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America and Athens as Seen Through South Park and Aristophanes

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America and Athens as Seen Through *South Park* and Aristophanes

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Introduction:

When Dionysius the tyrant wished to be educated on the polity of Athens, Plato was said to have sent him the poetry of Aristophanes.¹ It was through the works of Aristophanes that foreigners could learn how Athens functioned. The works of Aristophanes span 37 years, and won him multiple awards in this time. If Dionysius wished to learn about modern day America, then I think it would be best to give him the corpus of *South Park*. Over the course of two decades, this series has aired 267 episodes and has been consistently renewed. Though *South Park* does not capture the intricacies of what happens in America, it captures the general sentiment surrounding these events. What it captures, is the zeitgeist of America, the spirit of the times. Just as Aristophanes captured the polity of Athens, so too did he capture its zeitgeist. When compared, these zeitgeists show many similarities, such as the pervading sense of apathy and unhappiness inundated with brief bursts of hope.

Though originally, and literally, defined as the spirit of the times, the zeitgeist can be understood as the configuration of the beliefs and ideals which drives the action of a community in a specific period of time.² It is this configuration that the satiric comedies of *South Park* and Aristophanes are able to capture. These satires do not simply display the news, they display how their societies reacted to certain events in the news, allowing for a comparison to be made between the zeitgeists. In addition, they are able to give a comparison over a long period of time, allowing for a deeper connection to be made. While the works of Aristophanes are the only fully extant works of Old Comedy that currently remain, necessitating their use in a comparison, the same cannot be said for America.³ There are multiple modern satiric comedies which depict American culture accurately, some of which have been on the air for longer periods of time such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*. What makes *South Park* unique is that it has not changed their writers over that time. Trey Parker and Matt Stone were the original creators of *South Park* in 1997, and still take the time to “write, direct, edit, and do most of the voices” for the series

¹ Rusten 2011:275.

² Fjørland 2008:52.

³ Dentith 2000:2.

in the two decades it has been on the air.⁴ If the attitude of the show changes towards certain topics, such as the emotions towards a specific person, the change occurs not from a different in multiple writers' opinions, but from the culture the show examines.

There are three parts which go into capturing the zeitgeist: parody, satire, and ridiculing by name. Parody is the imitation of another object, whether it be an artistic work or cultural thought. The modern understanding of parody is often based on artistic imitation, which comes in the form of generalized allusions, imitating generic tropes, or explicit allusions, imitating specific text or work.⁵ The imitation of contemporary culture, through contemporary languages and stereotypes, was a key fixture in Attic Greek comedies, and is also found in American comedies, though it may not always be described as parody.⁶ These parodies do not necessitate a critique or any form of cruelty, but rather show the relationship felt between the satiric comedians and their culture.

The heavy use of parodying contemporary language in Greek comedies is largely found in the genre of Old Comedy. The only extant examples of this genre are the remaining works of Aristophanes.⁷ Within these works “colloquialisms and vulgar language, extravagant multisyllabic coinages,” and imitations of “barbaric and non-Attic dialects” are frequently used.⁸ Through these imitations, Aristophanes could parody the language and stereotypes of contemporary Athens. In addition to these imitations, Aristophanes creates frequent allusions to other literary forms such as the epics of Homer, his fellow comedians, and tragedies. These allusions vary in length, some, such as his comparison of the demagogue Cleon in *Wasps* (1029-37) to the monstrous Chimera in Homer's *Iliad* (6.181),⁹ are quite lengthy, while others are brief, borrowing only a line or short phrase.¹⁰ These explicit allusions are found throughout the works of Aristophanes, but are not the only allusions utilized. Aristophanes makes

⁴ Zeidner 2000:1.

⁵ Dentith 2000:1.

⁶ Dentith 2000:2.

⁷ Dentith 2000:2.

⁸ Konstan 2014:34.

⁹ Biles 2006.

