseball famously referred to as America’s pastime. Connotation to American national identity is also true for basketball after the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona and the popularity of the national Dream Team, although basketball also comes with more urban culture connotations and is a more internationally popular sport.⁷⁰⁵ The top league of competitive ice hockey in the world is the National Hockey League, which consists of American and Canadian teams, but even though the majority of the teams are American, it is a sport that is more popular in countries like Canada, Sweden, Finland, and Russia and in recent years it has been surpassed in popularity in America by the world’s largest sport football, or soccer as it is known in America.

Other sports that are popular in America and are connected to the nation in the sense that they are referred to as American sports include motor racing like

⁷⁰⁵ Sorek and White 2016, Nathan 2014, Grundy et al 2014.

NASCAR and IndyCar, combat sports like wrestling, boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA), and sports that are popular in America but also have a great international interest, like golf, tennis, track & field, and swimming. American sports is a global industry but at the same time an isolated phenomenon where the USA does not compete against other nations and the local is represented as the global like in the World Series final, a final game series played between two teams from Major League Baseball, a league with exclusively American teams with the sole exception of the Toronto Blue Jays from Canada. It is an example of American as norm in thought and action, the literalization of the city upon a hill where it is taken for granted that all the world's eyes are directed at America.⁷⁰⁶ Sports in general is otherwise a truly international arena where national pride and national specificities and connotations play big parts in what makes it popular. Invoking sport disciplines in a narrative almost always says something about nation since most sports come with nationality and national identity attached. The representation of sports in *Archer* is interesting because it refuses the American city upon a hill as point of departure in that it rarely stems from an American perspective on sports, but more usually a European and sometimes a Latin American or East Asian perspective, and sometimes an international perspective not rooted in any specific national identity.

Ray Gillette, before he became a field agent for ISIS, used to be an alpine skier and competed in the Olympics, winning a bronze medal in the giant slalom. In S11E07 *Caught Napping* the silver medalist from that race, German national Gerswan Ramschluss, turns out to be the villain of the episode, orchestrating the kidnapping of Lana and Archer's daughter Abbyjean. Ramschluss refers to Ray as Braunie and wants Ray to call him Silbie as the German slang words for bronze and silver. Even though American athletes have excelled historically in alpine skiing, like the Mahre brothers Phil and Steve, Bode Miller and Ted Ligety, but especially female skiers like Andrea Mead Lawrence, Lindsay Vonn and Mikaela Shiffrin, it has never been an American sport. It is instead more connected to winter sport countries of the European Alps and Scandinavia. *Caught Napping* takes place mostly in the upscale alpine town of St. Moritz, which is the annual host of a horse racing contest on snow called The White Turf International Horse Races of St. Moritz, which is a real thing and has been since 1907. In the episode it is described by Cheryl as "part of the European snob circus". Cheryl as a Tunt has extensive knowledge of the uberwealthy elite and their traditions and rituals. References are also made to Olympic winter sports like biathlon and the luge, sports that are almost exclusively European at an elite level.

When Torvald Utne, the Swedish diplomat working for the UN, is introduced in S01E04 *Killing Utne*, the first question asked about him is if he is the famous shot putter, another sport that is not commonly connected to the US. When racing

⁷⁰⁶ Billig 1995, p. 151.

is used as a backdrop in S02E11 *Jeu Monegasque* it is not the American NASCAR or IndyCar series that are reiterated, but the Formula 1 series that is the most popular outside the US and specifically in Europe. The episode set at the Monaco Grand Prix does not use modern F1 cars, but models that were used for racing during the 1950s and 1960s. By changing this, the mise-en-scène of the episode reiterates the European 1960s jet-set where the F1 Grand Prix series was a part of elite sophisticated culture more so than the commodified behemoth it has become today. In *Honeypot*, Archer is drawn into a game of jai-alai by former Cuban spy Ramón. Jai-alai is originally a Basque sport where the aim is to use an oblong hand-held wicker to bounce a ball off a glass wall at extremely high speeds. Archer is first disdainful of the sport and confident that he will triumph over a middle-aged and somewhat out of shape gay man, even though he has never played the game before. Quickly he takes a ball to the head from his opponent and is knocked unconscious, gaining respect for both the game and for Ramón in the process. There is a callback to this in S03E05 *El Contador*, when the episode villain Calzado claims that “Tomorrow I will hunt the most dangerous game in the world” referring to humans as prey as a reference to many film and television iterations, but primarily *The Most Dangerous Game* (Pichel and Schoedsack 1932). Archer responds “Jai-alai?”, which is part reference to the earlier episode and part reference to jai-alai often being described as the most dangerous sport in the world due to the velocity the hard rubber ball used can attain.

During the show’s run, none of the major American sports are used or even mentioned for any kind of important function. When sports are reiterated, they are used to communicate a nostalgic air of class and sophistication and a strong sense of internationalism and Europeanism plucked from various parts of the decades following World War II. The F1 Grand Prix is used instead of NASCAR, the Olympic Games are used instead of the Super Bowl, biathlon is mentioned over basketball, jai-alai is used instead of baseball, and upper-class sporting activities include White Turf at St. Moritz instead of Golf at Augusta International. Choices are constantly made to avoid American sports and focus on European or international sports, often reiterating examples of the past to further undermine the hegemony of commodified sports that we see today.

Subverting America as Norm

Outside the realm of sports, several nationalities are referenced and their representations or their relationship to the US are parodied. Scandinavia is introduced in *Archer* through the inclusion of Torvald Utne, chairman of the UN intelligence service, and represented as the neutral and UN friendly region keen on diplomatic solutions as opposed to the more hands-on and violent alternatives that ISIS and other spy agencies use. The Scandinavian role in the show is as a

neutral pawn in the international chess game of superpowers and their agencies. In S11E01 *The Orpheus Gambit* the international art thief Peregrine that the agency is after turns out to be Interpol contact person and Belgian national Bruchstein and when Archer finds out he expresses his anger in this exchange:

Archer: "You waffle based... wait, you're still Belgian right?"

Bruchstein: "Yes, but I was raised in the States."

Archer: "You lambic gurgling limburger dick cheese."

Bruchstein: "Those are silly stereotypes."

Archer: "Are you guys Flemish or Walloons? That would help my specificity."

Archer is simultaneously disinterested in people around him but often weirdly astute about historical, political, cultural, or societal references. In S13E01 *The Big Con*, when taunting a competing agent in a skills competition, Archer quips that "The treaty of Versailles called, it wants its total failure to achieve any of its stated goals back. Also, it's sorry about Europe." In S13E06 *Bank Run at Mr. Bank's Bank*, Archer makes a reference to Etruscans and then snaps at Ray on the topic of banking when he says, "I didn't invent banks, Ray. So direct your shitty comments to the Assyrians, or possibly Sumerians. Indus Valley also in the mix!". The multifaceted nature of Archer's references not only include national specificity, but historical national specificity connected to the invention and establishment of financial structures.

An example of the subversion of American exceptionalism can be found in S05E04 *House Call* where Archer questions who really uses the metric system and receives the answer that it is the entire world except the US, Liberia, and Burma. Archer, who oscillates between earnest criticism of America and stern belief in American exceptionalism, is baffled by this information because "you never think of these other two as having their shit together". Another example of the duality of Archer as a character can be found in S04E11 *The Papal Chase* where the agency is tasked to save the Pope from an assassination attempt from his own Swiss Guard. Archer makes plenty of quips on the ridiculousness of the Swiss Guard uniform and of Italy in general, including the difficulty in finding a decent car for a getaway. This causes him to remark that "Italy is so gay" in a display of homophobia representative of masculine heterosexuality, but then he immediately turns to the Pope and asks him "Speaking of, Pope, what's with the gay thing?". Archer has no problem using homophobia or homophobic slurs as he often does in conversation with Ray, but when placed in the same car as a religious figure head, his first question is on the compulsory heteronormativity of the Catholic Church,

which he finds problematic. It points to Archer being a character who wants to be left to his own devices and has no problem with other people minding their own business as they see fit, as long as he can make fun of them when he wants to. The Italian setting and the inclusion of a religious figurehead who is also a head of state including his bodyguard and other national specifics of Vatican City and Italy contributes to the international perspective that runs through *Archer*.

“The Swiss” is the primary antagonist of season 13, and it is a league of elite operatives who, according to the narrative, is responsible for the 1929 stock market crash, the Cuban missile crisis, and the Cola wars of the 1980s. They call themselves “the invisible hand” and according to Malory’s description it is like the entire country of Switzerland, famous for its neutrality and peaceful nature, “extracted all their warlike impulses and injected them into a tiny group of people”. In S13E03 *Saturday* they are going after the Cayman Islands because the rich are banking there now instead of banking in Switzerland. Archer does not miss a chance to taunt or mock the Swiss, in *Caught Napping* he says that “Switzerland is basically the jazz of countries, it just keeps going and going and nobody has any idea why”, and in *Saturday* he shouts “Haha, stupid Swiss! It’s the battle of Grauholz all over again.” as a reference to the historic battle in 1798 where the Bernese opposition to Napoleon was ultimately thwarted. However, in *Saturday* the Swiss are also referred to as “fast learners” with a “superior educational system” and in S14E08 *Breaking Fabian* the Swiss prison system is referred to as the best in the world, where “they really focus on rehabilitating the whole person” as opposed to the American prison system. This echoes a previous reference to British prisons in S12E03 *London Time* when Archer deduces that they are probably very nice in comparison to American prisons. Just like the comparisons with Canada and Canadian society which I addressed in chapter three, comparisons between America and other countries are often made in favor of the other country.

But even when the show or Archer as a character makes fun of a country, and even when they do it from a decidedly American perspective, the fact that they focus to such an extent on a country outside the US shifts the perspective from exclusively American to international. Mocking Belgian burglars with geographic and culinary specificity, Italian and Vatican citizens with observations on spatial limitations in both vehicles and sexuality, and Switzerland and the Swiss based on accurate references to historic battles and contemporary educational system, expands the world that Archer moves in and, inevitably, the world that we as audience inhabit. It is an American show, but the perspective is very consciously constructed to not be exclusively the perspective of the American nation looking out, the citizens of the city on the hill looking down on its neighboring settlements, but on the US and its inhabitants, in this case the members of a private espionage agency, as one piece of the international puzzle of countries and nationalities that exists. The shift in perspective is sometimes small, sometimes more prominent,

but it is important in that it helps to subvert America as the norm of the world and places it as a country and a nation among others.

Another part of subverting notions of America as the norm of the world is to criticize the US as nation and the dealings of its representatives, as it plays into the subversion of American exceptionalism and America as norm, especially when coming from an American television show. In S02E04 *Pipeline Fever* the eco terrorist who wants to blow up a pipeline on American soil say that victory for him will only come “when Americans stop destroying the earth, just so they can drive bigger cars, build bigger houses and eat bigger food” and when Archer answers “So like... never.”, the terrorist replies “Yeah... God, that’s depressing.” It is an honest and stark comment of American consumerist society and the stranglehold that capitalism hold on American society.

When it is revealed that resident scientist Algernop Krieger, who is fluent in Portuguese and has a German sounding last name, actually is the son of a Nazi scientist, Cyril tries to exert influence by taking this information to Malory who shrugs it off by saying:

“JFK:s father was a bootlegger, so what. [...] Do you like powdered orange beverages [...], microwave ovens, Neil Armstrong, hook-and-loose fasteners [...]? None of those things would have been possible without the Nazi scientists we brought over after World War II. [...] After the war ended, we were snatching up Kraut scientists like hot cakes. You don’t believe me walk into NASA sometime and yell Heil Hitler they all jump straight up.”

Even though this comes from a character like Malory who certainly does not shy away from morally and ethically dubious actions, there is no sugar coating of the history of American moral flexibility to yield results. For Malory and for America, result is everything that matters, and if corners need to be cut and people need to be sacrificed because of it, so be it.

I touched on criticism of American foreign policy and activity in Chapter 3 when discussing the San Marcos storyline at the end of season five, but it is not the only time the show references real life activities of the US government or the CIA. In S06E02 *Three to Tango* Archer says to antagonist and in this episode temporary ally Conway Stern “Wait, isn’t Argentina our ally?” To which Conway Stern replies, “You’d think, right? After we threw them that lovely coup?”. In S13E08 *Dough, Ray, Me* American troops try to take control of the fictitious Latin American country Manatina and dispose of its democratically elected and very successful socialist President Lucero. CIA operative Slater denies American presence in the country by saying, “it’s the CIA’s policy not to intervene in other countries’ internal politics” and when Lana answers “...oor you’re hoping this mess will get her deposed and you replace her with a right-wing dictator” Slater replies “touché” and Archer fills in with, “I think it’s pronounced Pinochet”, as a

clear nod to American culpability in the Chilean military coup in 1971. In S13E07 *Distraction Action* the absurdity of American domestic laws of civil forfeiture, where someone accused of a crime does not have to be guilty for the FBI to seize their assets, is highlighted. In S03E08 *Lo Scandalo* the Italian Prime Minister is murdered in Malory's apartment and she tells the story of how they met during "Operation Gladio", a real clandestine operation in post war Europe, which began as an operation to impede Soviet influence over Europe but according to Malory "turned into a crypto fascist shit show starring Alan Dulles". In S14E04 *Chill Barry* Archer mocks British espionage agent Zara Khan, when she offers criticism of America, with "Yeah, too bad we're not living in the soggy remains of an empire", to which Khan replies, "give it time".

The most scathing criticism of American foreign activities, however, comes in S05E07 *Smugglers' Blues* where Archer, Ray, and Cyril are trying to sell cocaine to the Cali Cartel because no-one else wants to buy wholesale from them and Ray admonishes Archer to not compare their activities now to intelligence work. Archer then replies with the following angry tirade on the nature of intelligence work and the role it has played in contemporary American foreign policy:

"Don't worry, I won't! Because selling cocaine to cocaine dealers doesn't really compare to helping overthrow democratically elected governments, like the US did in Guatemala, Chile, Nicaragua... uh, oh! Iran! Because spoiler alert! Those didn't really work out so great. But that's okay, because I'm pinning my hopes for the future on the next big shipment of Stinger missiles to that ragtag bunch of Mujahedin heroes in Afghanistan!"

Archer here offers a slightly abbreviated checklist of some of the American political activities in foreign countries and the consequences that those interventions have had, and it is the clearest example of Archer as a character being fully aware of the corruption, greed, and lust for power that controls aspects of American foreign political activity and that despite the fact that he is a spy working with the US as a base and who often does espionage work for the American government in some form, he holds the American government and American institutions in very low regard. What is interesting in Archer's tirade is that since he references real events in American foreign politics history, he positions himself temporally after the American intrusion in Nicaraguan politics which happened during the 1980s and concluded in 1990 with the shift in political leadership in the country. However, as he references the Mujahedin in Afghanistan, a coalition of local guerilla groups that with the help of American financing managed to defeat the Soviet Union and force them to leave the country, in a future sense, meaning that the faith of the country is not yet decided, he places himself temporally before 1989 when Soviet troops left the country. It is an example of the temporal fluidity and play that permeates the show, but this time the knowledge that we possess

from a contemporary perspective is what gives the tirade a further humoristic and satirical edge. *Archer* references the Mujahedin as heroes in present day in the episode, but it is delivered with self-conscious parodic exaggeration with the hindsight knowledge that the Mujahedin in Afghanistan morphed into the Taliban movement when American funding ceased, and that the US would end up invading Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks in 2001, repeating the same mistakes that the Soviet Union made in the country. The show uses this temporal discrepancy to deliver a tongue-in-cheek criticism of American foreign policy and to satirically poke a hole in the image of America as the greatest country on Earth.

Conclusion

American exceptionalism is the notion that America is the greatest country on earth and that it is a foregone conclusion that it is the country that everyone on earth would want to live in if they had a choice. The city upon a hill is a metaphor for the place in the world that has everyone's eyes directed towards it, a metaphor that can be interpreted as a warning that every mistake made is visible, but where interpretations in America has also meant a perspective that the USA is the natural center of the world and that the rest of the world needs to adhere and adjust to it. In this way America is not as dependent on its neighbors to define its national identity. American exceptionalism appears in isolation; it is the notion of self-reliance where neighbors are either not important or treated as a nuisance. The story of American national identity is not so much contrasted against its neighbors, close or far, but very much shaped by its borders. The borders that need protection and that are there to keep things out and to not disturb the American Project. Believers in American exceptionalism contest that America does not need to look outside its borders for confirmation, they expect everyone else to adjust to them.

The dominance of American culture through among other things film and television over the last century has resulted in America functioning as a norm for the rest of the world, as a base and reference point that is used to such an extent that American culture is just seen as culture and American ideas and ideals are seen as neutral and rendered unproblematic. Media like film and television have played an important role in the consolidation of this order, but American film and television also have the potential to offer subversion and resistance to the notions of American exceptionalism and America as norm. I suggest that *Archer* is one of those shows.

As a parody or pastiche of the spy genre and the Bond franchise specifically, it highlights how the use of exotification and international travel in the source texts work to emphasize notions of American exceptionalism and through exaggeration, inversion, misdirection, and plain reiteration, it changes the way we view the USA and how we view the rest of the world. I argue that through the use of temporal

and spatial instabilities, the parody of *Archer* decentralizes the USA as the obvious focal point of the world. It undermines America as the greatest and the only country in the world. It offers differing perspectives sneaked in through American and even outright patriotic characters. Malory and Archer celebrate certain parts of Americanism, sometimes by contrasting it with other worse alternatives (immigrants, welfare), sometimes with better alternatives, undermining America as dominant force. What emerges through this mosaic is a flawed America. It destabilizes the notion of the greatest country on Earth and the position as a natural focus point, and it does so by sneaking it in, feeding it not as a pie to the face, but with a spoonful of sugar containing of humor and parody wrapped up in a pastiche of an American ideal.

Chapter 7 The Right to Bear Arms

Alright, cool, we've got guns. So now what? – Eric Cartman

I can't believe this country hates women more than it loves guns. – Diane Nguyen

Die Hard Die Hard Die Hard! – Summer Smith

The second amendment of the US constitution famously proclaims the right of the people to keep and bear arms, and it has since its ratification in 1791 been vehemently protected by vociferous parts of American society and government. A key part of American identity, especially masculinized American identity, has been The Frontier Myth and the right or even duty of the American (male) individual, free from the shackles of eastern government and urbanity, to tame the wild using the wits and weapons at his disposal. The myth has been evoked by individuals, organizations, companies, branches of government up to and including presidential candidates and presidents.⁷⁰⁷ The frontier myth and its championing of violence and gunslinger heroism is ingrained in the story of the American nation and is prevalent in its reiterations to this day. This chapter focuses on the depictions of violence in general but more on the depictions of guns and gun violence specifically in the material and how parody and satire are used to comment, solidify, and undermine notions of American national identity and gun violence.

From Daniel Boone via Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Marshal Will Kane, Ethan Edwards, and the man with no name to John Rambo, John McClane, Martin Riggs, Ethan Hunt, John Wick, and Steve Rogers, all male heroes armed with the weapons at their disposal on a quest for justice, revenge, rescue, or a good cause, have always been central to American storytelling and storytelling about America. With its prevalence in film and television history the lone male hero and the genre-bound violence from westerns and action movies have been parodied numerous times. Mel Brooks deconstructs the sheriff hero in *Blazing Saddles*, the *Lethal Weapon* franchise is mercilessly spoofed in *Loaded Weapon 1*, and what is *Archer* but a

⁷⁰⁷ Slotkin 1998, pp. 1-3.

spy parody ridiculing movies and TV shows like *Mission Impossible* (1966-1973), *The Saint* (1962-1969), *The Persuaders!* (1971-1972), several Hitchcock movies, and the British centered but very much American produced *James Bond* (1962-) franchise? Depictions of the American West are part of the interpretations of national history and western parodies subvert the conventions and tropes of the genre to breathe new life into it while simultaneously reinforcing ideas already present in western films.⁷⁰⁸ Iconic representations and popular myths like the lone gunslinger from westerns or action movies make for great parody fodder since they are easily recognized and often highly stylized meaning that just a slight exaggeration or misdirection can have great effect.⁷⁰⁹ Staging a classic western duel between two armed combatants in a Macy's store instead of outside a saloon in *Friends* S02E02 *The One with the Breast Milk* and arming them with perfume bottles instead of six-shooters works perfectly when the reiteration is made through the use of slow motion, extreme close-ups of eyes and itchy trigger fingers combined with a non-diegetic western style guitar riff on the soundtrack.

So how do the shows in this research handle the notion of violence, guns, and gun violence in its content? Is it prevalent or marginal, is it candid or humorous, is it represented through parody and in that case; what does the parody do? To answer these questions, I have looked at examples from all five TV shows, albeit with a shorter look at *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* which does not depict guns and keeps its violent imagery to a minimum. *Archer* is discussed at length with specific examples in Chapter 6, including a general discussion on the effects of parody and pastiche on the weaponry and violence in the show which is why it does not feature here more than to note its relationship to the Frontier myth. The section on *Rick and Morty* focuses mainly on its *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988) parody and the many layers of reiterations of national identity that it entails. With *South Park* I focus on the depictions of school shootings and the structural criticism of American society and then talk about an ironic subversion of a conservative talking point. Finally, the *BoJack Horseman* section also emphasizes the role of parody in connecting the glorification of violence in Hollywood movies to a gendered structural criticism of American gun culture. Before that, however, I expand the discussion on American gun culture and the Frontier myth.

Richard Slotkin has written extensively on guns, violence, the Frontier myth, and the American nation in his seminal work *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. He emphasizes the importance of mass-media and popular culture as "the form of cultural production that addresses most directly the concerns of Americans as citizens of a nation-state".⁷¹⁰ The construction of the myth of the frontier is, according to Slotkin, the oldest and most

⁷⁰⁸ Turner 2003, pp. 48-54.

⁷⁰⁹ Cmp Gehring 1999, pp. 28-85.

⁷¹⁰ Slotkin 1998, p. 9.

characteristic myth that America has. He writes that “the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means to our achievement of a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization”.⁷¹¹ He also concludes that violence, in subjugating the indigenous population and in enslaving Africans, was central to the development and mythic representation of the Frontier.⁷¹² Western movies of the 1930s and 1940s used tropes of wilderness violence, the oversimplified struggle between good and evil and the self-made rugged individual as hero that had been around since the birth of film, but this time the films “were fused into larger, mythic themes of taming the frontier, curbing lawlessness, and forging a nation”.⁷¹³

Even though America historically, like other countries, has been a violent nation it is not the violence that sets it apart, but rather the symbolic and mythological status that violence has had and continues to have and the political consequences that it enacts. Slotkin writes that “[W]hen history is translated into myth, the complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action or representative individuals or ‘heroes’”.⁷¹⁴ The formation of the individual and the hero connected to the American nation through the Frontier myth is older than the foundation of film but has grown significantly with and through the progression of the film industry. From English 17th and 18th century roots two myths of regeneration through violence took hold and were popularized in American storytelling. The first is the captivity narrative where a white Christian and civilized woman is captured by savages and must resist the temptation of their immoral ways and ultimately be rescued by the hero at any cost. The second is the celebration of the wilderness hunter taming the wild and fighting Indians using their skills against them, with its most famous and popular representation being Daniel Boone and one of many modern reiterations John Rambo (at least after the first film).⁷¹⁵

The geographical frontier of westward expansion was supplemented and later replaced by the frontier of the gold rush bonanza and the promise of amassing a great fortune from nothing but hard work, true grit, and an adventurous mindset in the western mountains in the 19th century and the oil fields of the southwest in the early 20th century. The economic depression starting with the bank crash of 1873 combined with conflicts with Native Americans, labor organizations, and the

⁷¹¹ Ibid, p. 10.

⁷¹² Ibid, p. 11.

⁷¹³ Klein 2016, p. 83, cmp Slotkin 1998, pp. 255-278.

⁷¹⁴ Slotkin 1998, p. 13.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 14-15.

failure of Southern reconstruction were molded into a story of threats to civilized society based on the myths of frontier heroes standing up to a horde of savages. By turning all threats against the new corporate order of employer and employee into a bunch of savages threatening the moral and legal authority of the ruling class, the contradiction of the free man as ideal and subjugated workers or people of color with no civil rights could be evaded.⁷¹⁶ This image of the lone free (white) man standing up against a horde of savages or enemies through sheer grit and with the help of a firearm became one of the dominating hero narratives in literary stories of the western life like the books of Zane Grey. It was cemented further with the numerous western pictures of the studio era in the 1930s and 1940s and classic westerns like *Cimarron* (Ruggles 1931), *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), *My Darling Clementine* (Ford 1946), *Red River* (Hawks 1948), *High Noon* (Zinneman 1952), *Shane* (Stevens 1953), *The Searchers* (Ford 1956), *Rio Bravo* (Hawks 1959), and *Lonely Are the Brave* (Miller 1962). Familiarity with the genre and its conventions and the nostalgia that can be derived from it disarms the audience with its “overt and playful appeal” to its structures, but Slotkin makes the point that the underlying structures of films like the western genre and its many iterations “represent a powerful recrudescence of the old myths of regeneration through violence”.⁷¹⁷

In Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns in the 1980s, he often invoked connections to an American cinematic past and the western heroes and John Wayne specifically, relying more on a fictional storytelling of a glorious past than actual references to historical or political figures, which according to Slotkin has become more and more common in “authenticating the character and ideological claims of political leaders”.⁷¹⁸ Even though there still are western movies, the Frontier myth and the lone gunslinger hero persona have spawned more obvious descendants since then. Vietnam-rescue films such as the *Rambo* (1982-) franchise and vigilante-cop films like the *Dirty Harry* (1971-1988), *Die Hard* (1988-2013), or *Lethal Weapon* (1987-) franchises acts through myth to “justify social violence through the symbolic enhancement of a tale of personal violence” and just like the cowboy westerns these vigilante-style action films are invoked “by public officials and covert operatives who defy public law and constitutional principles in order to “do what a man’s gotta do””.⁷¹⁹ The modern day action hero functions as a continuation of the lone gunslinger, the cowboy hero or antihero from western movies, the vigilante who takes matter into his own hands to get the job done. Through its many iterations and the way it has been used and referenced as a

⁷¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 18-20.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid, p. 640.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid, p. 644.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 650-651.

shorthand for the efficiency of male leadership by political, spiritual, and financial leaders, it has become ingrained in the myths and storytelling of American national identity.

Even though physical guns are missing from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* - most battles are fought with magic as weaponry - western tropes are used and parodied in the series. One of the more pertinent examples is in S01E21 *Over a Barrel* where the mane six are called out to usher peace between two quarreling factions in the small town of Appleloosa. The rural setting is reminiscent of an American western town complete with main street flanked by buildings including a saloon and a cowboy hat store. The citizens of the town are all ponies, they are apple farmers, and the conflict stems from apple trees planted on land that is sacred stampeding ground for the buffalo population of the region. In language, costume, living quarters, customs, and name, the town citizens are represented as Anglo-Saxon and the buffalo tribe is represented as Native Americans and even though the conflict occurs in present time it is more reminiscent of western film scenarios invoking a nostalgic 19th century and the real-life conflicts between settlers and Native Americans on the American continent. The conflict erupts when the leaders of the two factions, Chief Thunderhooves and Sheriff Silverstar, are unable to settle their differences and they all take part in a showdown at high noon. There are numerous references made to western films and tropes where a Sheriff leading a showdown at high noon is just one of many. The episode also uses film tropes associated with specific western style, like switching the image ratio and using extreme close-ups of eyes to reiterate and parody the spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone, complete with musical nods to Ennio Morricone's soundtracks. The moral of the episode is that no conflict is impossible to solve, and no two enemies are beyond patching things up and becoming friends, which is a heartwarming but perhaps somewhat naïve rendering of conflicts when reiterating the American west of the 19th century, considering the real-life ramifications for Native Americans of the settler colonialism of the time.

As we have seen in Chapter 6, guns and all kinds of other weaponry are a big part of *Archer*. Not a single episode omits the use of some sort of firearm but the cavalier attitude towards guns is part of the life of an international spy agency. *Archer* uses references from and parody many source texts throughout its run, but the main concept of the show is a spy parody. The obvious main reference and source text in the spy genre is the Bond film franchise that started with *Dr. No* (Young 1962) with the latest installment as of this text being *No Time to Die* (Fukunaga 2021) with a yet undisclosed title and a yet undisclosed Bond actor slated for a 2026 premiere. James Bond was created by Ian Fleming in 1953 and the film franchise with the British MI6 agent with codename 007 has as of now 27 installments and is one of the most successful and long-lasting movie franchises of all time. The *Bond* films were also one of the key factors of the resurgence of American parody films and television shows in the 1960s and 1970s, due to its

distinct style and tone and the fact that it flirted with parodic tropes in itself without crossing the line.⁷²⁰ James Bond may be British and depicted as quite patriotic towards his home country, but the film franchise that is the second most financially successful of all time is produced in America by American studios and very much epitomizes American ideals of an individual male hero to save the world against foreign bad guys and set free in all ways conceivable the damsels in distress that he meets along the way. In the same way as Robin Hood is originally and geographically English, his depictions and representations have always been laden with American national identity. From Errol Flynn and Disney to Kevin Costner and Russel Crowe, he has embodied American ideals of freedom, justice, fighting oppression (and taxation) by individual excellence and a forceful entrepreneurship against all odds, landing a heterosexual romantic relationship with Marion in the process.⁷²¹

James Bond is also one of the more obvious examples of the lone gunslinger taking matters into his own hands, an excellent example of a champion of the lone white male hero defeating a villain and saving a damsel in distress with an impressive arsenal of weaponry. Archer and his fellow agents also use an impressive arsenal of weaponry and Archer functions as a parodic version of James Bond. Where Bond is a smooth, high-stakes gambling, heavily drinking, unabashed womanizer, Archer is an unapologetic high-functioning alcoholic who references the abortions of his female partners out loud and drops everything at hand for a beautiful woman. For Bond, Queen and country are the first priority but it does not stand in the way of a good time. For Archer, he himself is the number one priority, higher ideals are only invoked when they suit him and he does not do well with orders or even basic instructions, but he still seems to manage navigating the world of international espionage by basically winging it. Archer is a world class secret agent; he follows his own rules and takes matters into his own hands when necessary.

Working mostly within the logical constraints of the reiterated source text (the *Bond* franchise) combined with the changes made (exaggerating and literalizing the source text by saying quiet parts out loud) in the new piece of art that is Archer, is what makes him as a character more of a pastiche than a parody. Therefore, one could make the argument that Archer reinforces the lone gunslinger myth that James Bond decidedly does. The changes are more subtle than in outright parodies

⁷²⁰ Gehring 1999, pp. 22-23.

⁷²¹ Ironically, Errol Flynn is Australian, born in Hobart on Tasmania, Crowe is born in Wellington, New Zealand and moved to Sydney as a young child, while Brian Bedford who voiced the Disney version of Robin was from Morley in Yorkshire in England. Only Costner was born in America, which is something that is famously parodied in *Men in Tights* (Brooks 1993) where London-born Cary Elwes notes that his English accent makes him unique in the canon of Robin Hood depictions throughout history.

like *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Roach 1997), but the relative realism of Archer's character can be said to make him an even more subversive version of the gunslinger trope. An obvious parody like *Austin Powers* creates a greater distance to its source text than a pastiche with parodic instances. No one reads *Austin Powers* as a genuine character, and it makes it easier to dismiss him. Placing Archer closer to the source text gives more subtle changes and a relatively closer relationship with reality often has a greater impact upon viewing. It is a fine balancing act between the easily dismissible silliness of *Austin Powers* and the campy but straight masculine outrageousness of the Bond franchise, but *Archer* often manages to find a middle ground where what is depicted is harder to dismiss at the same time as it clearly undermines the foundations that the mythological and untouchable male white gunslinger hero has been built upon.

Rick and Morty and Die Hard

Guns are commonplace in *Rick and Morty*, from regular revolvers to disintegrating lasers with holstered snake dispensers giving the illusion of turning a person into a snake. Rick is also the epitome of the rogue loner setting up his own rules without any care for centralized authority, but he refuses to play a part as a symbol of the American nation even though he saves it and the world on more than one occasion. In S03E10 *The Rickchurian Mortydate* Rick and Morty are tasked by the President of the United States to neutralize an alien roaming free in the Kennedy sex tunnels under the White House. They do so without showing any enthusiasm or gratitude for being called up by the President, which annoys him. Nationalistic duty is not a reason for either Rick or Morty to do anything, but they are fine with saving the world since it is such a hassle to find and move to a new one, not because it contains America. When an increasingly disgruntled President tries to scold Rick and Morty by confidently stating that he is protecting this country from subordination by a foreign power, Rick replies, "Does China know about that dealbreaker?" to which the President claps back, "China doesn't piss on the White House." and Rick ends the conversation with "Well why would they? I'm sure it was expensive.". Rick places himself above most things in the world, even in the universe, and nations and nationality is definitely one of them.

The most interesting examples of discussions on national identity are usually in episodes dealing with the president, like *The Rickchurian Mortydate*, and S05E06 *Rick and Morty's Thanksplotation Spectacular*, but there are other examples of comments on America and gun violence, for instance in two satirical comments on police brutality in S05E10 *Rickmurai Jack* where a police officer in the Citadel shoots two protesters and Rick says "Wooff, you're about to be suspended with pay. Come on Morty, let's get out of here before it gets political." Additionally, the intersection of police brutality and racist structures comes across in S05E01

Mort Dinner Rick Andre when Jerry threatened by Rick's ocean dwelling nemesis Mr. Nimbus calls the police to inform them that "a strange horny ocean man is on my lawn" after which he listens to what the other end of the line says and continues "Well, I don't see how that's relevant, but we're white.", prompting an immediate response from five police officers brandishing guns to fend off the foreign intruder.

There are also plenty of inversions and parodies on action movies and the action hero gunslinger myth in *Rick and Morty*. A *Predator* (McTiernan 1987) style search and destroy mission in S05E04 *Rickdependence Spray* quickly deteriorates into mayhem when the US Marines deployed, including the ultra-masculine übercool lone wolf Blazen, are all killed by enormous aggressive sperms in search for an egg. Rick becomes an anime style vigilante with two crows as sidekicks in S05E09 *Forgetting Sarick Mortshall*, and the commercialized franchising of superhero movies and its characters is parodied in S03E04 *Vindicators 3: The Return of Worldender*. In S04E06 *Never Ricking Morty* and S06E07 *Full Meta Jackrick* Jesus is turned into a gunslinging action hero, complete with an extreme washboard stomach, and the entirety of S07E08 *Rise of the Numbericons: The Movie* is an action, adventure, and science fiction movie parody ending with the hero played by Ice-T shooting the villain in the dick with a golden gun. These are all examples that undermine the prevalence of the lone male hero and its place in the storytelling of American national identity, but there is one more example that is interesting in that it self-consciously deals with the conflation of myth building and action movie heroes.

In S06E02 *Rick: A Mort Well Lived*, alien terrorists take over Blips and Chitz, a popular gaming arcade that Rick and Morty have attended in previous episodes. When they take control of the building the power goes out while Morty is stuck inside a video game and when it reboots his consciousness merges with the computer. In order to get Morty out of the game, Rick also has to go into the game, leaving their unconscious bodies unprotected against the terrorist threat. This leaves Summer as the lone person able to fight the terrorists and keep Rick and Morty safe while they extract Morty's consciousness from the arcade game. Before going under, Rick instructs Summer to "do a *Die Hard*" on the terrorists, meaning to "sneak around and use air vents" like John McClane does in the classic action movie from 1988 directed by John McTiernan. Two things complicate matters however. One is the parodic misdirection that Summer is a teenage girl in the 2020s and therefore of course has not seen *Die Hard*, the other is that the terrorists taking over Blips and Chitz in a parodic inversion are keenly aware of the mythology behind *Die Hard*. Their leader appropriates the same accent and tone of voice as that of original villain Hans Gruber played by Alan Rickman as he explains to Summer that the *Die Hard* story follows an ancient myth that all civilizations develop once they have reached a certain sophistication, and that he and his followers recreate this myth, explained in further detail in one of his many published books, *The Nakatomi Paradigm*, in places and venues all over the universe. Since Summer has not seen the movie, she

does not follow the manuscript of the myth. She hides in a doorway instead of under a table to easily take out one of the terrorists, when asked by the terrorist leader what her name is she says, “call me Die Hard”, and instead of repeating McClane’s classic catch phrase “yippee-ki-yay motherfucker” she shouts, “walkie-talkie Die Hard motherfuckers”.

Die Hard was in many ways the foundation of the action movie as a genre and many subsequent action movies has been presented and explained with it as shorthand, such as “*Die Hard* on a bus” (*Speed*, de Bont 1994), “*Die Hard* on a plane” (*Con Air*, West 1997), or “*Die Hard* in the White House” (*White House Down*, Emmerich 2013). In the original movie, villain Gruber talks to hero McClane over walkie-talkie and references the frontier myth reiterated in Hollywood movies when he asks if McClane is “Another American that saw too many movies as a child? Another orphan of a bankrupt culture who wants to be John Wayne, Rambo, Marshall Dillon?” to which McClane responds “I was always kinda partial to Roy Rogers actually, I really like those sequin shirts.”. With hints of irony and sarcasm, McClane picks the garish sequined stylized version of the western hero over the more realistic counterparts, the artificial Hollywood version over the more grounded and masculine. It works as a self-conscious jab at the artificiality of Hollywood movies and the improbability of action movie storylines. Gruber starts referring to him as “Mr. Cowboy”, displaying a consciousness of the connections between the American myths of western movies and the lone gunman replicated in 1980s action movies. He makes the connection between John Wayne and Rambo but also includes one of the biggest radio and television iterations of this trope, Marshal Dillon from *Gunsmoke* (radio show 1952-1961, TV show 1955-1975). This is the legacy of the frontier myth and the male lone gunslinging hero expressed directly in what is perhaps the seminal and foundational action movie of modern-day Hollywood. Not only does it continue the tradition of lone male gunslinging heroes, but it infuses it with a self-conscious nod to its origins as a precursor to the postmodern or postclassical storytelling that would be common in movies and television from the 1990s to present day and that *Rick and Morty* itself is very much a part of.

Rick: A Mort Well Lived is interesting in that it undermines the trope of the lone action hero who against all odds saves the day with the use of cunning, fortitude, and plenty of explicit and gratuitous gun violence. It is made more subversive, however, by literalizing the connections between frontier gunslinger myth and action movie heroes in the mythical re-enactment made by the *Die Hard* alien terrorist team. By turning the male adult muscular hero into a cynical teenage girl who is not interested in those kinds of stories, the myth is rendered powerless both in a symbolic and a literal sense. What the parody does here by using *Die Hard* specifically as a source text and not the action movie genre at large is to redirect the polemic edge towards the sedimentation of storytelling myths at large and not at *Die Hard* as a movie. Even though scenes and lines from the original are used

and spoofed, it is not criticized more so than having a cynical seventeen-year-old girl from 2022 affirm that a movie steeped in cynical self-conscious cool from 1988 is not for her. It is a parody that reiterates an action movie that reiterates western movies that reiterates the frontier myth, and it is the first in that line that undermines the frontier myth and the male hero instead of reinforcing it.

South Park and School Shootings

S22E01 of *South Park* titled *Dead Kids* starts with police storming the 4th grade classroom of South Park Elementary with automatic weapons drawn. The teacher raises her voice to be heard over the sound of shots coming from the corridor and continues explaining to her students how to make the distinction between numerator and denominator. Cartman is upset because he has failed his math test even though he copied off Tolkien, and while the police vanish into the hallway to chase down the active shooter, a collective sigh of disappointment runs through the classroom when the students learn that they will need to take the math test again at the end of the week. Stan, Kyle, Cartman, and Kenny leave the school conversing about the hard math while passing a covered child's body on its way into an ambulance. This is the first of four school shootings in the episode, and they are all happening outside the main storylines and when they are shown in frame, they are met by complete nonchalance and indifference by everyone. With one clear exception.

Stan's mother Sharon picks Stan up from school with tears in her eyes from the relief that he is not hurt and sadness and horror over the events that have taken place. This is met with looks of incongruity and embarrassment from Stan and the other kids. At the dinner table that night, Sharon urges Stan to talk about what had happened today, and Stan lets everyone know that he failed his math test. Oh, and yeah, there was a school shooting as well. Stan's father Randy asks with suspicion, "Was it you?" and when he realizes that it was not and that Stan was not shot, he pivots back to talk about the failed math test, which causes Sharon to explode with anger and frustration. Neither in nor outside school does anyone seem to react to the school shooting as anything outside everyday routine, as important as what lunch was served in the cafeteria that day and slightly less important than the math test. The only exception is Sharon, and her seemingly reasonable response to the horrible actions at the school is treated as an aberration, as something irrational and overly sensitive. Randy's conclusion is that she might be about to get her period again, and when she gets angry that her fear and frustration is brushed off as PMS, Randy is the one feeling like the affected party since he has to "walk on eggshells once a month". Randy, not Sharon, is the one met by understanding and consolidation from a united circle of friends expressing their empathy at what he has to go through. Sharon's reaction at the supposedly horrendous notion of regular school shootings is treated

in the episode as unreasonable, exaggerated, and hysterical, with all the misogynistic connotations intrinsic to the word. She talks to her therapist about the fear of her children succumbing to gunshots and that she will not be there to protect her children when something happens to them, but he shows little understanding and is distracted by Randy standing outside the window trying to gesture that Sharon only has PMS and is a bit irrational and emotional right now.

Randy's storyline throughout the episode works as a parody of romantic comedy tropes from movies where a character or a couple are stuck in a rut and need to find a new spark or a new perspective on life. Instead of acknowledging the legitimacy of Sharon's ailments and recognizing the toll it has taken on her, Randy turns to the sources he is familiar with to show support and love. In a reiteration of the serious talk at the final act of a sitcom episode, he tries to comfort her and express understanding that she is about to get her period and that it is a sensitive time for her, but the sitcom narratology reiteration breaks when he is rebuffed by an incensed Sharon. With the guidance and support of his friends he then turns to the failsafe of all romantic comedies, the grand gesture. Having realized that Sharon's attitude could be attributed to menopause instead of a period and that the change might be permanent, he decides that a public reconfirmation of their love in front of all their friends is what will make Sharon feel better, since the grand gesture of love is what romantic comedies have taught us is the most effective way to make things better again. Since Sharon's problem is treated by everyone including Randy as a sitcom or romantic comedy problem, it should be fixed in the same way. He sings the theme from *Love Story* (Hiller 1970) in the school cafeteria aided by strobe lighting and rose petals spread throughout the room in an attempt to reaffirm and reignite their passion, but when the song starts another school shooting also starts. While Randy sings his song, Cartman and Token make it across the cafeteria while stray bullets from school shooters are everywhere, but no adults seem to react to it. Sharon's friend Harriet Biggle is shot in the arm during the performance, and when Sharon points out that Harriet was shot and that she should be choked and sad because of what has happened and what keeps happening, Harriet responds with a slightly choked-up "Well if you wanted to make me sad... congratulations... you did a great job." She is not upset by the school shooting or the fact that she has a bullet lodged in her arm, she is sad and upset that Sharon is irrationally angry and is yelling at her. This sentiment is shared by everyone that has gathered at the school cafeteria and Randy is left alone when their friends leave disappointed and Sharon storms off angry. The doctor outside the school covers up another child's body and pushes it into the ambulance while simultaneously explaining to Randy that Sharon might be at the beginning of her menopause and that it is like a super period which can last up to two years, which is the news that does make Randy shocked, scared and sad.

The fear and frustration of school shootings not being taken seriously is turned into a storyline of a middle-aged couple and their failure to communicate on the

same level. Through the means of parody, it is transformed from a political issue to romantic love, and it is this absurd juxtaposition that makes it such an effective political statement. Sharon is made to be the outlier, the character that by addressing the fact that everyone should react more strongly to kids being shot to death in schools is treated literally like a woman with hysteria, with all the misogynistic connotations that come with the definition. When Stan is struck by a bullet in the last shooting of the episode, she resigns to the fact that since no-one else reacts to this repeatedly happening, it cannot be such a big deal after all. It is probably not society that is at fault, it must be me. It might just be a little bit of PMS.

According to independent online research group Gun Violence Archive, the number of mass shootings, defined as four or more people including the shooter being shot on one occasion, in the USA in 2023 was 655. The total number of children and teenagers killed by gunfire in the USA in the same year was 1715, with 4547 injured.⁷²² Online crowdsourcing site Mass Shooting Tracker puts the number of mass shootings 2023 at 759, with 936 people killed and 2974 wounded.⁷²³ During the same year, the K-12 School Shooting Database reports that there were 349 school shootings with 71 killed and 178 injured, closing in on one school shooting per day on average and increasing every year.⁷²⁴ Mass and school shootings are literally an everyday occurrence in the USA and very little in forms of initiatives to regulate or prohibit the sale and spread of firearms is undertaken. It is treated as something normal and mundane, as much a part of everyday life as a discussion on who has seen *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) and if it was a great movie or if the unpolished effects of the end scene hampered the experience somewhat, as Cartman seems to imply in the second storyline in *Dead Kids*.

Cartman's investigation into why Token says he has not seen *Black Panther* is depicted as a parody of noir or neo noir tropes, including voice-over narration, costuming with leather jacket and cutoff gloves, pictures taken with a long-lens camera, and mysterious non-diegetic music. He uses the interrogation technique popularized by Peter Falk's titular character in *Columbo* (1971-1978) by adding "just one more thing" while exiting. When they dodge bullets trying to make it to fourth period math and the important test, Cartman drags Token by the hand much akin to heroes in action movies guiding the heroines to safer ground. He picks up a lunch box with a pastiche replica of police dog Chase from *Paw Patrol* (2013-) on the front to shield from bullets. The reference to *Paw Patrol* is surely not an accident. *Paw Patrol* is an animated adventure show that has the dual quality of

⁷²² Gun Violence Archive Past Summary Ledgers, <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>, published 251015, retrieved 20251017.

⁷²³ Mass Shooting Tracker for 2023 on <https://www.massshootingtracker.site/data/?year=2023>, retrieved 20251017.

⁷²⁴ Riedman 2023, K-12 School Shooting Database, <https://k12ssdb.org/data-visualizations>, retrieved 251017.

being targeted at a young audience and being unabashedly pro-law enforcement. The show centers around a group of puppies with different qualities who work together to help people, to foil villains, and to mitigate natural disasters. The core crew include a fire fighter, an excavator operator, a pilot, a mechanic, a boat operator, and Chase the police puppy who uses his catchphrase “Chase is on the case” in every episode. Reiterating Chase and *Paw Patrol* by having Cartman use the Paw Patrol lunchbox as a shield against the stray bullets does a few things. First, by using another cartoon character who is decidedly more innocent than the boys of *South Park*, it reminds us that there are younger students at the elementary school, *Paw Patrol* is mainly targeted at an audience of 4-7. Second, Chase is one of the most positive fictionalized representations of police authority there is and juxtaposing his positive authority with a character like Cartman, known for misusing authority whenever he gets the chance, creates an ironic extraneous inclusion that can be read in multiple ways; as Cartman using an innocent sign of police authority as a symbolic shield, as the fragility of the police force in the form of a lunch box against real life bullets, as a cynical Cartman happily using whatever he can to protect himself in the moment, or just a neat gag about a cartoon cop.