¹⁰ Schlesinger 1937:301 Schlesinger creates a list of allusions made in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, *The Birds*, and *Thesmophoriazusae*. He notes how the briefer allusions are used more frequently in Aristophanes' works, as they are easier to include.

frequent generalized allusions to the epics and tragedy. Using stock phrases, such as “the mattock of Zeus,” and stereotypical phrases, Aristophanes can parody the style and feel of tragedy, creating paratragedy.¹¹ Aristophanes also parodies his comedic rivals in similar fashion, allowing him to effectively parody different genres of literature.

South Park parodies other works quite frequently, with some episodes focusing entirely on parodying certain genres or authors. These allusions are produced either through a change in animation (“Good Times with Weapons” parodying anime) or through the imitation of a genre’s storytelling formula (“Scott Tenorman Must Die” parodying “cat and mouse” style plots). Though many episodes make generalized allusions, *South Park* also parodies through explicit references. These can take the form of either a quick, minor reference (Butter’s *Mad Max* speech in “Proper Condom Use”) or lengthier, plot focused references (the parody of *Children of the Corn* in “The Wacky Molestation Adventure”). These imitations allow *South Park* to portray its contemporary culture, with respect to literature. Contemporary culture with respect to language is also parodied through the liberal use profanity and use stereotypical accents. These accents occur from characters based on stereotypes of rednecks, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans.¹² *South Park* parodies the contemporary languages and accents in this way, and stereotypical beliefs and common misconceptions in similar fashion. One example is the depiction of conservatives and liberals with characters referred to as “white trash redneck conservative” and “aging hippie liberal douche.”¹³ Another example was the portrayal of Tourette Syndrome in “Le Petite Tourette,” which was praised by the Tourette Syndrome Association for *South Park*’s depiction of the typical understanding of Tourette Syndrome alongside the realistic way someone is affected by it.¹⁴ These are not the only ways *South Park* parodies contemporary culture, as it frequently depicts public figures in the series, and mocks them by name.

¹¹ Schlesinger 1937:302.

¹² There are occasions which this does not happen, such as in “Here Comes the Neighborhood.” Characters such as Snoop Dogg and Will Smith changed accents dependent on whether they were talking to each other or other people.

¹³ “Goobacks” s8e07.

¹⁴ TSA Response to episode. In the episode Cartman learns that some people who have Tourette Syndrome uncontrollably swear, which he uses this to his advantage, but also is taught that there are other, more common ways in which Tourette’s Syndrome can affect people.

This mockery is not a new occurrence, but has been a staple for many comedic ventures, especially the genre of Old Comedy. The Athenians had a name for this type of mockery: ὀνομαστικὴ κωμωδεῖν. Translated literally, this phrase means “to ridicule by name.” However, this literal translation overlooks the fact that the ridiculing was done against important contemporary figures, including powerful political leaders with very direct, personal mockery.¹⁵ Though the Athenians did not have a specific name for the people mocked in this way, the modern term “public figure” encapsulates them.¹⁶ This practice was instrumental in the creation and production of Old Comedy, and the entire corpus of *South Park*.

In pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, *South Park* frequently square off against political and religious leaders, and the “cult of celebrity.”¹⁷ Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s goal in creating *South Park* is to be “equal opportunity offenders,” meaning everyone and everything is subject to their mockery.¹⁸ For this reason, they purposefully try and mock whomever and whatever is prevalent in the news. This includes, but is not limited to, President Bill Clinton (“The Red Badge of Gayness” in 1999), Mel Gibson (“Passion of the Jew” in 2004), and Pope Benedict XVI (“Fantastic Easter Special” in 2007). These characters were mocked by name, and while the mockery is often a brief reference, it can frequently take up the plot of the entire episode.¹⁹ However, there are some limitations to the mockery of people, which will be explored in chapter 2.

Ridiculing by name defined the genre of Old Comedy, distinguishing it from later forms of Athenian comedy which utilized stock characters.²⁰ Aristophanes utilized ridicule to great effect, mocking well-known people involved in politics, education, and entertainment. Since the works of Aristophanes usually take place in Greece, most often Athens, contemporary figures are featured in either minor references (Pericles in *Acharnians*), or have more plot-centered appearances (Euripides in

¹⁵ Chronopoulos 2011:207.