Cartman and Token enlist the help of Butters, who carries an AR-15 automatic rifle as he is hall monitor for the week, and when he leads the way to cover Cartman and Token’s escape, it is shown in slow-motion with Butters roaring in a manly fashion while firing at the source of the shooting. When they bridge the last meters to the classroom door by somersaulting in the crossfire, it is once again shown in slow-motion with a hard rock electric guitar theme accentuating the action star coolness of the move. The use of parody and pastiche in Cartman’s side plot grounds his quest for the truth as exaggerated performative play untethered to the realities of what goes on around him. He is not fazed by Token refusing to acknowledge that he has seen Black Panther but comes up with more and more elaborate explanations to why he would be lying instead of accepting the obvious and simple explanation that Token has indeed not seen *Black Panther*. The sequences reiterating action movie tropes in the hallways are part of the exaggerated performativity of Cartman, re-enacting movements from war movies or action movies as part of his rogue loner detective persona. When he makes the last dive to the classroom door he does so with a smile on his face, fulfilled with his performance of movie protagonist.

The discrepancy between Cartman’s subjective experience and the reality that surround him is then emphasized when his noir style voice-over turns into an actual conversation. The non-diegetic voiceover becomes diegetic in the last scene from the school when Cartman starts a verbal conversation with the voice in his head, reminiscent of *The Informant!* (Soderbergh 2009) where the voice-over narration that we have been led to believe was non-diegetic throughout the movie becomes diegetic in the pivotal third act scene where protagonist Mark Whitacre starts taking advice from the voice-over and we learn that it has been his thoughts all

along and that the music in the movie has also been part of his subjective experience. The movie tropes only exist in Cartman's subjective experience and performance and have little or no bearing on what happens around him. This is signaled by the lack of parodic activity in the rest of the episode. Police officers scrambling to find a shooter and guidance counsellor Mr. Mackey trying to guide them to the right place and scolding them when they shoot the wrong kid are played for laughs in their absurdity, but they do so without referencing television or film source texts. The school shootings and their consequences are never parodic, only satirical. In this instance, the effect of parody is the lack of it or rather the separation of it from Cartman's insane subjective experience and the reality of the school shootings that have real consequences including at least four dead children and Stan getting shot at the end of the episode. By separating the parody and the satire, the school shootings are never mitigated in the episode, only through the lack of reaction from the characters jaded by their unyielding frequency. By depicting mass shootings as an everyday occurrence that an American citizen needs to cope with, the absurdity of it is highlighted.

No shooter is ever in frame or otherwise identified in the episode. The school shootings are depicted through the sound of gunfire, through frantic law enforcement trying to find the shooters or warning about active shooters in the hallway, or by someone being struck by a bullet, but the perpetrators are never, at least to the knowledge of the audience, caught, killed, or punished. Their story is never told because for the episode and for the instances where school shootings occur in *South Park*, the individual culprit is not the one responsible for the violence. By eliminating the rogue individual from the storytelling, either as a villain or a righteous antihero, the message becomes centered around the structural problem of school shootings. They are not performed by individuals, they are ingrained in the societal structure of American everyday life for a child attending school, treated as a natural occurrence and therefore deemed impossible to rectify. When people are found dead in the woods in S22E06 *Time to Get Cereal* the police reaction is to ask, "There's a school shooting out in the woods? But outside of school is the one place kids are supposed to feel safe." When the police express fatigue (not anger or frustration) with the many school shootings happening, Kenny suggests that one cause of action would be to ban semi-automatic weapons, to which the police officer promptly tells him to "shut up!". A school shooting is not a big deal, it is just something that happens, and anyone addressing the absurdity of this, like Sharon tries to do in *Dead Kids*, is overreacting and should calm down and not take it too seriously.

Live-action dramas like *Elephant* (Van Sant 2003), *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (Ramsay 2011), or *Mass* (Kranz 2021) have shown the efficiency and emotionality of fictional depictions of school shootings. Using animation to show school shootings and the effects of them lessens the impact of the acts themselves, making them less visceral and offensive and also more possible to take in. A recap article of

Dead Kids in entertainment magazine *Vulture* reminisces on a live-action school shooting movie with explicit scenes that audiences at the Toronto Film Festival had a hard time accepting.⁷²⁵ At the same time, animation affords storytelling possibilities that would be very hard to achieve through live-action. 10-year-old kids performing acrobatic stunts through a hail of bullets, re-enacting noir detective storylines in a believable way, or the sheer number of moving parts and characters in the grand gesture scene would be difficult or impossible to achieve without the means of animation. Turning school shootings and dead children into comedy also poses challenges. The same *Vulture* article bemoans the “sniggering glibness” and “self-aware boorishness” of the episode. It states that the plot between Randy and Sharon turns into “an unending elbow-rib about chicks and the periods that make them crazy” and that “an unruly response to such extreme experiences is perfectly reasonable in these extreme circumstances.” For the author of the article, the cavalier attitude of the general public towards school shootings is a gag, something to be taken at face value instead of analyzing the satirical layers of it. He is unable to read *South Park* as anything but shock comedy, and any political message that the show expresses is rendered moot or treated as an accident, only to be invented by an astute audience and not offered by the episode itself.

Parody and satire need to be understood as such in order to work. Parody in this episode works in at least two ways that affect the satirical message of the show. Cartman parodically re-enacts several noir and police procedurals and action movie sequences in his ridiculous quest to reveal the fact that Token in fact has seen *Black Panther*. Through parody, Cartman embodies one side of the subjective blindness to the very real and dangerous school shootings that occur around him, including navigating hailing bullets to not miss cheating of Token on the repeated math test, which was his mission all along. The parody highlights the subjectivity and renders the contrast with “real” violence even more absurd. The second side is Randy reiterating through parodic means the common tropes of sitcom moral messaging and romantic comedies. He tries to re-enact a “heartfelt moment” with his wife and when that fails turns to “a grand gesture” of love and affection, because that is how he and we as an audience have been taught to handle someone, especially a woman, who is overly emotional and irrational, but who we love anyway. Parody is used to increase the juxtaposition between reasonable behavior and irrational behavior, turning the tables on them in the episode with the effect that the absurdity is highlighted, and the satirical message is emphasized. Sharon is the only one who has a reasonable response to school shootings and their effect on us. Blaming her reaction on her period is absurd, and having school children not react to shootings occurring around them is also absurd.

The use of parody emphasizes this absurdity through means like exaggeration (navigating crossfire to attend a math test) and extraneous inclusion (grand gesture

⁷²⁵ Bramesco 2018.

props and settings). The lack of parodic activity in the school shootings and the police response also emphasizes the absurd discrepancies at play. Even though the shootings are exaggerated in that they occur four times in one episode in one school and that bullets fly everywhere throughout the episode, they do not reference a source text and is therefore not parodic. The absurdity the episode signals is not so much that school shootings happen, it is that they keep happening and that no-one is doing anything to stop them and that we have become so jaded by their regularity that we no longer seem to react to them. Without parody, comedy, or animation, this would be a point that would be more difficult to get across to an audience.

An interesting alternative take on American gun culture can be found in season 19, which is discussed at length in Chapter 5. The seasonal arch is about gentrification and censorship, where the physical gentrification of South Park is connected to the language of political correctness as gentrified speech, and advertising and sponsored content as gentrified news leading to financial censorship of free speech. In the concluding episode of the season, S19E10 *PC Principal Final Justice*, Kyle, Cartman, Kenny, and Butters have a falling out with Stan over the looming threats from PC Principal and his PC frat brothers. This is something that Leslie, a girl from school who turns out to be an advertisement made into corporal form, has falsely convinced them of. They realize that they need to acquire guns in order to protect themselves. After Cartman asks “Even if we thought it could help protect us, how are we all gonna get our hands on guns?” The show instantly cuts to the four boys standing on the basketball court making sure their guns – Kyle and Cartman with handguns, Kenny with two handguns, and Butters with a shotgun – are locked and loaded, and Cartman states “Alright cool, we got guns, so now what?”. The drastic cut creates a comedic effect but also works as a comment on the ease of which Americans, even four 10-year-olds, can get a hold of guns quickly if they need it.

Parody is centrally based on expectations. For a parody to work, it needs to reiterate a source text that an audience can recognize, either as a direct reference or through style or mode. The audience is led to believe that something is about to happen based on genre conventions or storytelling norms. Based on previous instances from film and television, certain expectations come from certain situations. This is why we expect the lovers to end up together in a romantic comedy, that someone will be murdered in gruesome fashion in a horror movie, and that when someone coughs anywhere in fiction, they are most likely terminally ill patient with an incurable disease. What parody does is to build on these expectations to then subvert them through some form of change or incongruity, to have the lovers cough in each other’s faces, to have the murderer and their intended victim fall in love, or to have someone terminally ill pick up an oversize salmon and use it as a phone, because sometimes parody derives its effect from the extraneous inclusions of surprising elements. Playwright Anton Chekov famously

formulated the principle that every element of a story must be necessary and that irrelevant elements should be removed, meaning that if a gun is shown or referenced during a play, it should be fired sometime before the ending. “Chekov’s gun” has been established as a narrative principle that many films and television series adhere to, which makes it an excellent tool for parodists to use. The coughing character being terminally ill is a version of this principle or trope, because within the logic of that principle, a cough is never without meaning. Anything that builds expectations can be used to divert or misdirect expectations. Usually, therefore, if characters arm themselves with guns, expectations demand that they fire those guns before the end of the story.

Since the entire 19th season of *South Park* has imbued a sense of distrust in the citizens of the town towards each other, they can no longer be certain who to trust and who is working for the proliferation of intelligent advertising. Just like the boys when they did not feel safe, almost everyone in town acquires guns to feel safe. Usually and traditionally in film and television history, citizens arming themselves due to fear of the unknown spell disaster. The editor of the school paper and the boys’ classmate Jimmy issues a stern warning that guns will not solve anything and that they are never the answer, a common warning issued by the voice of reason in film and TV before a pending catastrophe. It also echoes warnings issued against the spread and use of guns in America as a sobering counterpoint to the gunslinger western and action hero who very much uses guns to solve problems according to his rules. Expectations when everyone arm themselves, even 10-year-old boys, is that it will lead to everyone shooting each other. In an ironic and parodic twist, however, the classic Chekov-induced trope of people unnecessarily arming themselves ending up shooting each other or innocent bystanders, the guns turn out to actually be the answer. When the people of *South Park* start pointing guns at each other in heated arguments, they do not shoot each other but start telling the truth instead of sugarcoating or lying, and they start to actually listen to each other. The episode uses parodic misdirection of “Mexican standoffs” where everyone is pointing guns at each other but instead of shooting one another they open up and work through their problems, leading to actual resolution and progress.

The guns cut through the bullshit, including gentrification, political correctness, and advertising trying to sell things to you, and they keep everything and everyone honest. In the end, it is the guns and everyone arming themselves that is the answer, that ends up saving the world. It is played with a great sense of irony and misdirection of classical tropes and expectations, and it is used to convey the moral message of the need for more honesty, even brutal honesty, in order to communicate in a world where everyone and everything is for sale. Using guns as a source of good in a manner very distinctly different from the war, western, and action tropes where guns enable the hero to defeat the villain, has a comedic effect but also works through its parodic representations as a satire of American gun

culture. A common talking point for pro-gun activists in America is that “guns don’t kill people, people kill people”, and also that “if everyone had a gun less people would be killed by firearms”. *South Park* in this episode poses the question what it would take for everyone arming themselves as a solution to violence to be a true and realistic statement, and the ironic chasm between reality and the parody version in PC Principal Final Justice shows the impossibility of that statement.

BoJack Horseman and Sensible Gun Legislation

The absurdity of the enormous number of mass shootings in the USA in the past decades is not only satirized and parodied in *South Park*. In S01E02 *BoJack Hates the Troops*, BoJack gets in trouble by picking a fight with an anthropomorphized seal in a supermarket over who has dibs on a pack of muffins without realizing that the seal (named Neal McBeal) is a Navy Seal and that BoJack therefore unwittingly has belittled American troops. He tries to defend his position by calling in to the live television news show where Mr. McBeal is interviewed and affirming that people in the army can also be jerks, which is not met by understanding. BoJack says, “Most people are jerks, just because you give them guns and put them in the army doesn’t make them good people.” Finally, BoJack is forced to say that Neal is a hero and that all other troops are also heroes but cannot help criticizing the hypocrisy of celebrating every single member of the US troops as heroes by ironically stating that “I don’t believe saying that cheapens the word and actually disrespects those we mean to honor by turning real people into political pawns. Also, I am not deeply ambivalent about a seemingly mandated celebration of our military by a nation that claims to value peace, telling our children that violence is never the answer while refusing to hold our own government to the same standards.” All this while his agent Princess Carolyn frantically tries to stop him saying it. The compulsory patriotism and support of the troops that BoJack is subjected to were features of American society in the aftermath of 9/11 and had lingered to this first season of *BoJack Horseman* in 2014. The episode makes a clear satirical standpoint on the mandatory acceptance and celebration of American state sanctioned violence. A more in-depth look at American gun culture and the connections it has historically made to Hollywood films and the culpability of Hollywood storytelling for gun proliferation in modern day America can be found in another episode.

BoJack Horseman dedicates an entire episode in the fourth season to a gendered perspective on the plight and predicaments of gun violence and gun culture in America. In S04E05 *Thoughts and Prayers*, the new action movie from producer Lenny Turtletaub is about to premiere. It is *Ms. Taken*, starring Courtney Portnoy, about the niece of Mr. Taken from the *Taken* (2008-2014) movies. The premiere is in danger, however, after a mass shooting at a shopping mall feels too similar to

the third act shootout where Portnoy takes out a slew of thugs in a hail of fire inside a shopping mall. The cold opening before the intro features a back and forth between producer Turtletaub and his assistant. Turtletaub pours a glass of whiskey in front of three movie posters with the titles *Glockerspaniel*, *Americanine Sniper*, and *Bulletproof Principal*, all sporting anthropomorphized dogs of different breeds with a determined look and a variation of a firearm front and center. *Americanine Sniper* is a parody of a direct source text, *American Sniper* (Eastwood 2014), while the other two posters reiterate generic action genre tropes and redirects their names with dog references. A fourth poster titled *The Good, the Bad, and the Bugly* with a cricket in the same pose and costume as Clint Eastwood's Blondie on it can be briefly seen when the assistant enters the room. Eastwood's *American Sniper* was a great financial success and yielded high critical acclaim upon its release telling the story of Chris Kyle, a real-life Navy Seal sniper with 160 confirmed kills who was celebrated as a hero with numerous medals and awards for his achievements.

If the posters were not enough to make the connection between Hollywood movies glamorizing gun violence and real-life violence, Turtletaub expresses precisely this in a parodic literalization of the situation. He says, "I'm sick and tired of real-life gun violence getting in the way of us telling stories that glamorize gun violence. Why does this keep happening? Has the whole world gone crazy?" Turtletaub is used as an instrument to state some of the points the episode is trying to make and to create a comedic juxtaposition in the blunt honesty shared by a Hollywood producer, that the glamorizing in films is something that they are keenly aware of and that they would like to continue with it unabashed and unhindered since it is a dependable source of income. Turtletaub's assistant then replies honestly and apparently with great theoretical knowledge about American history and the importance of the Frontier myth in the country's inception, in an overtly self-conscious and even more literalized fashion when he says, "No, we've just been conditioned by a rugged individualistic culture woven into the savage architecture of our country itself, birthed as it was by violent uprising, but perhaps popularized in the modern imagination by stories..." when he is interrupted by Turtletaub saying "Okay okay Chomsky, when I want you to talk I'll staple a string to your back and yank it." The assistant spells out the underlying mechanics of American gun culture in a way that would fit perfectly into this dissertation and he presents the underlying message and theoretical construct of this specific episode, but in a parodic and satirical twist, he is promptly interrupted by Turtletaub who is less than impressed with the assistant's theoretical knowledge and belittles him accordingly with a comedic zinger equivalent of blowing a raspberry.

The production team starts working on how to change the movie, but each time they come up with a new idea for a set piece, they get a Google alert that a mass shooting has occurred there as well. They immediately try to find new ways around the problem, after muttering "thoughts and prayers for the victims of course" and "of course, yeah, thoughts and prayers". Clips from *Ms. Taken* are shown throughout the

episode. Through exaggeration of violence and a stilted over-the-top delivery and blunt literalized lines it works as a parody of the usual Hollywood action movies glorifying gun violence. With Portnoy in the leading role the film is described by Turtletaub as “Bridget Jones, just slightly more bloody murder”. In a rough-cut scene from the film rising star Courtney Portnoy as Ms. Taken is facing an anthropomorphized, red-eyed, scar-faced albino bunny villain in a clothes store, and quips, “All this time you thought I was just another damsel in distress, but I’m afraid you were mis... guided.” before she starts shooting again. The common expectation for a western or an adventure or action movie is that the lead is male, and a female character is to be rescued. She is the damsel in distress, and he is there to put everything right again. This brief scene uses the classic damsel in distress trope to switch roles where the female protagonist takes the reigns and shoulders the responsibility of the gunslinging hero. It does so, however, with a parodic misdirection of the line and an obvious ironic delivery, pointing the polemic edge of the parody towards the hammy lines of Hollywood action movie script writing. It works as a self-conscious parody of the now common inversion of the damsel in distress trope, exaggerating the oddity of a female lead action movie.

There are several references throughout the episode to other cultural works addressing mass and school shootings, like Todd inadvertently referencing Foster the People’s song *Pumped Up Kicks* from 2011 when brainstorming ideas on how to avoid people being shot in shootouts, so that maybe if they just had the right shoes to outrun the bullets, they would be safe from harm. Princess Carolyn, as part of the production team of the movie, implores that they must keep the story on Courtney and “not on the depressingly unstoppable rise of real-life gun violence in this country thoughts and prayers”. To not be caught off-guard again, the production team sets a Google alert for “mass shooting” and is subsequently interrupted every few minutes with a new shooting that once again changes their plans for a reshoot. The title of the episode *Thoughts and Prayers* comes from the characters using the phrase as a tack-on at the end of each sentence when discussing the horrifying consequences these shootings can have on the release of the movie. This references the real-life response to mass shootings where thoughts and prayers are often the only thing offered for victims or their families. The phrase, through its routine mandatory use, becomes a comment on how people in American society and government can talk about the events that take place and express their condolences but never offer anything concrete or substantial in terms of changes to gun legislation or increased accessibility to health care. By having the characters add it to the end of their sometimes crass and financially driven discussions of mass shootings, it is rendered meaningless, a phrase used as alibi for sensitivity instead of the real thing.

Due to the sheer number and frequency of mass shootings in the USA, satire site The Onion now uses the same headline to address all new mass shootings. It reads “‘No way to prevent this’ says only nation where this happens regularly” and

it is a comment in the same vein as the alibi phrase is used, that nothing new is ever said after mass shootings, but the same phrases keep repeating. In the episode it works as a satirical parody of people officially saying one thing because it is expected of them while focusing entirely on a completely different thing. The clips from *Ms. Taken* and the slightly exaggerated and stylized production meeting where those involved say out loud what is usually implied when trying to navigate making violent films that do not clash too obviously with real-life violence, works as an effective satire on both the financially driven Hollywood industry, but also the views on and acceptance of real-life gun violence in America, explicitly connecting it to the construction of the nation, the fabric of which it is made and reproduced. In the episode, gun violence is a part of America and America is a part of gun violence.

Diane is a voice of reason in the show, and her political views can be described as third wave feminist intellectual liberal. Throughout the show, she calls out injustices like discrimination, sexual assault, corporate bullying, racist imagery, and she admonishes her husband Mr. Peanutbutter for supporting fracking. When this episode starts, she is working as a writer at Girl Croosh, an online site interested in topics related to the female experience as long as they are popular and trending, in a satirical pastiche of postfeminist sites like Buzzfeed and Jezebel. She is tasked by Princess Carolyn to write a piece on Portnoy and *Ms. Taken* in order to drum up positive buzz around it and shift the focus from gun violence to Portnoy as a person. When leaving a restaurant, Diane and Courtney Portnoy are assailed by an anthropomorphized badger making sexualized threats, so Portnoy pulls out the gun she keeps in her bag and the assailant quickly scurries away. As an avid anti-gun agitator, Diane is very skeptical towards using guns for protection, but when Courtney invites her to try shooting a gun at her private gun range to experience the feeling of power a gun can imbue into its user, she is quickly swayed. The scene where she first tries shooting is in super slow motion accompanied by non-diegetic classical music, Bach's Cello Suit no 1, signaling a heightened exuberant experience and the transformation of her feelings towards guns. She starts wearing a gun everywhere, and it soon leads to her writing an article for Girl Croosh titled "A Handgun of One's Own", where she outlines the ways women are unsafe and are made to feel unsafe in society, that they always need to have their guard up no matter where they are and at what time, that men can never understand what it is to feel like that, and that a gun is something that can change the power structure in society. If more women had guns, more women would have the power in their own hands.

The article is a viral hit and leads to a wave of women getting concealed carry licenses and buying guns, which prompts male-lead TV shows and men on the streets to vocalize their concerns. Under the headline "Girls Just Want to Have Guns" in morning show *Morning Time Hollywoo*, A Ryan Seacrest Type and A Billy Bush Type agree that they would not want to be close to a woman with a gun

“at a certain time of the month”. Men on the street who are interviewed by news show *Breaking News* ask if women shooting people “really know what guns are for” and one man proclaim that “I don’t feel safe anymore walking down my own street at night alone. Me! A man!”.

The parodic versions of morning shows and news shows exaggerate male behavior when faced with the concept of women with power, and it uses literalization in that it says the quiet part of male hypocrisy towards gendered power structures in society out loud. The effect is a disclosure of what is really meant when men discuss women in public life, that the preservation of (white heterosexual) masculine power is the number one priority, and that any disruption to that logic is perceived as a threat. In source text originals, this is never stated outright but wrapped in metaphors and innuendos. Reiterating news segments from morning shows and news shows establishes that this is not treated as entertainment, but as something that is worth taking seriously. The parodic effect of literalizing the subtexts of the source texts highlights the absurdity of its arguments, since it basically boils down to the position that men should have more power than women and that when women pose a challenge to that notion, they must be stopped by any means necessary.

The conflict between personal opinion and political principle gets an interesting representative in Mr. Peanutbutter. As an anthropomorphized dog he is naturally appalled by guns and especially the loud noises they make, but during the fourth season he is running for Mayor, and as a candidate for a political position he cannot indulge his personal feelings towards guns, but need to accept that his political stance is to respect the second amendment “but some gun purchases should require the barest possible amount of background check”. This is as far as a political candidate vying for office can take a position on gun control and the underlying message is of course that it will not change anything about the number of guns in America and the way they are used. There is a duality to the anthropomorphized dogs in this universe, where the fear of loud bangs is contrasted with the fact that dogs played most of the action hero protagonists in the movies on posters in Lenny Turteltaub’s office. The notion of watch dogs and guard dogs and dogs used for hunting in real life renders them suitable for embodying the action movie hero and its connections to the frontier and a nostalgic past. The dog is quite literally the domesticated and housebroken version of the lone wolf and using dogs as those kinds of film heroes signals a more controlled and malleable version of the lone wolf trope.

The *Ms. Taken* production team tries to pivot to emphasizing that all mass shootings are performed by men, and that the female-led *Ms. Taken* therefore applies to different standards, and that a movie like that would make women feel more safe in society, and that subsequently everything that happens in society that makes women feel less safe would benefit the movie’s box office. Not that they want to make women feel unsafe, but if they already do, there is no harm in making

a bit of money out of it. This is also thwarted, however, when women suddenly start to carry out mass shootings, or at least one single mass shooting. This prompts the male legislators of California to start a series of congressional hearings on gun violence since “even one death from the bullet of a female gun owner is too many”. Shown live on local public broadcasting (C-Spaniel), the congressional hearings include a politician asking what his constituents are supposed to do, “not complimenting random women on the street because they might be carrying a gun?” as well as a male “gun scientist” explaining how the trigger of a gun is designed specifically for a man illustrated by a presentation where female fingers are described as limp, soft, flowery, and indecisive, and a graph showing how increased gun usage yields increased nail chipping.

This is an extension and an escalation of the parodic news segments from earlier in the show, including the literalization of saying the quiet part out loud. This time the show parodies real-life congressional hearings including its lofty promises and political statements, but also reiterates source texts like courtroom drama tropes, and so-called gender experts diligently used to enhance the differences between feminine women and masculine men in talk shows and debate shows. Diane is questioned on the stand of the hearing and tries to explain the constant societal messaging that women are only safe when the men around them allow them to be and that the legislators need to either “roll up your sleeves and actually work to create a society where women feel safe and equal. Or you can just ban all guns.” One productive legislative session later, as the title card literally states, the State of California bans all guns. Diane is genuinely surprised and says: “I can’t believe this country hates women more than it loves guns” to which Princess Carolyn succinctly and urgently replies: “No?”.

This episode not only satirizes gun violence in society and in movies, it makes explicit connections between mass shootings and gun violence to how American society is constructed, that it is not simply something that happens in society, but one of the building blocks of it. Guns are linked to the mythological individualism that permeates America as a nation, an individualism that is distinctly male in nature. The individual wielding power through political or economic structures, or through the use of physical force or firearms, is intrinsically a man, and the person he wields his power towards is a woman, and this is woven into the fabric of the nation, it is one of the main pillars of its construction and perseverance. Rather than accepting and addressing that inequality, the legislators of the fictional version of the State of California decides to ban all guns, a rash and drastic decision that denies them one of the tools to wield power but keeps the power well within their grasp. Put to the test, the (white heterosexual middle and upper class) male power structure successfully chooses to stay in power, because the male power structure is even more important than reiterating and reinforcing the Frontier myth and the importance of guns for American national identity. What is even more important than that is that the power structure of American society stays masculine.

Thoughts and Prayers uses parody that exaggerates and literalizes societal discourses as a way to purvey the message that American gun culture is not first and foremost about guns, it is about maintaining a conservative power structure, and disclosing that and emphasizing the ridiculousness of that creates a subversive and destabilizing argument that men in charge are more interested in keeping men in charge than in the well-being of its citizens.

Conclusion

I started this chapter by referencing the second amendment of the US constitution, stating the right of the people to bear arms as necessary for the security of a free state. Few other myths or stories about the United States have had a greater impact on its cultural output than the Frontier myth and the man of the people picking up arms to tame the wilderness of land and enemy and protect those near to him. The sentiment of the second amendment that an armed militia is necessary for protection against a British military threat has been adjusted to fit into the mold of the Frontier myth and its lone white rugged male protagonist hero who takes matters into his own hand and does what needs to be done. There is a throughline from stories of real-life representatives of the myth such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett to the heroes of western fiction from authors like Zane Grey to the western heroes of cinema and television like the characters played by John Wayne or Gary Cooper or the cast of *Bonanza* or *Gunsmoke* to the action heroes of the 1980s like John Rambo and John McClane and the superheroes of the 21st century. The story of frontier heroism and the lone male gunslinger has had an enormous impact on American culture and on American nation identity and is as prevalent today as it has ever been. This has created a nation where guns are common and visible but also mythologized more than in other countries. The USA has more mass shootings per capita than any other country on earth. Guns and the consequences of using them are an integral part of American society and as such, they are common targets for political protest and satirical commentary.

The television shows used in this text all reference gun culture or the Frontier myth in some form or another. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* shows an awareness of western movie tropes built on the Frontier myth but focuses on cooperation and friendship over subjugation and conflict. *Rick and Morty* highlights the historical and cultural connection of the Frontier myth by literalizing the plot from *Die Hard* as its own myth and in turn self-consciously referencing an American cultural past of cowboy movies and sequined heroes. Through the use of parody, the Frontier myth and the notion of creating myths are undermined and called into question. If someone refuses to recognize the rules that have been set up and that we are interpellated with, cracks in the armor can be made visible and the sedimentation of the lone white male hero myth can be disrupted. Drawing

from the Frontier myth and the lone gunslinger, *South Park* and *BoJack Horseman* turn their focus in a different direction, to the structural permeation of American gun culture.

South Park depicts school shootings in *Dead Kids* as something that has become so commonplace that no-one reacts to them anymore, even if they are in the middle of one. In a society and a culture that allows school shootings to continue without lifting a finger to stop them because that would mean an infringement on the second amendment and the proliferation of American gun culture, the sole person still feeling angry, scared, and frustrated that this keep happening is treated as hysterical and irrational. The gendered perspective of the fear and anger towards school shootings being explained as PMS or menopause adds another layer where the protection of gun culture is masculine and strong and protesting it is feminine and weak. Through the means of parody and satire, the absurdity of American gun culture, of the innumerable school shootings, and of the lack of measures taken to mitigate it, are respectively highlighted and rendered absurd. It emphasizes school shootings as something that is not the cause of lone gunslingers, but that it is a structural problem permeating American society.

In *BoJack Horseman* episode *Thoughts and Prayers*, the gendered perspective of gun violence is stated more directly. Countless mass shootings cause major problems for the film studio protagonists of the episode, not because people die, but because the settings of the mass shootings clash with the ones in their movie. Parody is used to highlight the connection between Hollywood movies glorifying gun violence and mass shootings happening every day without anyone stopping them. The power structures in society where a woman can never feel safe from the potential attack from a man is upended when women start arming themselves and after the first mass shooting carried out by a woman, guns are banned in the state of California. The fear of women with power is the only thing stronger than the sanctity of American gun culture.

This chapter has shown how parody can be used to highlight absurdities in the source texts and in everyday life. By emphasizing the prevalence of the Frontier myth and its connections to Hollywood storytelling, and making changes through exaggeration, literalization, and misdirection, the shows manage to make political statements on American gun culture and its stronghold in American national identity. Parody and satire are used to destabilize the norm of the gunslinging hero and to question the structural permeation of gun culture in America by highlighting the absurdity of its unhindered continuation.

Chapter 8 Parody, Satire, and the Varying Degrees of Nationalism

For our home! – Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash

America! Get yo’ uterus turnt! – Sextina Aquafina

Are you gonna be a fucking America nerd or are you gonna be cool and steal the Constitution with grandpa? – Rich Sanchez

This text has revolved around American national identity, but in this final analytical chapter I will look closer at representations of nation and nationalism. This of course overlaps considerably with notions of American national identity, but it is not used as the starting point for analysis and discussion. To help nuance the analysis I examine representations that convey different degrees of attitude towards the American nation and American nationalism, but also towards the concepts of nation and nationalism in and of themselves, from positive to neutral to negative. I will use examples from all five shows, but since *Archer* and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* have more in-depth discussions on the American nation, American national identity, and representations of nationalism in their respective chapters, the focus is on *BoJack Horseman*, *Rick and Morty*, and *South Park*.

The logic of national thinking stipulates that the world is divided into nations and that this is normal and desirable, that every individual should belong to a nation and that the nationality of that person decides or at the very least influences the way they think and behave. Belonging to a nation and a nationality also comes with certain responsibilities and entitlements, and this logic of sorting the world is something that, as Skey puts it, “makes sense to a large number of people”.⁷²⁶ Nationalism presents itself as “the affirmation of each and every ‘nationality’, and these alleged entities are supposed just to be there, like Mount Everest, since long ago, antedating the age of nationalism.”⁷²⁷ Nationalism, by taking for granted

⁷²⁶ Skey 2011, p. 4-5.

⁷²⁷ Gellner 1983, p. 49.

ideas of nationhood and the connection between people and a homeland, presents a world built on different nations as something natural and in many cases unavoidable.⁷²⁸ The most effective way to build a nation is therefore by camouflaging its construction and artifice.⁷²⁹

A key aspect when defining nationalism as a discourse and stressing its constant and everyday construction and reconstruction is that it is something that can change, does change, and is susceptible to criticism and reformation. Marginalized groups in a nation can express dissatisfaction with the current order, highlighting injustices or absurdities in the system and advocating change in some form. The term sedimentation was introduced by Husserl and subsequently developed for the “phenomenological analyses of everyday life” by Berger and Luckmann, and it refers to “the process whereby a particular discourse comes to be seen as objective or natural rather than one possible way of making sense of the world.”⁷³⁰ It has been used to conceptualize power struggles in societal discourses and to illuminate structures that fix meaning.⁷³¹ The decade after 9/11 saw a shift in American politics towards brand management more than political content.⁷³² Right after the attack, the death of irony was firmly announced, and then ironically disproved by numerous comedians and satirists. If anything, irony was sharpened into political action rather than the hollow cynicism that signified the 1990s.⁷³³ Convergence culture and online culture have created a new public landscape, in which humor, satire and irony can be used for navigating it. Online content of television programming can now reach an even larger audience than the original broadcast.⁷³⁴ In the vast cultural landscape of America, there are always artists and individuals who position themselves outside or against the norms created.

This could take the form of violent protest, but it can also come in the form of German film director Wim Wenders using the style and storytelling of American painter Edward Hopper. Frank Mehring states that “Hopper has been identified as an artist who successfully shows the audience the other side of the American dream by focusing on loneliness, isolation, miscommunication, and anonymity” and that “Hopper’s characters often appear self-contained in their self-imposed silence, thereby counterbalancing familiar tropes of obsessive optimism commonly

⁷²⁸ Billig 1995, p. 61.

⁷²⁹ Stychin 1998, p. 3, quoted in Medhurst 2007, p. 28.

⁷³⁰ Skey 2011, p. 12.

⁷³¹ Skey 2011, pp. 12-13, where he quotes Laclau and Mouffe 1995, p. 11, Laclau 1990, and Berger and Luckman 1991, pp. 34, and 85-89.

⁷³² Gournelos and Greene 2011, p. xi-xiv.

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Ibid, p. xvi.

associated with American culture.”⁷³⁵ “By using the medium of film, Wenders brings into perspective the falseness of the images generally associated with “America” as the “land of plenty”.”⁷³⁶

Films have included satire since the conception of the art form, and at the peak of the process of Americanization during and after World War I, dissenting voices that was not part of the straight white middle-class male core that the nation was supposed to be built on, let their voices be heard, sometimes with quite ingenious subtlety. Alice Guy Blaché’s *Making an American Citizen* (1912), in which a recent immigrant learns hard lessons on how a husband is supposed to act in the new country, “called attention to the gender barriers limiting access to American citizenship. [...] The film’s last intertitle reads, “Completely Americanized!”.”⁷³⁷ Documentarian Michael Moore has been generous in his criticism of the American government and society while firmly reassuring that he has great love for the country. He has tried in many of his films to show different perspectives of the US and he has talked profusely of how he refuses to accept the statement of the National Security Strategy of the United States that “American values” were “right and true for every person, in every society ... across the globe and across the ages”.⁷³⁸

American satire has always been a sphere reserved for male voices, and until more recent times explicitly white voices.⁷³⁹ African American comedy was earlier and sharper in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, when white established comedians took on a somber and serious demeanor, black comedians pushed the envelope and literally or figuratively questioned American unity after the attacks. Lanita Jacobs specifies that many comics in the aftermath of 9/11 “maintained an unabashedly critical stance toward American foreign policy, presidential rhetoric, and frenzied flag-waving” and that their jokes “evoke an ambivalent patriotism – indeed, a pervasive Du Boisian “double consciousness” still felt by many African Americans”.⁷⁴⁰ The perspective of minorities in the USA is different than the hegemonic representations of the majority, and comedians and jokes that can use examples from another everyday culture offer important and racially nuanced perspectives to the discourse surrounding 9/11 and its aftermath. To be able to joke about 9/11 and the consequences of it in American society was one way of resisting pro-war rhetoric and to shift perspective to highlight domestic problems of racial inequalities and violations of civil rights.⁷⁴¹ American views on nation,

⁷³⁵ Mehring 2010, p. 14.

⁷³⁶ Ibid, p. 8.

⁷³⁷ Stanciu 2022, pp. 35-36.

⁷³⁸ National Security Strategy 2002 quoted in Holloway 2011, p. 108.

⁷³⁹ Winter 2011, p. 174.

⁷⁴⁰ Jacobs 2011, p. 47.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 54-55.

nationalism, national identity, and patriotism differ significantly depending on what parts of the country and which citizens are allowed to express their opinion. This chapter comments on and analyzes these shifting nuances and perspectives, how they are expressed through parody and satire in the material, and how this forms a mosaic of different attitudes towards nation and nationalism.

Celebrating Nation and America

A positive spin on nationalism is something that is hard to find in the overall messaging of the series, but depictions of celebrating nationalism are easier to locate, especially in contrasting American national identity with others. The concept of American exceptionalism, of the USA being a unique and chosen country on Earth, that it is the envy of all other countries, the city upon a hill which draws the world's gaze, and that everyone would want to live there if they had a choice, plays into this. Sterling Archer often praises the awesomeness and coolness of the American nation and is genuinely surprised when other countries can offer something that the US cannot. At the same time, he is sometimes fully aware of the transgressions that the American nation has been guilty of historically and he is not afraid to reference this in conversation with other people in the espionage business. In S01E02 *BoJack Hates the Troops*, BoJack himself is wary of compulsory expressions of patriotism, but that celebrating US troops without questioning is the norm and what is expected from American citizens is signaled clearly by the episode. Malory Archer often uses stereotypes and racism to separate the American nation from other, in her eyes, lesser alternatives, but it is Eric Cartman who is the obvious representative of celebrating patriotism in this material. Not that he is specifically for American nationalism, but that he uses any excuse to wield nationalism as a tool in order to procure increased authority. That is why he has no problem donning a Nazi uniform and rallying people against Jews to gain control of South Park. It is why he wants to keep Mexicans out of the American border, and it is why he has no scruples informing on his classmates to get them sent to American detention centers for child immigrants. To paraphrase himself, Eric Cartman knows enough about nationalism to exploit it for his own purposes, and if celebrating nationalism lets him have what he wants, he warmly embraces that opportunity. Cartman is rarely used to convey the moral or political message of the series; he usually functions as the antithesis that highlights structural hypocrisy or is placed in a despicable role in order to make a satirical point. The celebration of nationalism or patriotism is therefore rarely presented in any of the series without an ironic caveat that shifts the messaging of the episode, outright celebrations are therefore difficult to identify.

Finding positive representations of America as a country is easier, even when examining the messaging from the shows. It can be in the form of throwaway lines

that emphasize and strengthen the notion of the USA as the greatest country on Earth, or as we have seen in the relationship with neighboring and other countries. In *Rick and Morty* S05E04 *Rickdependence Spray* Morty talks about America with the President of the USA (who is modelled as a parodic inversion of Barack Obama), and says “here’s what I know, sir, this is the greatest country in the world, we invented apple pie and lasers.” Invoking a common and traditional symbol of national identity in apple pie and combining it with a technological advancement that has real bearing in the world of *Rick and Morty* fuses the old and the new in a genuine appreciation of what the US is and what it can be. In S06E02 *Rick: A Mort Well Lived*, where Morty is trapped in a video game where all non-playable characters represent part of him, one part of Morty illustrated by the world’s president truly believes in American exceptionalism and that he lives in the greatest country on Earth. Even though this is undermined by the show through criticism of America and the sheer number of different possible versions of the USA there are, a core of positive representation of the USA still exists within Morty.

One of the first television shows that took a comedic and satirical take on the 9/11 attacks was *South Park* in the first episode aired after the attack, S05E09 *Osama Bin Laden Has Farty Pants*.⁷⁴² I will address the episode’s more critical stances in the next section, but it is worth highlighting the ending monologue and sentiment that Stan delivers. After realizing that the rest of the world does not like the US because of its actions on international soil, shattering the illusion of American exceptionalism that the boys have had up to this point, that everyone likes and wants to live in America, Stan plants an American flag on Afghani soil saying “America is our home, our team. Maybe if you don’t like your team, you should get the hell out of the stadium.” In the midst of the satirical takes on American exceptionalism and specifically the compulsory patriotism of post 9/11 America that the episode offers, this is undoubtedly a pro-American patriotic statement in and of itself, delivered as a rallying cry for lost and angry Americans. So what if no-one likes us, we are going to be who we are and keep doing what we do, and if you do not like it, it is us against you. The show criticizes the American government and American institutions and authorities in almost every episode, but a love for the country with all its flaws and madness always shines through. That the USA is the greatest country on Earth can be challenged and subverted in the show but is never truly altered to offer any alternative versions.

The concept of America as the bastion of freedom is often used for parodic and satirical purposes in the shows, but it is not always the target of a polemic edge and can work as a parodic take with a basic positive attitude on American individuals and their unabashed belief in America as the land of the free. This is exemplified by Stan’s father Randy in *South Park* S09E05 *The Losing Edge*, where

⁷⁴² For a more in-depth analysis of the episode and its place in American satirical history, see Gournelous 2009, and Greene 2011.

the main story is about the boys being tired of playing baseball for the school team and only wanting to quit, but since every other team they face also want to lose, they advance further and further in the playoffs and grow even more tired and restless of America's "national pastime".⁷⁴³ As a supportive father, Randy follows the kid's baseball games and due to a combination of alcohol and overt emotions he finds himself embroiled in fistfights with other fathers at every single game he attends. Every time he is rounded up and arrested by local police, he shouts "I thought this was America!". Despite it being a satirical take on overenthusiastic sports parents and an overreliance on the powers of the first amendment, it conveys a strong faith that America is the land of the free and the place where all manners of expression should be allowed, since it is the greatest and freest country on Earth.

Accepting Nation and America

A neutral positioning towards the nation is something that is often overlooked and rarely the focus of academic research. It is probably the least scrutinized part of this text, but it is the most common representation of American national identity. All parodies using American art like film and television as source texts and not infusing it with a critical spin is an acceptance and reaffirming of American national identity. Establishing the fact that the USA exists and that it is there and that this is neither positive nor negative is not something that offers itself easily to analysis, but it is important not to overlook it. It is in the neutral positioning of the nation that most national reinforcing occurs. It is here that sedimentation where the nation is taken for granted and treated as something that has always existed and will always exist is firmly established.⁷⁴⁴ In the neutral approach to the nation more so than in the positive approach, we take the nation for granted as it is not similarly highlighted or exposed. The section in Chapter 4 outlines how painstakingly conscious animators have to be when creating connections to real-life America, something that the other shows to a lesser extent needs because they are set in America, but something that live action film and television reiterate automatically.

Nationalism is something different from nation, but in the case of invisible representations of nation it is closely connected to invisible expressions of nationalism. Since these are the actions we take every day to reinforce the nation

⁷⁴³ Baseball is often referred to as America's "national pastime" due to its cultural legacy and central place in American national identity. The origin of the phrase is an article in the New York Mercury from 1856 that was written as a response to the sport's popularity in Northeastern USA at the time, see <https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/baseball-america/about-this-exhibition/origins-and-early-days>.

⁷⁴⁴ Stychin 1998, p. 3, Medhurst 2007, p. 28, Skey 2011, pp. 4-5, Billig 1995, p. 61.

often without even being aware of it, they also become actions of nationalism. It is the kind of nationalism that is hidden in the open, so taken for granted that it is rendered invisible. This is the banal nationalism that Billig talks of, and the borders between accepting the nation and accepting nationalism become blurrier the less you highlight actions of reinforcing the nation and nationalism, whether it be in a positive or negative light. What has become the most quoted example of banal nationalism from Billig is the difference between waving the national flag at a sporting event or a political rally, and the national flag that hangs in the background at a place of work without drawing any attention to itself. The flag is one of the prime examples used for expression of national identity, but it is also one of the key elements of the sedimentation of the nation, national identity, and nationalism. The national flag has different meaning and importance in different countries, and symbols such as the national flag are prevalent in American national identity. If the Union Jack or the St George's Cross signals Britishness and Englishness respectively, the American Flag, also known as The Stars and Stripes, Red, White & Blue, Old Glory or The Star-Spangled Banner is perhaps the most commonly used symbol associated with American nationalism. Michael Billig quotes Ernest Renan when he concludes that "Of all countries, the United States is arguably today the home of what Renan called "the cult of the flag".⁷⁴⁵

Billig makes a point of using flags both literally and figuratively when drawing distinctions between expressive and banal nationalism, the difference between the waved and hanging flag, but he establishes that any way you look at it, the USA is a country that uses flags excessively. In *Texas vs Johnson* 1989 concerning the burning of the American flag the Supreme Court defended the right to do so, but two justices wrote dissenting views claiming that the US flag holds such extraordinary value that it should be exempt from the first amendment protecting free speech.⁷⁴⁶ It is noticeable evidence of the symbolic value the flag holds in the US and sets the ground for what it means to use it or desecrate it.

It is easy, however, to examine the constant use of flags and conclude that the USA therefore is a more patriotic or nationalistic country than others, but this is not necessarily the case. Consider the difference between flag use in neighboring countries like my native country Sweden and Norway for example, especially during the celebration of the respective national holidays, May 17th in Norway and June 6th in Sweden. The national day celebration in Norway is intense, popular, and contains an excessive quantity of flags waved every year. It is celebrated by a large part of the population and the national colors of the flag, incidentally the familiar red, white and blue, are everywhere all day. In contrast, the national day in Sweden is hardly celebrated by anyone despite tenacious efforts from local and national governments, exemplifying the political dimension of

⁷⁴⁵ Billig 1995, p. 39, where he quotes Renan 1990, p. 17.

⁷⁴⁶ Little 2015.

nationalism that Michael Skey was talking about. The national day was simply “Svenska Flaggans Dag” (“The Day of the Swedish Flag”) until 1983, it only became a bank holiday in 2005 and there is no consensus on how to celebrate the day. It is a national flag day, where you are allowed to raise the Swedish flag on your flagpole if you own one, but the celebrations are sparse, and the flags are not as enthusiastically whipped around as they are in Norway.

So, is Sweden a less nationalistic or patriotic country than Norway? Well, that is neither a yes or no question nor within the scope of this text, but the celebration of the national holiday and the usage of flags is not what decides the level of national sense of self. Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1905 and was occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II; Sweden has been more or less independent since its inception and has not been in a war for over 200 years. It is safe to assume that nationalism in Norway and Sweden, two countries that have more in common than most countries in the world, would look different considering who has two liberations to celebrate and who can take their nation for granted and for absolute certain. Even though Swedish nationalism is not expressed in the same way as Norwegian nationalism is, at least during their respective national day celebration, it does not mean that it is not there. Nationalism in Sweden, with the exception of national sporting events and far-right nationalist movements, is usually understated, quiet, and almost invisible, but it is at the same time self-evident, unwavering, and taken for granted in a way that probably only a country that has not been questioned or challenged for a long time can manifest. In Sweden today, it is rarely needed, once again outside the realm of national sporting events and neofascist nationalistic rhetoric, to use symbols like flags to rally support for the existence and defense of the nation, the nation is already obvious and self-evident. And even though the American flag is very present, very used, and highly waved during celebrations and in everyday life, it alone is not enough to ascertain levels of American nationalism. Suffice it to say that it does play a part, and that it is one of many markers of national identity.

In animation, the flag hanging on the wall or placed on a desk does not just happen to be there. If there is a flag in an image, it has been placed there. The American flag is such an obvious and recognizable symbol of national identity that when it is placed in frame in animation, it always fills some kind of purpose. In *Archer* S03E06 *The Limited* the episode starts with an enormous American flag in picture as an establishing shot from the Grand Central Station in New York but also to signal that the characters are leaving the US for Canada in the episode. The *Americanine Shooter* poster parody of *American Sniper* in *BoJack Horseman* S04E05 *Thoughts and Prayers* reiterates the flag from the source text but adds a miniature anthropomorphized eagle at the top of the flagpole for an extra parodic gag as an inversion of American flagpoles often using an eagle symbol at the top. The Oval Office is full of American flags in the episodes of *Rick and Morty* that

visit the room, as a true reiteration of its source text, but the American flags are undoubtedly there, and they are visible for someone looking for them.

In the material chosen for analysis accepting nation or nationalism can be a simple and basic thing like language, that the language spoken in all five shows is English and that exceptions from that are exceptions and treated as such. All five shows visit versions of existing American cities like New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and New Orleans, and all five shows at some point show versions of the Statue of Liberty, of the Golden Gate Bridge, of eating apple pie and hamburgers, of watching American television, of meeting hillbillies and rednecks, and of gambling in Las Vegas. *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is the only show that does not depict American gun culture, but just as the other four shows it contains references to the American west filtered through film and television versions of the western. The American film industry is depicted in all shows except *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. Rick hosts the Oscars, BoJack thinks he is nominated for, and Sarah Lynn wins an Oscar, Phil Collins waves his Oscar for best original song in *South Park*, and the seventh season of *Archer* culminates on the film set of *Deadly Velvet* where Archer ends up shot and left for dead in a pool in a parodic reiteration of *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder 1950). These are some examples of representations of American national identity that solidifies and sediments notions of nation and nationalism without drawing attention to itself. However, the most obvious and visible representation in the material of nation, nationalism, and national identity is discussed in the following section, focusing on criticism of America. It is also the section that will be dealt with in most detail and depth.

Criticizing America

BoJack Horseman offers many examples of criticism of American nationalism and the USA as country and society. The conflation of capitalism and national identity, including commodification of media and journalism is addressed in chapter five, and the pervasive nature and gendered consequences of American gun legislation is addressed in chapter seven. The show also contains two interesting storylines that criticize specific parts of structures in American society that are in some ways unique for the country and I argue that these structures are in the very least tangential to integral parts of American national identity. The are American celebrity culture and American abortion legislation, and they are both satirized and critiqued through the use of parody in the show.

BoJack's status as a celebrity and the consequences or lack of consequences of his actions is one of the main throughlines of the show. He frequently invokes his status and privilege as a celebrity, saying things like "also, remember that I am a

celebrity” or “I am a famous”.⁷⁴⁷ This is literalized into satire of its structural pervasiveness in S02E05 *Chickens* where BoJack invokes his status as a celebrity in order to release Todd and accomplices from custody after they have been arrested for harboring Becca the chicken as a fugitive from chicken emporium Chicken 4 Dayz. After saying “Listen up everybody! I, famous celebrity BoJack Horseman, have an announcement. I’m gonna have to ask you to drop all charges against my friends on account of me being a celebrity. We gracefully accept the requisite slap on the wrist and a brief, but ultimately pointless trial in the court of public opinion. Good day.” the arresting police officer begrudgingly admits that “Well, you are famous, so you are all free to go”. By allowing celebrity status to go via parodic literalization from indirect to direct influence over law enforcement, the episode offers satirical commentary on the structural safekeeping of Hollywood celebrities, and it is not the only time the show does this.

In S02E07 *Hank After Dark*, Diane speaks candidly about the public sexual allegations directed at famous and popular TV host Hank Hippopopolous, or “Uncle Hanky” as he is colloquially known. Hank confronts Diane in a scene parodying the Deep Throat garage scenes from *All the President’s Men* (Pakula 1976) without any comedic intent. The episode is a satirical commentary on male celebrities avoiding consequences for violent or sexual abuse or misconduct. Uncle Hanky is not punished for his wrongdoings and is allowed to keep on doing them, his celebrity status and popularity unchanged despite the allegations being part of public record.

In S05E04 *BoJack the Feminist* celebrity bad boy Vance Waggoner, a parodic reiteration of a coagulation of male film stars like mainly Mel Gibson, but also Alec Baldwin and Mark Wahlberg, apologizes every time he commits an atrocity, whether it is sexual harassment, statutory rape, drunk driving, racial and antisemitic abuse including an unprovoked attack against Swedish people, violent behavior, or domestic abuse. The pervasive structure of male Hollywood stars apologizing and doing the same thing all over again is literalized through the inclusion of the *We Forgive You Awards* show, where the best apologies of the previous year is honored with a Forgivie. In the episode, Waggoner receives a Lifetime Achievement Award at the ceremonies, which in and of itself works as a parodic inversion of the concept of lifetime achievement awards since forgiveness is not something that should be repeatedly necessary nor celebrated. Writing about the depictions of Hollywood celebrities in *BoJack Horseman*, Arya Rani concludes that just as Diane says in the episode, media can normalize abusers when abusers like Vance Waggoner are given a platform.⁷⁴⁸ Sarah Wagstaffe writing about forgiveness and masculinity in *BoJack Horseman* comments on *BoJack the*

⁷⁴⁷ See Alexander 2024, pp. 153-169 for further discussion on celebrity and entitlement in *BoJack Horseman*, specifically connected to the houses used in the show.

⁷⁴⁸ Rani 2024, p. 176.

Feminist that in the episode, “BoJack is celebrated as a hero for implying that Vance is not a good person, while Diane Nguyen points out Hollywood’s hypocrisy in acting shocked by (usually male) celebrities behaving badly, while jumping at the opportunity to publicly forgive them and allow them a profitable comeback”. This is illustrated in the episode by Vance Waggoner receiving his lifetime achievement award. It is a part of a structure in celebrity culture generally but in Hollywood celebrity culture specifically, where, as Wagstaffe puts it, “[s]o many powerful people in Hollywood, especially men, have either done bad things or would if given the chance that forgiveness is given without question or need for real repentance”.⁷⁴⁹

In S05E11 *The Showstopper* and S05E12 *The Stopped Show*, celebrity culture and structural abuse intercross again, but in two distinctly different ways. Throughout season five, BoJack has become increasingly addicted to painkillers to the point where he in the penultimate episode of the season has difficulties separating real life from the fictional detective show *Philbert* that he stars in. As discussed in chapter two, *Philbert* is a parody of gritty detective series in general and *True Detective* (2014-) specifically. Showrunner Flip McVicker is a parodic reiteration of the myth of the male genius where his overblown ego is frequently lampooned through subtle depictions of his incompetence, illustrated by his casual misogyny, his frequent overuse of the word “literally” when his scripts are not supervised by Diane, and literalized and exaggerated line exchanges like co-star Gina’s character Sassy saying “kiss me, you smart handsome renegade” and BoJack’s Philbert answering “there’s no time for that, the nuclear missiles are coming”. Just as *True Detective* showrunner Nic Pizzolatto, Flip is accused of plagiarism, but in his case it is by two comedians writing jokes for ice popsicle sticks.⁷⁵⁰ *The Showstopper* is introduced through an alternative version of the main title theme and intro, where the usual panoramic tracking shot through BoJack’s house is replaced by close-ups of a bulletin board where lines are drawn between different clues and notes like “check dark web”, “don’t trust orphans”, and “buy more push-pins” in a parodic inversion of conspiracy mapping in detective shows. The music accompanying the intro is a slow and dark country blues song in minor key strongly reminiscent of the intro songs of *True Detective* season one and two.⁷⁵¹

In the episode, BoJack finds a mysterious threatening note and tries to find who could have sent it to him. The investigation is mixed with storylines from the second season of *Philbert* illustrating BoJack’s increasingly dismantled sense of reality through subjective perspectivity and BoJack’s use of detective costumes

⁷⁴⁹ Wagstaffe 2024, p. 201.

⁷⁵⁰ <https://www.vox.com/2014/8/7/5975769/true-detective-a-work-of-plagiarism-a-guide>

⁷⁵¹ Season one theme song is *Far from any road* by The Handsome Family and season two is *Nevermind* by Leonard Cohen.

and props on set and in private. In a parodic inversion of conspiracy theories and the use of the bulletin board, BoJack narrates himself placing photos with pushpins on a bulletin board in his home, the parodic inversion emphasized by him asking “what to they all have in common?” and pinning a photo of rapper Common on the board. He makes his assistant take notes on his conspiracy theories and then turns away and says out loud “The fascinating mysteries of detective BoJack, who is great, will continue after this”. Even in his discombobulated state where fiction and reality blend together, BoJack still remembers to insert himself in the narrative, complete with cuing up commercials. On set Gina asks what is wrong and BoJack once again turns away and says with gritty voice and squinted eyes “I can’t tell her the truth, she’s safer knowing nothing” in an attempt at voice-over narration, but he says the line out loud, and Gina asks if he realizes he said that out loud. BoJack uses the style, narrative techniques, and tropes of film and television that he knows and that are part of him, just like he uses the spinning chair technique, montage sequences, or waits for the credits to roll in examples from earlier seasons. BoJack is not only a celebrity, but he is also such an integral part of Hollywood film and television culture that it is ingrained in his way of interacting with the outside world. The episode ends with BoJack choking Gina as part of a scene on set but where the blurred lines of reality and fiction have him perform the act for real, only stopping after Mr. Peanutbutter and additional crew members break them up.

In an interesting example of the use of parody leading up to the final scene, BoJack experiences a dream sequence where Gina performs a musical number that Rani identifies as “inspired by Judy Garland’s “Get Happy” (*Summer Stock*, 1950), Ann Reinking’s “There Will Be Some Changes Mage” (*All That Jazz*, 1979), Liza Minelli’s “Mein Herr” (*Cabaret*, 1972), and “Nowadays” (*Chicago*, 1975)”. Rani, quoting Richard Dyer, states that the song “asserts the never-ending performance of a star both on- and off-camera; like Dyer’s claim that the ‘public self is endlessly produced and remade in presentation’”.⁷⁵² The number emphasizes the inevitability and tragedy of BoJack’s stardom. As a star he needs to continue performing and he needs to continue being a celebrity because it is what is expected of him, and it is what the Hollywood industry will make him do. This is underlined in the next episode *The Stopped Show* when the gears of celebrity industry start to grind and forces BoJack and Gina to address what happened on set as an unfortunate event, but nothing more. BoJack wants to own up to what he did, but he is not allowed to. Gina does not want her career derailed and forever connected to the more famous actor that abused her, but due to the trauma of the incident affecting her behavior on other productions, she is classified as a “difficult actor”, and her career is derailed anyway.

⁷⁵² Rani 2024, p. 177, quoting Dyer 2004, p. 12.

Rani points out how the structures of Hollywood and celebrity media work together to protect abusive male celebrities. What starts in *BoJack the Feminist* and continues in *The Showstopper* and *The Stopped Show* culminates in S06E12 *Xerox of a Xerox* where some of BoJack's wrongdoings like him choking Gina and his role in the death of Sarah Lynn is brought to the surface by *His Girl Friday* pastiche Paige Sinclair. Immediately Princess Carolyn starts working on damage control with celebrity interviewer Biscuits Braxby in order to protect BoJack by portraying him in a sympathetic light and allowing the public to forgive him. However, Sinclair convinces Braxby that BoJack needs to face the consequences of his actions, and by using parodic reiterations of celebrity media, in an episode aptly referencing Jean Baudrillard's writings on simulacra and the absence of originality or authenticity, the show delivers what reality rarely can, consequences for a male celebrity.⁷⁵³ As Rani points out, using parodic reiterations of celebrity media in the form of *Hollywoo Reporter* and *Braxby Means Business*, both dependent on "stories that are considered bad journalism", to investigate and expose BoJack's actions flips the script on what is considered quality journalism and offers a comment on good or bad culture in the process.⁷⁵⁴

I argue that Hollywood and Hollywood culture, with its long history and tradition of films and stars imbued with American national identity and central in the creation of American national identity, is a key structure in what constitutes American national identity today. The film industry, and to a lesser extent the television industry, have more than any other media form established America as the cultural dominant in large parts of the world. It is an integral part of what has made America the ideal of dreams and ambition, and what has made America the focal point and main reference of cultural discourse. In that sense, Hollywood and the Hollywood industry is an important part of what constitutes American national identity, and a critique of Hollywood and its inherent structures is a critique of American national identity. What *BoJack Horseman* does, through the means of parody and satire, is to criticize the pervasive gendered structures of American celebrity culture in its systematic defense of and forgiveness to male stars and executives, as representatives in extension of American national identity.

American abortion laws are heavily criticized in S03E06 *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew*. Diane is having an abortion with Mr. Peanutbutter but accidentally tweets that her client, teen pop diva Sextina Aquafina, is the one having the abortion. The tweet gains traction and support from celebrities to the point where Sextina decides to fake an abortion. She releases a new single and music video celebrating this, titled *Get Dat Fetus, Kill Dat Fetus*, while Diane goes through the actual process of getting an abortion. The music video *Get Dat Fetus, Kill Dat Fetus* is first and foremost a general parody of the excessiveness of music videos. Episode writer

⁷⁵³ Baudrillard 1994.

⁷⁵⁴ Rani 2024, p. 178.

Joanna Calo, director Amy Winfrey, and animation director Anne Walker Farrell cites Rihanna's *Bitch Better Have My Money* as a direct reference, but influences from Taylor Swift, Nicki Minaj, Megan Thee Stallion, M.I.A. and P Diddy can also be seen in the video. Winfrey says that Netflix was initially a bit hesitant about the abortion music video. They thought that "perhaps we should mostly show the reaction on Diane's face".⁷⁵⁵ The generality of the references is very skillfully used here to mimic the mosaic of quotations or the simulacra that is so common in the world of music videos. The video also parodies scenes from the *Alien* (1979-) franchise and the *Mad Max* (1979-2024) franchise, where the *Mad Max* scene is a commentary on the common use of mise-en-scène and costume randomly plucked from movies and inserted in music videos. The *Alien* parody is referenced in the lyrics, which is itself a parodic reiteration of hip-hop lyrics, but it is also referenced in the video and works as a general sci-fi parody and a specific parodic inversion of the abortion scene in *Prometheus* (Scott 2012), where the visceral corporality and life-threatening menace of the original is replaced with arranged in-your-face attitude and sexual commodification.

The episode oscillates between the public reaction that Sextina faces as the new face of abortion, and the many hoops that Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter must jump through in order to get their abortion. Parodic versions of daytime variety shows and news shows satirize ignorance on facts of abortion, where "A Ryan Seacrest Type" on *Excess Hollywood* thinks that one in three women getting an abortion in their life sounds "crazy high", and Tom Jumbo-Grumbo as anchor of *MSNBSea Megadesk* poses the question that maybe the concept of women having choices has gone too far, which he asks from a "diverse panel of white men in bow ties to talk about abortion". Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter are informed that before they can have an abortion, they need to look at an ultrasound and listen to the baby's heartbeat, which is what happens in real-life America. They are then informed in a parodic exaggeration that the doctor must tell them that at one month old the baby might have a favorite color, and that color may be blue, and that Diane before the procedure must look at twenty hours' worth of cute puppy videos as Sara McLachlan's *I Will Remember You* plays softly. Sextina decides to live broadcast her abortion which at first comes with some moral and practical obstacles, but when watching the broadcast after getting her own procedure, Diane is knocked back at how "surprisingly tasteful" and "weirdly educational" it is.

When Diane starts to hint that her need for an abortion was not as great as other women at the clinic, Princess Carolyn stops her by saying "Diane, you don't need to explain anything." It is a truly human beat in an otherwise high-paced, reference heavy and hilarious episode, and it shows that the intention of the creators was not only entertainment, but to also show a slice of reality. Gretchen Sissons states that the humor of the episode "is never directed at Diane and her actual abortion—

⁷⁵⁵ McDonnell 2018, pp. 226-227.

instead, it mocks abortion restrictions, regressive news narratives, and over-the-top celebrity culture, while also providing accurate and destigmatizing details about abortion's frequency, physical recovery, and emotional aftermath".⁷⁵⁶ Television is a factor that can be and have been used to increase women's anxieties about abortion, but as in this case by accurately depicting a character's abortion decision and experience and through parody satirize the absurdity of American abortion laws, restrictions, and culture, it can also be used to help construct more productive narratives.⁷⁵⁷

Rick and Morty and the Sacred Conflict

A central aspect of the concept of carnival from Bakhtin is to cross boundaries and attack that which is sacred.⁷⁵⁸ Sacred used to mean the realm of church or king, but the modern use of sacred events constitutes those that are deemed symbolically important for a sense of community. In film and television, symbolically important sacred events are often represented and delivered through minor-key music, close-ups of emotional faces, and slow zooms, to elicit a respectful, serious tone. Scepanski uses *Family Guy* as an example of the carnivalesque where comedy and satire can be used to ridicule and transform the sacred but also help return the conversation to the sacred and help people return to normalcy and tradition in that they no longer live in a time when it is "too soon" to talk about something sacred.⁷⁵⁹ I would argue that this is also true for all the shows in this analysis with the possible exception of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

Hollywood initially struggled with how to handle action and violence in movies after the events of 9/11.⁷⁶⁰ Before 9/11 there were several instances of terrorist attacks on American soil, from anarchists and worker's movements at the turn of the last century to far right activists, "pro-life" extremists and political terrorists of both domestic and international origin in the decades leading up to the attack. As Stephen Prince aptly shows, there were plenty of depictions of terrorism in Hollywood movies before 2001, increasing in pace with the growing number of international terrorist attacks and the subsequent increased awareness of terrorism in people's minds.⁷⁶¹ Terrorism on American soil was nothing new, but 9/11 was on a different scale both in terms of casualties and attention and in the degree of

⁷⁵⁶ Sissons 2019, pp. 239-256.

⁷⁵⁷ Hall 2013, Munro et al 2009, Sissons et al 2021.

⁷⁵⁸ Bakhtin 1984b, p. 5.

⁷⁵⁹ Scepanski 2018.

⁷⁶⁰ Prince 2009, pp. 2-3.

⁷⁶¹ Cmp Prince 2009, pp. 17-70.

fear it incited in the American population, and which has remained as a feature of American everyday life since then.⁷⁶² In many years after the 9/11 attacks, George W Bush used the phrase “evil-doers” to describe Al Qaida and its supposed allies and protectors, a natural and unwavering evil that hates the USA and its freedom and will do anything to destroy it. Their evil was constructed as something natural, something that was part of their constitution, hence something that would never change.⁷⁶³ Bush explained why terrorists must be punished after 9/11 by saying that “the enormity of their evil demands it”.⁷⁶⁴ The dichotomy of the good side vs the evil side, “our” side against the terrorist’s side, was repeated from the morning of the attacks and during Bush’s entire term of office.

Many Americans bought in to the strategy, to become official American foreign policy, of good vs evil. It was a graspable and palpable explanation that helped people make sense of the events and helped unite the country in sharing distress and sorrow, but it also had, as Jamie Warner states, “profound consequences for dissent”.⁷⁶⁵ What started as official government policy soon became the only possible policy, and many journalists, media outlets and creators of popular culture not only accepted but actively sought out opportunities to celebrate and reaffirm their stance on the good side vs evil. David Gurney states: “The boundaries of acceptable discourse were tightened and vehemently policed post-9/11, and even the intimation of transgression became unacceptable.”⁷⁶⁶ The molding of 9/11 into first trauma, then compulsory and all-encompassing patriotism, was highly deliberate and orchestrated by the government in order to rally the country around its causes.⁷⁶⁷ The 9/11 events and its aftermath including mourning victims and celebrating heroes of fire departments, police departments, and armed troops, was turned into a sacred event that was not to be criticized or made fun of in any form.

To cement the dichotomy of good vs evil in an American discourse the concept of religion and the figure of God is often used. During the Gulf War both sides invoked God as playing on their side. President Bush often called on God to bless all forces on their side, concluding by saying “May He continue to bless our nation, the United States of America.”⁷⁶⁸ In *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis* (Trenchard-Smith 2003), the fictional versions of George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice agree that terrorists don’t hate people for what they do, but for what they are. Bush says: “Modernity, pluralism, freedom - these are good things, Condi. Liberty is God’s

⁷⁶² Ibid, pp. 3 and 18-21 where he describes previous instances of terrorism on American soil.

⁷⁶³ Ibid, pp. 187-188.

⁷⁶⁴ Monje 2011, p. 192.

⁷⁶⁵ Warner 2011, pp. 58-61.

⁷⁶⁶ Gurney 2011, p. 14.

⁷⁶⁷ Gournelos 2011, p. 92.

⁷⁶⁸ Bilig 1995, pp. 4-6.

gift. It is not negotiable on this watch, and that is the policy.” The music then starts swelling as he prays.⁷⁶⁹

Warner references Phillip Wander’s 1984 article where he defines *prophetic dualism* through his examination of the American cold war rhetoric. Prophetic dualism seeks to divide the world into two conflicting camps, one side that acts in accordance with “all that is good, decent, and at one with God’s will”, while the other side is in direct opposition. The only resolution to the conflict between the two sides is the total annihilation of one side, and since there is no guarantee the side of good will prevail, there is no room for middle ground, meaning that “neutrality may be treated as a delusion, compromise appeasement, and negotiation a call for surrender”.⁷⁷⁰

Wander highlights the difficulty of public discourse in a landscape shaped by a binary dichotomy where the good side is the side of God, since it is difficult to argue with God’s will when it is so clearly expressed. If God is truth and God is on our side, the truth is on our side, and every attempt to variegate that is evil and wrong and should be quelled immediately. In the media landscape after the 9/11 attacks the American press core with very few exceptions reiterated the dichotomized language of the government. As Warner phrases it, “[a]pparently, watchdogs were unnecessary for those who are on God’s side.”⁷⁷¹ Right wing pundits like Bill O’Reilly have continued to construct and reproduce a simplistic world view of good vs evil, where the evil side consists of terrorists and illegal immigrants, but also non-Christians. On the virtuous side are, besides Christians, right-leaning media, Republicans, and “a vague notion of the American people”.⁷⁷²

Earle and Clarke emphasizes the tight grip that evangelical Christianity has had on the political status quo in the US in the last decades and Billig points out how God is often invoked as a reason for national unity where “[t]he order of nations is not designed to serve God, but God is to serve the order.”⁷⁷³ This is not something new in American society or for the American film and television industry. The “don’ts and be carefals” which developed into the production code rules and recommendation specifically talks about not using pointed profanity like the words “God”, “Lord”, “Jesus”, or “Christ” and strongly discourages ridicule of the clergy or of “any religious faith honestly maintained”.⁷⁷⁴ In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, religion was weaponized as a patriotic tool in order to quell resistance and dissenting voices in the US, patriotism was made sacred in and of

⁷⁶⁹ Prince 2009, pp. 258-259.

⁷⁷⁰ Warner 2011, quoting Wander 1984, p. 342.

⁷⁷¹ Warner 2011, p. 61.

⁷⁷² Gray et al 2009, p. 129, quoting Conway et al 2007.

⁷⁷³ Billig 1995, p. 4, Earle and Clarke 2019, p. 6.

⁷⁷⁴ Mintez et al 2015, p. 131.

itself, but even more so in connection to the already sacred Christianity of the American nation. The dichotomy of good versus evil was invoked to divide the world into us and them and any protest could be deemed unpatriotic, Unamerican, and therefore evil. *Rick and Morty* satirizes and parodies this through numerous examples in the show where they do not draw a line between good and evil, but between science and religion, and expose how religion can be used to subdue protest and reinforce authority. The show uses parody and satire to turn religion from something sacred and sedimented in American society to a cautionary example of the dangers with authoritarian rule and the blind following of mystical leaders and reactionary dogmas.

The fault line between science and religion is one of the central conflicts in *Rick and Morty*. Three minutes into the pilot episode, Rick establishes that, "there is no God, Summer. You gotta rip that band aid off now, you'll thank me later."⁷⁷⁵ He is a self-proclaimed man of science and has little patience for expressions of religion no matter where they pop up. Everything that someone considers sacred in the sense that they imbue it with mysticism and reverence and defies logic or science is something that Rick takes issue with, and the concept of good and evil that was made so clear in the American aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is not as clear-cut in *Rick and Morty*. In S01E09 *Something Ricked This Way Comes* Summer gets a job at a store run by the literal Devil. He sells cursed items with an ironic twist, like an aphrodisiac making someone irresistible to women but impotent, or a beauty-cream that turns someone pretty but renders the user blind. Rick, as a self-proclaimed "man of science" discloses all secrets and start selling serum that counteracts the spells. What drives Rick is not self-interest or the prospect of making money on his remedies, it is to be right and to make sure that someone else is wrong. He is provoked by mysticism and magic, whether or not it is connected to religious characters as in this case.

In S02E05 *Get Schwifty* a giant head arrives on Earth, causing climate catastrophes and general panic, demanding of the people of Earth to "show me what you got". Rick immediately recognizes the head as a Cromulon from the Sigmum 5 expanse that produce and watch a competition where different planets are tasked to write and perform the best original song, much in the vein of gameshows like *American Idol* (2002-), *So You Think You Can Dance?* (2005-), or *The Voice* (2011-). His knowledge of other worlds allows him to recognize the giant head for what it is and not start treating it as something sacred, mystic, and worthy of reverence. While Rick, Morty and Ice-T are concerned with writing the song, Summer, Beth and Jerry are embroiled in the events that unfold in their community. Everyone gathers in the church to talk to and support each other and to find some answers to what the giant head wants. The local priest tries to calm

⁷⁷⁵ See Miranda2017, Bosman 2022, Genovesi 2024, and Holm and Donian 2024 for further discussion on *Rick and Morty* and the role of religion.

everyone by saying that “every crisis of faith is a chance to more faith” which does not fall into favor with the gathering crowd. After some back and forth the principal at the kids’ school suggests that all Gods and traditions are dead and that they should all start worshipping the only true God, the giant head in the sky. He becomes the leader of a new cult religion that harshly punishes those deemed “not of true faith”, like thieves, goths, a guy that talked in a movie theater, and an inappropriate joke teller. This is performed with a ceremony called the Ascension Festival, where the evildoers are strapped to helium balloons and sent into orbit. As they are untethered by the principal, he cites “headward, free now to rise” as a parodic inversion of the many traditional phrases and chants within the Christian faiths. Religious totalitarianism with capital punishment is nothing new, but what the episode depicts is how easily and readily people might be willing to accept it when circumstances allow it. All it takes for a murderous theocracy to gain power is a giant head in the sky and the fear of the people. The religion is dubbed Headism, and a few of the rites and rituals introduced are singing the seven contemplations of the head, wearing a head hat, praying “may my chores complete me as I complete them”, and growing lots of potatoes. The parody of religious rituals has two functions and two polemic edges, against organized religion itself and the way it prioritizes rituals and traditions over human life and human worth, and as a warning against anti-intellectualism in society where the misinterpretation and distortion of facts lead to totalitarianism in a gullible population. The religion collapses when the participants realize they were just taking part in a reality show, and that they might have misinterpreted reactions from the giant heads as endorsing mass murder and assassinating political enemies. Society quickly resets to normal. This can be interpreted as a classical sitcom reset, but due to the extreme consequences that the giant head and the Headism religion has caused in society, the swift reset functions more as a parody of the trope, much in the same way that the town of South Park is always reset at the beginning of next episode despite the enormous destruction that has sometimes occurred in the previous episode. When the reset is exaggerated enough, it becomes parody and destabilizes the trope it uses more than reinforces it.⁷⁷⁶

Two episodes centered around meta humor and meta storytelling are S04E06 *Never Ricking Morty* and S06E07 *Full Meta Jackrick*. Rick and Morty try to fight off villain Story Lord, who uses different narration devices, intertextuality and meta callbacks. In both episodes, religion generally and Christianity specifically play parts. In *Never Ricking Morty*, Rick and Morty are trapped on a train full of meta stories and risk being defeated if they do not find something that is so far from what they would normally do that it breaks the immersion of the train as a story device, so they turn to religious prayer and defeat the villain with the help of

⁷⁷⁶ For an extensive discussion on *Rick and Morty* and religion generally and *Get Schwifty* specifically, see Bosman 2022.

Jesus. Morty is concerned that ripping on God, the bible and Christianity might be cynical and a cheap shot, but Rick comforts him by reminding him that they were literally saved by Jesus Christ and that no-one can find that offensive. Story Lord returns in *Full Meta Jackrick* which starts with Rick and Morty caught in a loop of “previously on”-scenes instigated by a character named Previous Leon who runs from a fight with Rick and escapes through a rip in the fourth wall. Rick puts goggles on Morty which allows him to see how everything around him contributes to the story, revealing, for instance, a literal deus ex machina, some Chekhov’s guns and a ticking clock in Rick’s garage laboratory. They catch up to Leon after a rather heavy-handed but earnest comparison between creativity and mental illness explaining why creative people are always miserable. Leon also prays to Jesus who show up and save him, but only until villain Story Lord show up and reveal that Leon was bait and directs Jesus as his henchman to rip Leon’s wings off. Morty tries to point out that Jesus beating someone up is very *South Park*. However, Jesus lets Morty know that he is Jesus from every Jesus joke and that he therefore does not have a God. He is comedic satire in corporal form. These two episodes combine a barrage of storytelling tropes, specifically those used most commonly in film and television, to offer a literally sacrilegious attack on religion and Christianity. American evangelic Christianity has permeated politic life to the extent where it is considered impossible to become a leader of the nation without pledging allegiance to its rules and messages. Patriotic American national identity and Christian religion were both made even more sacred after the 9/11 attacks, and the combination of the two became a compulsory requirement in political public life. This is what *Rick and Morty* attacks by using harbingers of Christian faith in their meta narrative, and even though the notion of praying being furthest from what the characters would do is a bit heavy-handed, the satiric parody of Jesus as an incarnation of divinity is an effective attack on the sacred and an example of resistance against American authoritative figureheads.

A clear-cut example of the anti-religious tendencies of Rick in particular, but also the show in general, can be found in S06E02 *A Mort Well Lived*. Morty is stuck in a video game where he plays all the roles in the game except the character Roy, who is played by Rick who is trying to save Morty from the game but inadvertently gains a religious cult following in the process. In the episode, the police storm a meeting of Roy’s followers yelling “You’re under arrest for being religious in the wrong way”. This echoes the institutionalized dichotomy of good Christians versus evil non-Christians that became a dominant discourse in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and only has been exacerbated since then, leading to the American government through The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detaining children for being immigrants and arresting and deporting people for expressing dissenting views. Rick grows tired of the police and admonishes them to just shoot him and when one police officer says, “You think your God makes you bulletproof?”, Rick/Roy replies “There’s no God in the real world, you

fragmented putz. There is extra no God in this world.” More often than not it is religion as a whole and not Christianity specifically that is the butt of the joke and the target of criticism in *Rick and Morty*. Rick is one of the protagonists, which is not to say that his words and actions are the same as the moral or political message of the series, but in terms of pinning religion against science and declaring science the clear winner, the show follows the same path as Rick. Religion, mysticism, superstition, and magic are all seen as archaic, unimportant, and sometimes dangerous, a ruse to mislead and seduce a gullible population solely for purposes of money or power, never for spiritual enlightenment. Since the show is American and the cultural connections and references that it uses as its launching pad are American, I would argue that general religion and religious cults should be read as Christian religion if not explicitly stated otherwise. Christianity is mentioned and mocked more than other religions, but it is the concept of religion, of blind faith, and its intermingling in structures of power and politics which influence people’s lives whether they choose to or not, that the show takes a stand against.

In S06E09 *A Rick in King Mortur’s Mort*, Morty accepts a sword from a knight who is impressed by Morty choosing to stand in line for a sandwich when he was offered one for free. Accepting the sword means Morty must travel to the realm of Helios, situated on the Sun, which is a nation governed by ancient rules and tradition where they do things without questioning it since they have always done so, and this goes against everything Rick stands for. He mocks the Knights of Helios for not knowing the science behind not burning up close to the Sun, he says that the only point of tradition is doing things for no reason, and when the kingdom of Helios implodes after Morty leaves it, Rick proudly exclaims to the entire family that “someone just used critical thinking and basic physics to destroy their first entire religion” to which everyone exclaims “Nice Morty!” and “Good job!” It turns out, however, that the Knights of the Sun were responsible for keeping the political stability of the Galaxy, and when they disband there is discord between the planets’ representatives with the threat of all-out war looming. The entire episode uses parodic references to a *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) type scenario, where the different planets are equivalents of the houses of Westeros, clamoring for a chance to sit on the throne, as soon as the old ruler is gone. Consciously simplistic answers, the dichotomy of good and evil, and a clear and present enemy that is morally wrong and should be destroyed is something that the show satirizes, parodies, and subverts on numerous occasions during its run. It is not necessarily anti-religion, but it is pro-science, and it highlights the conflict between the two, especially when religion stops being a matter of personal faith and beliefs and starts becoming an organizing principle, for instance when constructing and maintaining an imagined community like a nation. The dangers of following a strong leader through blind faith is repeatedly emphasized, criticizing and subverting the interwoven fabric of religion and politics in American government, including faith-based anti-scientific stances like the dichotomy of good and evil

based on Christians and non-Christians, banning abortion, gay marriage, transsexualism, or critical thinking in general.

Rick and Morty and Nationalism

Rick and Morty's relationship with nationalism, the USA, and the American government is fraught at best and it is laced with parody and satire. In S03E10 *The Rickchurian Mortydate* Rick and Morty are enlisted by the President to take care of an alien monster in the Kennedy sex tunnels underneath the White House. They shoot the alien, later described by Morty as "an X-files monster", but when it scurries away, they both agree that this is rather boring and that the President treats them like the Ghostbusters, ready just a call away. There is no automatic loyalty or subservience to the Commander in Chief even for Morty, and Rick is loyal and subservient to no one. They would rather play *Minecraft* than do chores for the President. An enraged president says that the only reason the US does not arrest Rick and Morty is because they keep helping with these situations, so Rick and Morty explain that the US government would never be able to arrest them even if they tried. Morty says that "We'll keep on saving the world you know, we're happy to do that." and Rick adds "Yeah, but not because it contains America. Because moving to a new Earth is a bitch and a half." When the President refuses to accept that Rick and Morty can do things better than him, they solve the Israel-Palestine issue just to trump him in the "pretty obvious when you think about it" accord by inviting the parties to a *Star Wars* type cantina and smoke mind expanding space crystals. Not only is the basis and title of the episode a parody of *The Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer 1962), but literal world peace is achieved through the means of parody and intertextuality.

The Thanksgiving special episode S05E06 *Rick and Morty's Thanksplotation Spectacular* is jam-packed with representations and parodic iterations of national identity. With a giant American flag as a backdrop in the first image of the episode, Rick and Morty show up via portal gun at the National Archives to steal the Constitution because of the treasure map on its back, a plot point lifted from *National Treasure* (Turteltaub 2004). Rick tells Morty that it is the only worth the Constitution has since its front is just instructions on running a country and he notes "I'm pretty sure they're online". He also asks a hesitant Morty if he is "going to be a fucking America nerd or are you gonna be cool and steal the Constitution with grandpa?", but when Morty holds the laser gun used to access the room where the founding documents are kept, he accidentally shoots the Bill of Rights, the Head of the Lincoln Memorial, the Liberty Bell, and the Statue of Liberty, releasing a giant robot assassin that was hidden in it as a Trojan horse by the French. Rick scolds Morty because now they will be on the receiving end of the federal government's ire, "and on America's birthday, or whatever the fuck Thanksgiving

is". When the President predictably overreacts with countermeasures, he refers to Rick as a terrorist and Rick simply replies that the President has used that word so much that it now simply means someone that he does not like. Rick's plan to get out of the situation is to, as he has done several times before apparently, turn himself into a turkey and get the President to pardon him, like the real-life President does with a single turkey every Thanksgiving.

The preparation for the turkey pardoning and both sides scheming plays as a heist parody where both sides think they are ahead of the other, but when the President turns himself into a turkey Rick realizes that he may have made a mistake this time and that he will not get his pardon. A regular turkey is mistaken for the President and spliced with his DNA. This turkey President, in an effort to solidify his power should the real President come back, decides to sell New York, ravished by the giant French robot assassin that is allowed to run rampant, to the French and give all the money to the members of congress, who in turn confirm the turkey President as the real President when the original resurfaces. It is a biting comment on the financial motivations of the members of congress and how congressional decisions are made. After fleeing congress and the giant mutant turkey soldiers that the turkey President has produced, Rick and the President once again comes to blows and the President asks him why he hates this country, to which Rick replies, "I hate every country in the Universe, brother! They're job placement programs for the politicians that invent them."

The Thanksgiving story is given an alternative parody backstory when the truth behind it is revealed in the final act of the episode. Two alien spaceships landed in America in the 15th century carrying warring tribes of pilgrim and Native American lookalikes who needed to band together to take down the giant monster turkeys that roamed the American continent at the time. Morty does not know how to feel when confronted with this information, he says "I thought that we did everything and we invented everything and that's why we own everything" which in the episode work as a contrast to what he has just seen, but it is a telling perspective in line with the notions of American exceptionalism and the city upon a hill that is the center of everything and is entitled to anything. Morty's statement is not contradicted other than by the fantastical origin story of the pilgrims and Native Americans, which means that it must be read as the show's view on why America is the most powerful country in the real world. That the USA has done and invented many things is undeniable, but that it is the main source of its dominant status in the world today is debatable. The notion that the US "owns everything" is also questionable, even if it includes all Western colonial powers, which makes it an interesting closing line from Morty. The sentiment that the US is the greatest country on Earth is even reified by Rick in the episode when he threatens the President with moving to Canada, which would make that country the greatest on Earth. Even though the premise is that Rick is greater than any country on Earth, the greatest country is still America, and even though he says

damning things about nations and nationalism, he still has no problem recognizing America firstly as a country, and secondly as the greatest country.

While Rick and the President duke it out in the main plot line, an interesting side plot evolves concerning a soldier named Coop called up to be turned into a turkey and fight Rick. He gets the call in a pool hall, with his wife Mary-Lou, visibly pregnant with what the soldier refers to as their “little race car driver”, and asks her in his folksy Southern drawl what kind of world their son should grow up in, “one where a spiky-haired Doctor Who in a lab coat can change the color of the sky, or one where he can fill his pick-up full of hot dogs and drive it to a jukebox full of our demography’s current favorite music?”. It is an obvious parodic literalization on the common patriotic soldier doing his duty in a patriotic war movie fighting either alien monsters or evil foreigners and doing it for his family. Usually, he is the main character or the hero of those kinds of movies. He may not survive his ordeal, but he or his family is rewarded at the end of the movie, and he undoubtedly did the right thing for a good cause, and it was all worth it. This time he is a side character, and a parody of a stereotype at that. His good-bye make-out session with Mary-Lou is observed by the bartender pouring whiskey in a glass and wistfully stating “God, I love this country!” A quick montage shows the other soldiers called up for turkey duty, all with pregnant wives and pickup trucks, one driving away from a butter farm and the other three neighbors in a peaceful suburb, interestingly including an African American soldier and a female soldier leaving her pregnant wife behind.

After having been transformed into turkeys, the soldiers are equipped with military standard semi-automatic rifles and sunglasses. The failure of the first mission leaves Coop and his fellow soldiers destitute at the bar where he mutters “Birds replacing people. What would Johnny Cash or Dale Earnhardt say?”, confirming that true America for the white rural conservative population is country music and race car driving. The episode notes that this is a very limited part of America even though it is so often used as representatives for the entire American population. After helping with the final successful mission, Coop once again returns to Mary-Lou and the newborn baby in the post-credit scene. When Mary-Lou asks which of her two favorite cereals they should buy, Coop calmly says that she knows that they cannot afford either and that it is not the President’s fault that their insurance was cut because “they got to build missiles”. A crate of blueberries spills on the ground and the turkey genes in Coop takes over to make him forage for blueberries on the supermarket floor. While arena country music starts to swell in the background, another costumer says, “well I refuse to pay for this man’s health care”. If the main story ends with some form of patriotic reaffirmation, the side plot is a rather scathing criticism of the actions and priorities of the US government against the less affluent people in the country, even though they show every kind of patriotism, selflessness, and sense of duty that is always rewarded in other films and television shows. The parodic representation of the generic redneck

red-white-and-blue all-American soldier fighting for his country and what is right, turns into a realistic portrait of army veterans unable to afford food or health care for themselves or their families, and unable to receive help from those around them since everyone refuses to pay for health care for other people. It is the most damning and realistic event in the entire episode, despite its parodic and ironic tone, and despite the fact that Coop is acting like a turkey the last time we see him.

South Park, Nostalgia and Nationalism

In S20E01 *Member Berries*, two real life events combining culture and politics in distinctively different ways are invoked to make up the basis for the thematic throughline of the seasonal arc. The launch of the new *Star Wars* movie *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015) and San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality against people of color in America. In the opening episode national media attention has been placed on the South Park girls' volleyball team, which is not historically a common occurrence. The reason turns out to be to find out if Nicole Daniels, the only African American girl on the team, is going to sit or stand during the national anthem. She does sit down, but only after two other girls on the team do it, but what they protest is trolling and harassment online, not police brutality or racial injustice. After the national anthem, the entire crowd leave before the girls start playing their game. Meanwhile, congress decides that to unite a divided nation a new national anthem could be necessary, something that inspires and excites, has something for everyone, while still paying respect to the past, and who better to give this assignment to than J. J. Abrams, who “saved Star Wars, now we will ask him to save our country.”

The presidential election between Mr. Garrison with Caitlyn Jenner as running mate and Hilary Clinton is now dubbed as the fight between Giant Douche and Turd Sandwich, recalling the election for new school mascot at South Park Elementary in S08E08 *Douche and Turd* and symbolizing the fatigue and ennui felt towards having to make the distinction between two bad choices. The Hilary Clinton candidate is now literally referred to as Turd Sandwich with reporters calling for her by using “Ms. Sandwich!”. When Mr. Garrison realizes that he can win and that neither he nor Jenner has any plan on what to do when in office, he starts to freak out and tries to actively sabotage his campaign for a real political candidate to come into office. Everything he tries backfires, though, and finally and with the direct and physical influence of the member berries, he becomes the unapologetic version of the first Trump presidency. Randy is truly upset and angry that anyone can even consider picking Giant Douche over Turd Sandwich but then a friend shows him his stash of member berries and offers some because they “really take the edge off”. The member berries are introduced as a combination

between recreational drugs and opioids, resulting in a mellow sense of satisfaction and passivity for the user. The are shaped as grapes held together in a cluster talking in a high-pitched but soft soothing voice about nostalgic highlights from the past including “member Chewbacca?”, “member Bionic Man?”, and “member Slimmer from Ghostbusters?”. After lulling Randy into a state of blissful peace the member berries start to remember different things, like “member when there weren’t so many Mexicans”, and “member when marriage was just between a man and a woman”, which turn into a cascade of “member feeling safe”, “member no ISIS”, “member Reagan” until Randy finally reacts and wonder what is going on.

When J. J. Abrams is to present his new anthem at a packed 49ers stadium, the announcer over the speaker system tells everyone: “for our national anthem we ask you all in solidarity to please rise... or sit. Or take a knee. In order to honor America.” and the new anthem that is exactly the same as the old one plays. The only change made is that no matter what you do during the anthem you honor America, and it disarms any attempted protest including Kaepernick’s, to which the TV announcers extatically exclaims that “J. J. Abrams has fixed America!”.

Talking about the differences between literary traditions in the 1800s and the industrial society, Umberto Eco emphasizes that “the social change, the continuous rise of new behavioral standards, the dissolution of tradition, require a narrative of redundancy [...], an indulgent invitation to repose, a chance of relaxing”, which is further developed by Jostein Gripsrud as he describes the pleasure of repetition as the pleasure of recognition.⁷⁷⁷ Adorno quoted in the next passage by Gripsrud refers to the search for familiarity as “an infantile need for protection”.⁷⁷⁸ Although somewhat lavishly and arrogantly framed, there is a point in highlighting the dangers of repetition and comfort. The resent surge of Christmas movies cut from the same cloth, where the story, the characters, the plot, and the set design, including mainstays like buying a Christmas tree, planning and wrapping presents, baking and cooking, family gatherings, and most importantly snow, stays pretty much the same with small changes and a unique selling point that singles out that specific Christmas movie from the dozens of others that are produced.⁷⁷⁹ The familiarity, repetitiveness, and comfort are precisely the point of the movies, and it is why so many watch them each year.⁷⁸⁰ It is a way to watch something that you are comfortable with and know what to expect, while at the same time experiencing something mildly new in at least a few details.

In the seasonal arch of season 20 of *South Park*, comfort and repeatability are shown to run the risk of leading to fascism since that is what is comfortable and

⁷⁷⁷ Eco 1985, p. 165, Gripsrud 1995, pp. 176-178.

⁷⁷⁸ Gripsrud, p. 178, quoting Adorno 1991, p. 138.

⁷⁷⁹ Jurgensen 2017.

⁷⁸⁰ Metz 2018.

familiar. From *Star Wars* and storm troopers and the new *Star Wars* film to the sound of actual stormtroopers goosestepping their way to the presidency. Every protest is turned patriotic and thereby rendered innocuous, the possibility of resistance is taken away by making every gesture towards the flag a celebration. Nostalgia becomes the reset to status quo. The *Star Wars* sequel is made to symbolize the rehashing of old tropes and storylines because they are familiar and therefore comforting. The member berries of season twenty are the physical manifestation of nostalgia where they constantly want you to remember the cool and fun things from the past instead of focusing on creating new things. Eating member berries feels comforting but it is shown to have real life consequences, because if you are only focused on reliving selected versions of the past, you will not pay attention to what is happening in the present. Member berries make you remember the carnival as a fun time full of laughs and created memories and not as a starting point for revolution. Dwelling on the familiar and comfortable rules out everything that is uncomfortable and unfamiliar, including new experiences and the life and experiences of other people.

Nostalgia is unavoidably ideologic and often conservative. It creates a selective, idealized version of the past triggered by fears for the present.⁷⁸¹ White artists' use of blackface in musicals of the 1930s and 1940s was tightly connected to nostalgia, whereby representations of African Americans were connected to a musical and unproblematic past.⁷⁸² Authoritative regimes count on their citizens to be content and repeat the same tasks every day no matter how unjust of a system they may live in, to not go against the grain and protest or revolt. States and nations are built on that basis, and on the concept that we are part of a nation that we repeat and perform every day, often in ways we are not even aware of. Butler describes gender roles as constantly repeated and affirmed in a continuous performance where most of its manifestations are done without questioning or even thinking about it.⁷⁸³ Just like we perform gender, and just like it is ingrained through repetition in our behavior, we perform national identity through large and small, conscious and unconscious, manifestations of it. We are punished when we stray from the hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality, when we differ from its performative repetitions. We are also punished when we stray from hegemonic notions of nationality, when we are deemed to not "do" nation right. Insufficient American patriotism after 9/11, parodied in shows like *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*, and as we have seen in also *South Park* and *BoJack Horseman*, but also rooting for another country's athletes at an Olympic tournament, or, apparently and tragically, simply acknowledging that genocide is a bad thing, are all examples of doing

⁷⁸¹ Mizejewski 2008, pp. 21-29, DeFalco 2004, p. 5.

⁷⁸² Knight 2002, pp. 83-87.

⁷⁸³ Butler 1990.

nation wrong which has led to people being punished for it, including losing jobs, friends, or even lives in the process.

Going Native and Rejecting Nation

Something that is often overlooked with even the most scathing criticism of nationalism or national identity is that with that criticism you inadvertently reinforce something by acknowledging that it is there and that it is worthy of attention. Criticizing the nation still recognizes the nation and offering alternatives to hegemonic notions of national identity still interpellates you into acknowledging the existence of the nation and national identity. But there is a level where there is a choice to reject national identity and to reject the nation as a societal building block outright, and even though it uses plenty of references to the US, to nation, national identity, and to nationalism, I want to end this chapter by discussing an interesting example from *South Park* on the possibility of rejecting the nation.

In S16E11 *Going Native*, young Butters uncharacteristically acts out towards his parents and classmates. He is sent by his parents on a rite of passage to his distant homeland to find out who he is and where he belongs, in order to get his feelings of anger and frustration under control. It turns out that Butters and his parents, very much white Anglo-Saxon and middle-class, claim to be natives of Hawai'i. Not Hawaii, as Butters' father emphasizes, since that is the way the Haoli, the non-Hawai'ians pronounce it. Trying to support his friend during this stressful time, Kenny joins Butters on their trip to Hawaii where Butters is to learn of their native ways, including drinking Chi-Chi from coconuts, eating Poké provided by Safeway, and getting married at the Fern Grotto. When arriving at the airport, Butters and Kenny are met by a group of white Anglo-Saxon people referring to themselves as natives who explain that the differences between a native and a Haoli is the possession of a Mahalo rewards card. The exchange at the airport is observed by an actual Hawaii native who seems to be part annoyed, part in disbelief at what he is watching. The Sheraton Hotel they pass with their car is described as "just another mega hotel for the throngs of tourists" while true natives like themselves live at the Sheraton Residences.

When Butters is about to perform his ceremony to become a native, it is interrupted by the news that the Mahalo gift card is to be cancelled. Distracted by this, the group launches an attack against what they perceive to be the enemy, new tourists arriving on a cruise ship to the island, by whacking golf balls at them. Butters joins in and manages to strike the captain of the ship, leading to a chain reaction that ultimately sinks the ship in a manner reiterating the Titanic disaster as depicted in the blockbuster movie *Titanic* (Cameron 1997). When it is revealed that the stock of Chi-Chi might run out due to predictable trade obstacles, a fierce discussion erupts among the "natives" on how to fix the situation where everyone

tries to claim a greater right to the island and therefore a higher authority. One of the men exclaims that “I have lived on this island ten years. TEN YEARS!!! (every July and August).” Another establishes that “Your ancestors came on an airplane, six months ago. Our ancestors sailed here. On a cruise ship. Nine months ago.” Not only is it a satire of the common behavior of claiming a place as your own when you have visited it enough or lived there for what is considered enough time, it also works as a general satire on the mechanisms of colonialism as enacted throughout history by white Europeans and later white Americans. The claim of authenticity, nativity and ownership is obviously false, but it doesn’t matter to the WASPs settling Hawaii, as it has not mattered to colonialists throughout history.

The clearest use of parody in the episode is the letters that Kenny writes home to his friends to describe what is happening on the journey to Hawaii. Instead of using a phone or a computer as would be normal procedure, Kenny writes letter by candlelight with an open window overlooking the night sky over the Kaua’i beach. The style and prose of his letter is old-fashioned with complicated and archaic words and phrases reminiscent of 19th-century Victorian England. It reiterates letters and literature written from and about English colonies in distant locations, evoking exotified descriptions of the life of the natives and the white upper-class intellectual observing the strange goings-on. This is not the only time that *South Park* uses references to literature and a literary past.⁷⁸⁴ By using this form of communication, which Stan, Kyle, and Cartman predictably find weird and obtuse, *Going Native* ties the discourse of nativity, nation, and appropriation to an English colonial past. Through parody, in this case the extraneous inclusion of archaic language reiterating a style of literature connected to colonial England, repurposed via the temporal context in a modern communication between young boys in rural America, the absurdity of oblivious and exaggerated colonial behavior in modern day Hawaii is linked with a white colonial past. This suggests a timelessness in the actions taken by residents of Sheraton Residences that speaks to an entire history of reckless disregard in their relations with indigenous people.

Just as the first settlers to America claim ownership over the land, their ancestors claim status and right of interpretation to the national identity of the land through kinship. Ascension from a direct line of early settlers is used as an argument to a greater right to the country than someone whose family has been in the USA for a hundred years or who has moved here during their lifetime. American countries are different from European in that they were colonized by Europeans and formed in a well-documented and relatively quick manner, including atrocities against native inhabitants of the land. Similar, however, is the mechanism of claiming a larger right to nation and national identity, the national cultural capital that Skey mentions, through longevity. The longer you or your ancestors have lived in a nation, the more right and claim you have to control the

⁷⁸⁴ Noble 2012, p. 147.

nation, through material means like economy or land, or through cultural means by deciding who can and should be considered part of the nation and who should not. This is specifically what *Going Native* parodies and satirizes by ridiculing the notion that arriving earlier somewhere gives you greater right to call yourself a native and grants you the right to decide what rights the people arriving after you should have or not have. By connecting the ridiculousness of claiming nativity to a colonial past, the parody infuses the specific case of American tourists in Hawaii with a timeless criticism of colonizers claiming the right to land, and of citizens claiming the right to a nation. The episode not only undermines the mechanisms of tourism and white privilege, it undermines the very fabric of nationality as a natural divider between people, of national identity as something ancient and unquestionable, for American national identity specifically due to claims of authenticity springing from arriving early on ships, but also for national identity generally, that it is a ridiculous and archaic way of dividing the world and separating people from each other.

David Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile argues that although *Going Native* does use parody and satire to mock and criticize “the materiality of white settlers playing Indian [...] and going native”, it does so through racialized, gendered, and sexualized representations.⁷⁸⁵ He quotes Shari Huhndorf who describes going native as “a cherished national ritual, a means by which European America figures and reenacts its own dominance even as it attempts to deny its violent history”.⁷⁸⁶ Actual native Hawaiians are made invisible in the episode and agency is only given to white Anglo-Saxon tourists, thus reinforcing notions of settler colonialism and “naturaliz[ing] the dispossession and elimination of Indigenous peoples” as well as it “bolsters capitalist settlement instead of critiquing how capitalist relations shore up settler colonialism”.⁷⁸⁷ Citing Bakhtin's notion that satire requires its target social phenomena to be recognizable, Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile argues that the satire in the episode fails – since two reviewers explicitly stated they did not understand its message – rather than attributing their confusion to simply missing the point.

The episode is not only, as the reviewers suggest, about settler colonialism and self-claims to land and culture in Hawaii, but a satirical comment on settler colonialism throughout history and in modern time, and mocking the concept of claiming land, nation, and culture simply by being a little bit earlier than someone else, completely disregarding the indigenous people already present. Kenny's letters are the clue to the artificiality and absurdity of the settler colonialism and self-proclamation of indigeneity on display in the episode. The Stotch family and its peers in Hawaii are all part of a settler tradition tracing back hundreds of years.

⁷⁸⁵ Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile 2017.

⁷⁸⁶ Huhndorf 2001, quoted in Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile 2017, p. 60.

⁷⁸⁷ Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile 2017, pp. 60-66.

The distance between the traditional representations of English colonialism and the modern-day colonialism is minimized via this parody and it exposes the centralizing of the main characters of the episode as hypocritical, colonialist, and racist. I agree with Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile that the indigenous people of the island of Kaua'i are more or less invisible throughout the episode, but I also think this is very much the point of the episode. The airport salesman and the restaurant employee are mainly silent and are used to accentuate the absurdity of the self-proclaimed natives' actions.

Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile also suggests that the use of the Mahalo Rewards Card in the episode should be read as a comment on rights, benefits, and special treatment that indigenous people receive, but in order for this to make sense, it is necessary to read the representation of the settler colonialist group as having legitimate claims to the land they possess through the misuse of economic, cultural, and structural power, which I would argue is an inaccurate interpretation. The settler colonialists are never shown in a positive legitimizing way, they are quite the contrary shown as either oblivious buffoons or spearheads of an unjust colonial overtaking at every point of the episode. They are, however, represented as a group with economic, cultural, social, political, and violent power and as part of the same structural hegemony as the US Navy and the other tourists and settlers who come to the island. Using a card issued by that very structural hegemony, the political and economic power of the USA, as a token of a self-proclaimed indigenous status separating oneself from the otherness of the tourists visiting the island is not, I would argue, a jab at the notion of indigenous people receiving benefits, but rather at the hypocrisy of capitalist driven settler colonialism. Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile draws the conclusion that the satire fails because the self-proclaimed "native Hawaiians" distances themselves from tourists and the US Coast Guard while they still "occupy Hawai'i and reproduce settler colonialism vis-à-vis claiming and defending Kaua'i".⁷⁸⁸ I argue that this is not why the satire fails, and that this *is* the satire. It is directed at the people controlling hegemonic power while simultaneously claiming nativity and indigeneity oblivious of their own hypocrisy.

The resurrection of the status quo and the continued power structure in Hawaii with settler tourists dominating the space they have violently acquired works as a comment on the shared white power structure in modern and historical society. White settler, the white government and its white enforcers of violence, in this case the navy, are all on the same page, they all play for the same team. The ridiculousness of the "revolution" which is levied by simply reinstating the Mahalo Rewards card and appeasing the disgruntled "natives" can be read as a comment on how conflict between different white affluent fractions is never really a conflict at all. The indigenous people of Hawaii are more or less invisible in the episode

⁷⁸⁸ Uahikeaikalei'ohu Maile 2017, p. 64.

because it is a demonstration of the power structures of white colonialism, where affluent Anglo-Saxons are never at any real risk of losing either their health, money, or status. It all works out in the end, and it does so at the cost of the actual native population, as it always does in the story of historical colonization and the construction of an expansive national state.

Conclusion

In all five television shows used in this text representations of nation, nationalism, and national identity are common and widespread. Often, they are used for parodic or satirical purposes, criticizing or poking fun at their absurdity or questioning their legitimacy, while at other times they are just present without comment or questioning. These representations can be approached in a positive, neutral, or negative manner, and this material has shown examples of all grades. In this chapter I have identified four different tiers of representations of nation or nationalism in the material; celebrating, accepting, criticizing, and rejecting.

Celebrating nationalism is closely connected to American exceptionalism and actively enforcing its premises. It is the notion that the USA is better than any other country and that it is a duty to make sure it stays that way, often by means of racism or discrimination. Cartman is the best representative of this through his actions of outright racism and discrimination although his motivations more often spring from his personal goal of achieving a position of authority. Celebrating the nation are the cheerleaders and fans at a sporting event chanting U-S-A! U-S-A! and in those cases it is often rendered harmless and unproblematic. This of course leads into American exceptionalism once again, where the phrase “the greatest country in the world” has been so ingrained in the American vocabulary that it very well may have shifted from a nationalistic statement to part of the American nation. It is uttered by the boys of *South Park* and by Morty in *Rick and Morty*, and Archer certainly holds warm feelings for his home nation, albeit undermined by the mix of cold feelings he also harbors.

Accepting or recognizing nationalism is when there is nothing innately right or wrong with waving flags or pledging allegiance, and it is seen as an uncomplicated part of the fabric that makes someone American, while through its self-evidence it is rendered invisible. The everyday patriotism that many Americans feel and express is placed here, and symbols such as the flag, apple pie, or some diffuse notion of freedom are usually placed in this category as obvious parts of American national identity. Accepting or recognizing the nation is the acknowledgement that we are the United States of America, that America looks like this, and that this is not problematic. The invisibility of the nation is the banal nationalism that Billig talks about, and it is the “we” in the phrase we are America, it is the flag in the background of animated comedy shows. It is the Statue of Liberty and the city of

New York that are there and that works as descriptions of the nation without being complicated further. Since it is made invisible and sedimented, this is the part of nationalism and the creation of national identity that is hardest to spot and hardest to subvert and resist.

The third tier of representations of nation, nationalism, and national identity is critique. When it comes to nationalism, critique means to establish that our country is not better than everyone else, in fact our country might be worse than other countries in many respects. Criticizing the nation works similarly in that it acknowledges the flaws of the nation and that the flaws of the nation should be highlighted, but it still acknowledges that the nation exists, that national identity connected to the nation exists, and that nationalism connected to that national identity exists, even though that might be a bad thing.

The fourth and final tier is rejecting nationalism and the nation. Rejecting nationalism means acknowledging that nationalism is a ridiculous and even dangerous concept, and everyone duped by it is either an idiot or needs to be converted to see that the concept of attributing anything to nations needs to end. Nationalism is fundamentally bad, and we should all work against it. Finally, rejecting the nation means that nations are a ridiculous way of organizing a society and we should do something else. In this tier, nations are in fact not how the world is organized.

Chapter 9 Summary and Conclusion

Why did I say that I could write a book? – BoJack Horseman

What fun is there in making sense? – Discord

The whole thing! I read the whole fucking thing! I kept thinking “alright, I guess the cool offensive stuff must be coming” and then after like a hundred pages I was like “alright, I guess all the dirty stuff is at the end”, and then I got to the last page, and I was all “the fuck is this?! I just read a book! For nothing!” – Eric Cartman

I started this research with the main question of what parody does and can do. The general perception of parody is that it is used to make people laugh and to make fun of its source text. This is sometimes true, I would even be so bold to state that it is often true, but it is far from the whole picture. One of the key ambitions in this work was to show that parody can be more and do more than “just” provide levity and ridicule. In Chapter 2, I present my definition of parody when used on moving images not for the purpose of establishing a new or correct definition of the term, but to be transparent in the ways I use it in this text and for this analysis. Parody, for this purpose, is with perceived intent creating new art by reiterating and transforming a source text through the breaking of logic. Parody is separated from pastiche by how the new piece of art relates to the context of its new surroundings, where pastiche works within the frames of its logic while parody breaks the frames of its context. This is most evident in terms of genre, where a pastiche still works within the constraints of the genre and subsequently a horror film is still a horror film, a western is still a western, an action film is still an action film, while parody breaks the constraints of its context turning it into something else. There is no innate difference in quality between the two terms, and they can both contain humor and a polemic edge, but do not have to. There are obvious specific examples of both, but the line where the line crosses from pastiche to parody and vice versa is blurry and inexact and where to place specific examples will always be a matter of contention. In these instances, there are no exact and undisputable answers, and more importantly there do not have to be any.

Moving images like film and television often oscillate between parody and pastiche. Sometimes scenes in film and television can be parody and pastiche at the same time since there are so many elements in moving images that work and do things simultaneously. A line of dialogue can be a direct reference without transformation while costuming can be parodic and sound and music can be pastiche, making the drawing of exact lines between the concepts a matter of approximation, which can be frustrating for an academic scholar uncomfortable with embracing notions of ambiguity and fluidity. However blurred the lines might be between these kinds of concepts when discussing specific examples, there is merit in using the terms and their theoretical definitions as a starting point for critical analysis in that it offers methodological support to ascertain how parody and pastiche work and what they do in the chosen material. Ambiguity or uncertainty in definitions can then be compensated for by transparency and academic impartiality.

Parody is different from satire in two distinct ways that limit each of them in one direction, meaning that there can be and very much is much overlap between them in specific examples. There are many parodic satires, and there are many satirical parodies. Parody unlike satire must always reiterate a source text, which consists of a work of art, where a work of art is defined as “something that is made and of stuff and does something”.⁷⁸⁹ Satire can reference or reiterate real life that is not a work of art, parody needs something more.

This sharp line in definition is, however, more ambiguous than it first might seem, since reiterations of real-life people or events can often be hard to distinguish from previous iterations or depictions. Are satirical reiterations of Presidents Nixon or Trump only references to real life or are they reiterations of the many previous depictions of these men in film and television? Is it possible to make a parody of a real-life event that does not have fictional depictions but is shown in other pieces of art like a news broadcast or a live feed? I would argue that it is, and I would argue that this makes the line between parody and satire blurrier and more ambiguous. The second difference between parody and satire is that satire always needs to have a polemic edge, while parody does not. Satire needs to be critical of something in order to be satire. If it does not have any polemic edge, however subtle, it ceases to be satire. Many scholars argue that this is true of parody as well, but as I have shown in this text, there are many examples of parody that have no polemic edge, whether against its source text or in other directions. Parodies can be neutral or even celebratory in their position towards their source texts and they do not have to be critical of anything else in order to be defined as parody. There are several other functions that a parody can achieve without being polemic, the first and most common being comedic. Sometimes a parody is just funny and made to be funny, it is used to deliver a gag and to make

⁷⁸⁹ Dyer 2007.

people laugh and this is something that is separate from polemic edge or interpretative superiority and importantly it does not make it any less interesting for academic study. Parody with no other message than humor is still important and interesting and worthy of attention. Parody can also be educational without a polemic edge, for instance by highlighting filmmaking techniques or delivering facts about a subject by using an appropriate source text to deliver that message.

I also argue that parody can be used for poetic purposes. This is when a reiteration of a source text is transformed in some way in a way that breaks logic without comedic or polemic intent, but to highlight aesthetic or poetic qualities, simply because it makes the art more beautiful, more purposeful, or more “right” in that sense that is impossible to accurately and unshakably define but is very possible to feel. I believe that all forms of art include a form of poetry in some way, and I believe that parody is an art form and that it has, like all others, a poetic dimension that is hard to define and that has been thoroughly under-researched and underappreciated. This has something. This does something. This is elevated in a manner I have a difficult time explaining. It is related to notions of quality, but quality is just another ephemeral word that is difficult to pinpoint. Maybe that is exactly what the word poetry or poetic is, the notion of something elevated, a certain quality, that is impossible to accurately define but that is felt throughout your body when you experience it. And maybe that ephemerality, that uncertainty, that lack of exactness and definition, that *je ne sais quois*, should stay exactly what it is and be felt and not circled, and that it is poetry and that is what it is.

When analyzing what parody does and can do, I have chosen in this text to focus on how it uses and changes representations of national identity. I have analyzed examples of the uses of parody and satire in relation to notions of American national identity and while I argue that the examples I have chosen are representative of the material as a whole, there are plenty of exceptions to this. In shows that have run for six, seven, nine, fourteen, and twenty-six seasons respectively and that contain from 71 (*Rick and Morty*) to more than 320 (*South Park*) episodes, there are bound to be some inconsistencies and contradictions. All five shows reinforce notions of hegemonic national identity simply by affirming that they are American television shows that takes place in the USA or in a fictionalized version of the USA, and by using parody that references American art like film and television as source texts. The characters talk Americanized English and American cities and buildings are referenced in all shows. The nation that the “we” of the shows live in is the USA and it is affirmed as “our” country in all shows except *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* where the “we” live in “our” country Equestria, that I establish is a fictionalized version of the USA.

The use of parody is abundant in all five shows, even in *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* despite it being made for an audience of girls aged 3-8 who reasonably will not be able to understand the specific reiterations and references made but, as I argue, still have the potential and possibility to understand the tone,

mode, or style of parodies and use the interpretative spaces that the parodies create for play, performance, and identification. The bountiful parodies of the five shows usually reiterates or references source texts from American cultural history, where the American film and television industry including the genres they have invented or embellished are seminal parts of the construction of hegemonic American national identity. By parodying American source texts, subversion and resistance to them and what they convey is possible, but highlighting and giving space to source texts of American descent allows them further attention and lifespan, thus reinforcing them as integral parts of American national identity. Parody is, as we have seen in this text, an excellent tool for critical perspective and the possibility of subversion and resistance, but it is important to remember that built into the fabric of parody is the duality that every source text that is used is also deemed worthy of attention, be it for appreciation or ridicule. Does that mean that parody always reinforces more than it subverts? No, it does not. Just because the duality of parody means that anything that is parodied is also given attention does not mean that it surpasses its potential subversive effects. In this text I have laid emphasis on examples from a critical perspective, but I have not cherry-picked them from a text that generally says something else than what I reference, they are chosen because they embody or represent a general notion that permeates the source texts, unless specifically described otherwise.

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is a television show that was created with the main intention of selling toys to young girls and this is reflected in its content consisting of colorful characters and locations that make excellent merchandize items, but within this commodified structure stories of collectivism and co-operation over capitalism and individualism can be told to an impressionable audience. Education and science can take precedence over superstition and religion, female characters can be diverse, nuanced, and show strengths and weaknesses that are both embraced and celebrated, parodies of source texts firmly inscribed in American national identity create spaces for play, performance, and subversions of gendered identification, and the nation, our nation, can be ruled by a council of female decision makers, queer and straight alike.

Archer is an American show that features characters who work for an American espionage agency, several of whom spend considerable parts of the runtime lambasting other countries and their habits as a contrast to the American way of doing things. The agency and its constituents are often driven by commercial or egotistical motives and repeatedly benefit from the capitalist logic permeating American society. On the other hand, having characters that constantly and unabashedly act according to their own baser needs and use the system at hand for their own benefit firmly undermines the narrative construction of the hero as protagonist. The parodic depiction of a James Bond-esque main character who does not give a damn about morality or normative notions of nation, nationality, or national leaders, but only cares about the next drink, the next sexual conquest,

or the next villain to defeat, offers a simultaneously cynical and comedic subversion of the rogue agent as representative of the nation. *Archer* uses temporal ambiguity to emphasize the fluidity, volatility, and evanescence of national borders and its defenders. It places historical power structures specific in time and place next to futuristic or retro-futuristic depictions of utopian or dystopian realities in order to dislodge and disrupt established notions of nations, nationalism, and national identity. The focus on internationality over American nationality in the show, exemplified by the numerous international missions, depictions of the European upper class, or of international sports as opposed to the common and popular sports in the USA, combined with the ambiguous temporality, further questions and undermines hegemonic notions of American national identity. Even though choices in the show are made for stylistic, humorous, or narratological purposes rather than political messaging, the effect remains the same, and the subversion and resistance to hegemonic notions of American national identity still permeates the show.

Perhaps more than any other show in this material, *Rick and Morty* wears its references and cultural knowledge on its sleeve. Almost every single episode is a reference to a film (S02E02 *Mortynight Run*, S03E02 *Rickmancing the Stone*) or television title (S01E08 *Rixty Minutes*, S04E04 *Claw and Hoarder: Special Ricktim's Morty*) or famous quotation or phenomenon (S02E02 *Auto Erotic Assimilation*, S07E04 *That's Amorte*) and the references made within the episodes are abundant and used in many different ways. Not only are references to or reiterations of specific source texts commonplace, but the show uses meta references to filmmaking, film and television tropes, audience awareness through fourth wall breaks and references to previous episodes and highlighting the fact that the characters are characters in a television show, with all that comes with it. This constant barrage of self-awareness and metatextuality works as a disruption of stale narratological structures and expectations when done well as it is at many times throughout the show, but it can also at times lessen the emotional impact of specific scenes or episodic arcs, like the exploration of authorship and originality and comparing creativity with mental illness in S06E07 *Full Meta Jackrick*. Rick as a character and the show as a whole takes a distinct stance for science and modernity over religion and tradition in a criticism of the conflation of Christianity with American national identity, but in some cases the efforts of to flaunt modernity and edginess rings hollow. Rick is presented as a pansexual creature who has sex with humans, aliens, underground horse people, hiveminds, and planets, but for each instance of a sexual encounter, the entity that Rick engages with is represented as female, never really challenging his heterosexuality. In other cases, however, the show takes more risks and offers resistance and subversion, like the allegories of racialized police violence in American society depicted in S03E07 *The Ricklantis Mixup*, harsh criticism of blind American nationalism and patriotism and its consequences in S05E06 *Rick and Morty's Thanksplotion*

Spectacular, and of totalitarian political systems in S02E09 *Look Who's Purging Now* and S04E01 *Edge of Tomorty: Rick Die Rickpeat*.

South Park is also a show that oscillates wildly between political fields of opinion, in fact it is one of the things the show is most famous for, especially in academic output. A show that has been on television for twenty-eight years and counting, inconsistencies and outright contradictions are unavoidable. The downplaying of the climate crisis in S10E06 *ManBearPig* is contradicted in S22E06 *Time to Get Cereal* and reversed fully with an excellent satirical take on the shortsightedness of human priorities in S22E07 *Nobody Got Cereal?*. Like *Rick and Morty*, *South Park* is keenly aware of film and television tropes and use them to great effect like in the many deaths of Kenny or the effects of media nostalgia in the seasonal arch starting with S20E01 *Member Berries*. In the same effect, the show is acutely aware of existing prejudices and stereotypifications and often uses it for satirical purposes by highlighting them successfully in episodes like S15E09 *Last of the Meheecans* and S16E11 *Going Native* and less successfully in episodes like S13E11 *Whale Whores* and S15E06 *City Sushi*. The show offers a critical perspective to representations of American national identity, but it also reinforces hegemonic and conservative political views in many episodes. Sometimes it is executed well, for instance in the satirization of political correctness in the PC Principal character in season nineteen starting with S19E01 *Stunning and Brave*, and sometimes it is done poorly as with the issue of trans women in sports in S23E07 *Board Girls*. More than anything else, *South Park* is a carnivalesque show in that it attacks what it considers to be authority and ridicules what it considers hypocrisy, often with carnivalesque methods of parody, mimicry, profanity, blasphemy, and the body grotesque including the explicit depictions of bodily fluids, maiming, death, and rebirth. Sometimes that carnivalesque machinery offers a critical perspective to American national identity as reinforced by state and government. S23E01 *Mexican Joker* uses a superhero parody to criticize American immigrant policies in general and children in detention centers specifically, and the absurdity of American gun policy is exposed in S22E01 *Dead Kids*. The ubiquitous conflation of capitalism and American national identity is satirized and criticized in several episodes but perhaps most poignant in S14E11 *Coon 2: Hindsight* exposing the hypocrisy and lack of action against large corporations. S19E03 *The City Part of Town* and S19E07 *Naughty Ninjas* highlight the connections between gentrification and racialized police violence in the intersection of ethnicity and class, and S13E03 *Margaritaville* and S17E01 *Let Go, Let Gov* examine the intersections of capitalism, religion, and American national identity through literalization.

Considering it is a depiction of life in Los Angeles for a former television star and the events that unfold around him in the entertainment industry, there is little surprise that *BoJack Horseman* is a show that uses, parodies, and satirizes film and television tropes to a great extent. What is remarkable is how often the mechanics

of parody are put to use to offer subversion and resistance to hegemonic ideals and norms, not only when it comes to American national identity, but in matters of class, race, sexuality, gender, celebrity, generation, corporality and physical ability. The show depicts stories that expose the nuances of such disparate themes as trauma, psychology, capitalism, immigration, friendship, parenthood, relationships, sexual abuse, inadequacy, nepotism, toxic masculinity, the conditions and nature of art, and the consequences of combining clowns with dentists, all while remaining entertaining and captivating throughout its 77 episodes. In this text I have highlighted some examples that the show tackles such as the conflation of capitalism, American national identity, and the origins of American animation in S06E03 *Feel Good Story*, the gendered absurdity of American gun police in S04E05 *Thoughts and Prayers* and of American abortion legislation in S03E06 *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew*, and the personal and traumatic effects of abuse and betrayal in S03E11 *That's Too Much, Man!*, but I could have chosen and used any number of other examples. The show is a rich source of complex themes and nuanced storytelling combined with hilarious gags and jokes that often perfectly balances comedy and tragedy, levity and gravity, tomfoolery and earnestness. And what is interesting is that whether the show tackles humor or seriousness, it often does so through the lenses of parody showing explicitly what parody can do when wielded with a skillful hand. In those cases, like in the mentioned seminal episode *That's Too Much, Man!*, parody does not only elicit laughter or tears, it offers something beyond that which is hard to define or explain, something that proves that parody is the creation of new art and something that proves that parody can be emotional, important, or poetic. What that something is specifically, other than parody as art?

Short answer: je ne sais quoi. Long answer: I do not know and do not know, and I hold on to that, as to a saving banister.

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Works of Fiction

Television Series and Programs

- Adventure Time*, (created and/or developed by) Pendleton Ward, 2010-2018.
- American Dad*, Mike Barker, Seth McFarlane, and Matt Weitzman, 2005-.
- American Idol*, Simon Fuller, 2002-.
- America’s Got Talent*, Simon Cowell, 2006-.
- Archer*, Adam Reed, 2009-2023.
- Astro Boy*, Osamu Tezuka, 1963-1966.
- Batman*, William Dozier, 1966-1968.
- Baywatch*, Michael Berk, Gregory J. Bonann, and Douglas Schwarz, 1989-2001.
- Beavis and Butthead*, Mike Judge, 1993-2011, 2022-.
- The Benny Hill Show*, Benny Hill, 1969-1989.
- The Big Bang Theory*, Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, 2007-2019.
- Bob’s Burgers*, Loren Bouchard, 2011-.
- BoJack Horseman*, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, 2014-2020.
- The Boondocks*, Aaron McGruder, 2005-2014.

Bonanza, David Dortort, 1959-1973.
Border Wars, David Ross Smith and Ray Telles, 2010-2015.
Boy Meets World, Michael Jacobs and April Kelly, 1993-2000.
Breaking Bad, Vince Gilligan, 2008-2013.
Captain Planet and the Planeteers, Barbara Pyle and Ted Turner, 1990-1996.
The Colbert Report, Stephen Colbert, Ben Karlin, and Jon Stewart, 2005-2014.
Columbo, Richard Levinson and William Link, 1971-1978.
The Cosby Show, Bill Cosby, Michael J. Leeson, and Ed Weinberger, 1984-1992.
CSI Miami, Ann Donahue, Caron Mendelsohn, and Anthony E. Zuiker, 2002-2012.
Daria, Glenn Eichler and Susie Lewis Lynn, 1997-2002.
DEA, Al Roker Entertainment, 2008-2009.
Doctor Who, Sydney Newman, C. E. Webber, and Donald Wilson, 2005-.
Dream On, David Crane and Marta Kauffman, 1990-1996.
The Epic Tales of Captain Underpants, Dev Pilkey, 2018-2019.
Family Guy, Seth McFarlane, 1999-.
Family Matters, William Bickley and Michael Warren, 1989-1998.
The Flintstones, Joseph Barbera and William Hanna, 1960-1966.
Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends, Craig McCracken, 2004-2009.
The Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Andy Borowitz and Susan Borowiz, 1990-1996.
Full House, Jeff Franklin, 1987-1995.
Futurama, David X. Cohen and Matt Groening, 1999-.
Game of Thrones, David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, 2011-2019.
G.I. Joe, Hasbro and Steve Gerber, 1985-1986.
Gravity Falls, Alex Hirsch, 2012-2016.
Growing Pains, Neal Marlens, 1985-1992.
Gunsmoke, Clyde Ware and Charles Marquis Warren, 1955-1975.
Harvey Girls Forever!, Emily Brundige, 2018-2020.
He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, Lou Scheimer, 1983-1985.
Homicide: Life on the Street, Paul Attanasio, 1993-1999.
How I Met your Mother, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, 2005-2014.
I Love Lucy, Desi Arnaz, Lucille Ball, and Jess Oppenheimer, 1951-1957.
Jersey Shore, SallyAnn Salsano, 2009-2012.
The Joy of Painting, Bob Ross, 1983-1994.
King of the Hill, Greg Daniels and Mike Judge, 1997-2010, 2025-.
Mad Men, Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015.

Miami Vice, Anthony Yerkovich, 1984-1989.
Mission Impossible, Bruce Geller, 1966-1973, 1988-1990.
The Monkees, Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider, 1965-1968.
My Little Pony, Bonnie Zacherle, 1986-1987.
My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, Lauren Faust, 2010-2020.
The Owl House, Dana Terrace, 2020-2023.
Parker Lewis Can't Lose, Lon Diamond and Clyde Phillips, 1990-1993.
Paw Patrol, Keith Chapman, 2013-.
Peaky Blinders, Steven Knight, 2013-2022.
Peanuts, Charles M. Schulz, 1965-2006.
The Persuaders!, Robert S. Baker, 1971-1972.
The PJs, Eddie Murphy, Steve Tompkins, and Larry Wilmore, 1999-2001.
Police Squad, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1982.
The Powerpuff Girls, Craig McCracken, 1998-2004.
Professor Balthazar, Zlatko Grgić, 1967-1977.
The Raggy Dolls, Melvyn Jacobson, 1986-1994.
Rawhide, Charles Marquis Warren, 1959-1965.
The Ren & Stimpy Show, John Kricfalusi, 1991-1996.
Rick and Morty, Dan Harmon and Justin Roiland, 2013-.
Rick and Morty: The Anime, Takashi Sano, 2024-.
Robot Chicken, Seth Green and Matthew Senreich, 2005-.
The Saint, Leslie Charteris, 1962-1969.
Saturday Night Live, Lorne Michaels, 1975-.
Schoolhouse Rock!, David McCall, 1973-2009.
Shark Tank, Mark Burnett, 2009-.
The Simpsons, James L. Brooks, Matt Groening, and Sam Simon, 1989-.
The Six Million Dollar Man, Harve Bennett, 1974-1978.
So You Think You Can Dance?, Simon Fuller and Nigel Lythgoe, 2005-.
The Sopranos, David Chase, 1999-2007.
South Park, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1997-.
SpongeBob Squarepants, Stephen Hillenburg, 1999-.
Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry, 1966-1969.
Step by Step, William Bickley and Michael Warren, (1991-1998).
Steven Universe, Rebecca Sugar, (2013-2019).
NBC Sunday Night Football, executive producer Fred Gaudelli, (2006-).

Survivor, Charlie Parsons, (2000-).
The Tick, Ben Edlund, (1994-1997).
The Transformers, Henry Orenstein, (1984-1987).
True Detective, Nic Pizzolatto, 2014-.
Two and a Half Men, Lee Aronsohn and Chuck Lorre, 2003-2015.
The Venture Bros., Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick, (2003-2018).
The Voice, John de Mol Jr., (2011-).
The Walking Dead, Frank Darabont, (2010-2022).
The Waltons, Earl Hammer jr., (1972-1981).
We Can Be Heroes, Chris Lilley, (2005).
Wheel of Fortune, Merv Griffin, (1983-).
Youan Lai Shi Mei Nan, Jerry Yan, (2013-).
Young Sheldon, Chuck Lorre and Steven Molaro, 2017-2024.
Zhong Ji Yi Ban, Liao Fei Hong, (2005-2013).
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2001: A Space Odyssey, Stanley Kubrick, 1968.
300, Zack Snyder, 2006.
A Clockwork Orange, Stanley Kubrick, 1971.
A Grand Day Out, Nick Park, 1989.
Airplane!, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1980.
Akira, Katsuhiro Ôtomo, 1988.
Alien, Ridley Scott, 1979.
All That Jazz, Bob Fosse, 1979.
All the President's Men, Alan J. Pakula, 1976.
American Sniper, Clint Eastwood, 2014.
A Mighty Wind, Christopher Guest, 2003.
Anchors Aweigh, George Sidney, 1945.
Annie, John Huston, 1982.
Apocalypse Now, Francis Ford Coppola, 1979.
Arif V 216, Kivanç Baruönü, 2018.
Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery, Jay Roach, 1997.
Bacalhau, Adriano Stuart, 1976.

Back to the Future, Robert Zemeckis, 1985.
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Bad Boys II, Michael Bay, 2003.
Bad Day at Black Rock, John Sturges, 1955.
Bagdad ER, John Alpert and Matthew O'Neill, 2006.
Bananas, Woody Allen, 1971.
Better Luck Tomorrow, Justin Lin, 2002.
¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!, Luis Garcia Berlanga 1952.
The Big Sleep, Howard Hawks, 1946.
Birth of a Nation, D. W. Griffith, 1916.
Black Dynamite, Scott Sanders, 2009.
Black Panther, Ryan Coogler, 2018.
Blazing Saddles, Mel Brooks, 1974.
The Boys from Brazil, Franklin J. Schaffner 1978.
Brazil, Terry Gilliam, 1985.
Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony, Laurent Malaquais, 2012.
Cabaret, Bob Fosse, 1972.
Canadian Bacon, Michael Moore, 1995.
Casablanca, Michael Curtiz, 1942.
Cat Ballou, Elliot Silverstein, 1965.
Charlie Wilson's War, Mike Nichols, 2007.
Chicago, Bob Fosse and Gwen Verdon, 1975.
The China Syndrome, James Bridges, 1979.
Cimarron, Wesley Ruggles, 1931.
Con Air, Simon West, 1997.
Coraline, Henry Selick, 2009.
Creature Comforts, Nick Park, 1989.
Dabangg, Abhinav Kashyap, 2010.
Dazed & Confused, Richard Linklater, 1993.
Deadpool, Tim Miller, 2016.
The Departed, Martin Scorsese, 2006.
Die Hard, John McTiernan, 1988.
Dirty Harry, Don Siegel, 1971.

The Disaster Artist, James Franco, 2017.
Dog Day Afternoon, Sidney Lumet, 1975.
Donald Duck, Walt Disney and Dick Lundy, 1934-.
Double Indemnity, Billy Wilder, 1944.
Dr. No, Terence Young, 1962.
Dr. Strangelove, Stanley Kubrick, 1964.
Eddie Murphy: Delirious, Bruce Gowers, 1983.
Elephant, Gus Van Sant, 2003.
The Empire Strikes Back, Irving Kershner, 1980.
Fantasmagorie, Emile Cohl, 1908.
Far From Heaven, Todd Haynes, 2002.
The Fast and the Furious, Rob Cohen, 2001.
Fast Five, Justin Lin, 2011.
First Blood, Ted Kotcheff, 1982.
Flowers and Trees, Burt Gillett, 1932.
Forrest Gump, Robert Zemeckis, 1994.
Frost/Nixon, Ron Howard, 2008.
The Fugitive, Andrew Davis, 1993.
Galaxy Quest, Dean Parisot, 1999.
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Howard Hawks, 1953.
Gertie, the Dinosaur, Winsor McCay, 1914.
The Godfather, Francis Ford Coppola, 1972.
The Godfather: Part II, Francis Ford Coppola, 1974.
Godzilla, Gareth Edwards, 2014.
The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, Sergio Leone, 1966.
High Noon, Fred Zinneman, 1952.
The Informant!, Steven Soderbergh, 2009.
The Insider, Michael Mann, 1999.
Lonely Are the Brave, David Miller, 1962.
The Lost Weekend, Billy Wilder, 1945.
Love Story, Arthur Hiller, 1970.
Good Will Hunting, Gus Van Sant, 1997.
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Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chris Columbus, 2001.
The Haunted Hotel, John Stuart Blackton, 1907.

High Anxiety, Mel Brooks, 1977.
His Girl Friday, Howard Hawkes, 1940.
Hot Shots!, Jim Abrahams, 1991.
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Hot Fuzz, Edgar Wright, 2007.
How a Mosquito Operates, Winsor McCay, 1912.
Humorous Phases of Funny Faces, John Stuart Blackton, 1906.
Independence Day, Roland Emmerich, 1996.
Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Steven Spielberg, 1989.
It Came from Beneath the Sea, Robert Gordon, 1955.
Jaws, Steven Spielberg, 1975.
J. Edgar, Clint Eastwood, 2011.
Jerry Maguire, Cameron Crowe, 1996.
Joker, Todd Phillips, 2019.
The Last Bronycon: A Fandom Autopsy, Jenny Nicholson, 2020.
The Last of the Mohicans, Michael Mann, 1992.
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, Simon West, 2001.
L.A. Story, Mick Jackson, 1991.
Lejonjakten, Made by students at the Lund University carnival, 1908.
Lethal Weapon, Richard Donner, 1987.
Life of Brian, Terry Jones, 1979.
The Little Mermaid, Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989.
Little Nemo, Winsor McCay, 1911.
Loaded Weapon 1, Gene Quintano, 1993.
Love Ke Liye Kuch Bhi Karega, Eeshwar Nivas, 2001.
Løvejagten, Viggo Larsen 1907.
Mad Max, George Miller, 1979.
Mad Max: Fury Road, George Miller, 2015.
Making an American Citizen, Alice Guy Blaché, 1912.
Maleficent, Robert Stromberg, 2014.
The Maltese Falcon, John Huston, 1941.
The Manchurian Candidate, John Frankenheimer, 1962.
Mass, Fran Kranz, 2021.
The Matrix, Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski 1999.
Men in Tights, Mel Brooks, 1993.

Mest' kinomatograficheskogo operatora, Wladyslaw Starewicz 1912.
Monsters vs Aliens, Rob Letterman and Conrad Vernon, 2009.
The Most Dangerous Game, Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1932.
The Music Man, Morton DaCosta, 1962.
My Darling Clementine, John Ford, 1946.
My Little Pony: The Movie, Jayson Thiessen, 2017.
The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad!, David Zucker, 1988.
The Naked Gun 2 ½: The Smell of Fear, David Zucker, 1991.
The Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult, Peter Segal, 1994.
National Treasure, Jon Turteltaub, 2004.
Nixon, Oliver Stone, 1995.
No Time to Die, Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2021.
North by Northwest, Alfred Hitchcock, 1959.
Ocean's Eleven, Steven Soderbergh, 2001.
Ocean's Twelve, Steven Soderberg, 2004.
Ocean's Thirteen, Steven Soderbergh, 2007.
O Segredo da Múmia, Ivan Cardoso, 1982.
Pacific Rim, Guillermo del Toro, 2013.
ParaNorman, Chris Butler and Sam Fell, 2012.
Pauvre Pierrot, Émile Reynaud 1892.
Pee-wee's Big Adventure, Tim Burton, 1985.
The Pinchville Grand Prix, Ivo Caprino, 1975.
Pirates of the Caribbean, Gore Verbinski, 2003.
Demasiado miedo a la vida Plaff, Juan Carlos Tabío, 1988.
Plan 9 from Outer Space, Edward Wood jr. 1957.
Plane Crazy, Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928.
Predator, John McTiernan 1987.
The Producers, Mel Brooks, 1969.
Prometheus, Ridley Scott, 2012.
Raiders of the Lost Ark, Steven Spielberg, 1982.
Rear Window, Alfred Hitchcock, 1954.
Red River, Howard Hawks, 1948.
Rio Bravo, Howard Hawks, 1959.
The Room, Tommy Wiseau, 2003.
San Andreas, Brad Peyton, 2015.

Satsujin kyôjidai, Kihachi Okamoto, 1967.
Scarface, Howard Hawks, 1932.
Scarface, Brian De Palma 1983.
Scary Movie, Keenen Ivory Wayans, 2000.
The Searchers, John Ford, 1956.
Shane, George Stevens, 1953.
Sharknado, Anthony C. Ferrante, 2013.
Sharknado 5: Global Swarming, Anthony C. Ferrante, 2017.
Shaun of the Dead, Edgar Wright, 2004.
Silent Movie, Mel Brooks, 1976.
Smokey and the Bandit, Hal Needham, 1977.
Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, David Hand, 1937.
South Park, Bigger, Longer, and Uncut, Trey Parker, 1999.
Spaceballs, Mel Brooks, 1987.
Speed, Jan de Bont 1994.
Speedy Gonzales, noin seitsemän veljeksien poika, Ere Kokkonen, 1970.
The Spirit of Christmas, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1992.
The Spirit of Christmas, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, 1995.
Spotlight, Tom McCarthy, 2015.
Stagecoach, John Ford, 1939.
Star Wars, George Lucas, 1977.
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith, George Lucas, 2005.
Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens, J.J. Abrams 2015.
Steamboat Willie, Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928.
The Sting, George Roy Hill 1973.
Sunset Boulevard, Billy Wilder, 1950.
Summer Stock, Charles Walters, 1950.
Superhero Movie, Craig Mazin, 2008.
Super Man, Richard Donner, 1978.
Taken, Pierre Morel, 2008.
Terminator, James Cameron, 1984.
Terminator 2: Judgement Day, James Cameron, 1991.
Thamiz Padam, C.S. Amudhan 2010.
The Third Man, Carol Reed, 1949.
This Is Spinal Tap, Rob Reiner, 1984.

Three Little Pigs, Burt Gillett, 1933.
Three Men and a Baby, Leonard Nimoy, 1987.
Tin Toy, John Lasseter, 1988.
Titanic, James Cameron, 1997.
Tom and Jerry, Joseph Barbera and William Hanna, 1940-.
Top Gun, Tony Scott, 1986.
Top Secret!, Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1984.
Torrente: El Brazo Tonto de la Ley, Santiago Segura, 1998.
Total Recall, Paul Verhoeven, 1990.
Toy Story, John Lasseter, 1995.
Tron, Steven Lisberger, 1982.
Troy, Wolfgang Petersen, 2004.
Vertigo, Alfred Hitchcock, 1958.
Villi Pohjola, Aarne Tarkas, 1955.
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Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story, Jake Kasdan, 2007.
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War Horse, Steven Spielberg, 2011.
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We Need to Talk about Kevin, Lynne Ramsay, 2011.
White House Down, Roland Emmerich, 2013.
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Why Girls Leave Home, Gertie Potter, 1909.
The World's End, Edgar Wright, 2013.
Wu ji, Kaige Chen, 2005.
Why We Fight, Frank Capra, 1942-1945.
X-Men: First Class, Matthew Vaughn, 2011.
X-Men: The Last Stand, Brett Ratner, 2006.
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Zodiac, David Fincher, 2007.

Other

99 Luftballons, Nena, originally recorded 1983.

Dikter 1945-2002, Wisława Szymborska, Transl. Anders Bodegård, FIB:s lyrikklubb, Ordfront, Stockholm, 2003.

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald, originally published 1925.

Hallelujah, Leonard Cohen, originally recorded 1984.

Konglomerat Buriswara, Nino Riantarno, originally performed 1987.

Mexico, Lee Dorsey, originally recorded 1966.

Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wisława Szymborska, Wisława Szymborska, Transl. Johanna Trzeciak, Norton, 2001.

Moby Dick, Herman Melville, originally published 1851.

Oh, Pretty Woman, Roy Orbison, originally recorded 1964.

Pretty Woman, 2 live crew, originally recorded 1994.

Pumped up Kicks, Foster the People, originally recorded 2010.

Say! Boss Man, Bo Diddley, originally recorded 1957.

Semar Gugat, Nino Riantarno, originally performed 1987.

The Virginian, Owen Wister, originally published 1902.

Working in the Coal Mine, Lee Dorsey, originally recorded 1966.

From Blazing Saddles to The Naked Gun, film parody has been an integral part of the history of popular culture. With the decline of film parody came the advent of television parody. Today, animated television shows produce the most interesting and challenging examples of parody. Countersong examines how parody and satire are used in contemporary American animated television shows such as Archer, BoJack Horseman, My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, Rick and Morty, and South Park. By analyzing how they use parody and satire, Countersong shows that parody is not only a tool for laughter or ridicule. It can do so much more than that.