¹⁶ The creation of this term, and the legal connotation for it, is discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ Strum 2008:209.

¹⁸ Davis 2009.

¹⁹ The mockery of John Edward in “The Biggest Douche in the Universe” takes up the majority of the plot, while “AWESOM-O” briefly mocks Adam Sandler and his role in comedies.

²⁰ Chronopoulos 2011:207.

Thesmophoriazusae). Aristophanes stopped ridiculing others by name at the end of his corpus, as the culture of Athens had made such ridicule no longer acceptable.²¹ In this period, Aristophanes transitioned into the genre of Middle Comedy which focused more on using stock characters, but he could still make satiric comedies.

Satire has been defined in many different ways throughout time. Though the rhetorician Quintilian claimed satire to be “wholly Roman,” (*Inst.* 10 1.93) it had existed before him in Old Comedy. As many different cultures have laid claim to satire over the years, a definition which encompasses all forms of it is difficult to acquire. Samuel Johnson, an English lexicographer, defined satire as “a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.”²² The problem with this, and many other definitions, is that satire can come in multiple forms, such as paintings and plays, and is not restricted to literary forms.²³ Satire can come in many forms, one of which is the production of comedies for the public citizens.

Aristophanes utilizes satire extensively, though some plays emphasize it more than others. One play which focuses on satire is *The Clouds*, as it is a critique of Socrates and contemporary education.²⁴ In this play, an older man named Strepsiades convinces his son, Pheidippides, to study under Socrates, so that he may learn how to make the weaker argument stronger. Upon receiving his education, Pheidippides uses it to justify beating his father. In this and similarly devised plays, the satire drives the story. The play is being written in order to make a point. Most of his other plays do not base the plot on a contemporary issue, instead focusing on a “whimsical ideal,” creating a “comedy of the dominant idea.”²⁵ In these plays, the idea behind the plot drove the story forward, instead of the satire, though satire was still utilized in these plays. In *The Acharnians*, the aggressiveness of Cleon was heavily satirized, while *Lysistrata*

²¹ Lord 1927:61.

²² Johnson 1775:1749.

²³ Test 1991:8.

²⁴ Major 2013:83.

²⁵ Hughes 2012:27 Hughes only gives the name of six of these plays, *Acharnians*, *Peace*, *Lysistrata*, *Ekklesiazousai*, *Birds*, and *Plutus*. *Frogs*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Wasps* seem to be the plays that would also be included, based on his definition.

satirized certain women engaging in politics.²⁶ Satire can be found in his other plays, even if they do not drive the focus of the comedy.

South Park is similar to Aristophanes in that every episode is satiric, with some emphasizing it more than others. These less satiric episodes would also be those that follow a “whimsical idea.” Most episodes, especially the more recent ones, base their plot on current events. An example of this is the episode “Gluten Free Ebola,” which satirizes people’s obsession with having a gluten-free diet. These episodes start out by mocking a current situation or trend, and basing their plot around that. Other episodes start off with a “whimsical ideal,” such as the Imaginationland trilogy, which is based on the idea of “what if terrorists were to bomb our imagination?”²⁷ Episodes in this category still contain many satiric moments however, as the episodes usually take place in America, and therefore contain references to politicians and celebrities.²⁸ For these episodes, the satire is not the focus, but the story is.

These literary devices were not only possible within America and Athens, special importance was placed upon them, as they were seen as important and necessary for democracy. This was seen through the laws put in place to support such direct biting satire, and the annulment of decrees which tried to limit the ridicule. Within Athens, this support came more in the protection of the satirists from the laws, with public support providing this freedom. The first chapter will focus on such protection, and how it came under pressure before and during Aristophanes’ writing.

South Park is known for its crude humor which often targets celebrities. Though this humor is commonplace now, it is only possible through certain Supreme Court Judgments within the last 30 years. *South Park* is allowed to depict a large variety of characters on screen, both imaginary and actual. There are special rulings set in place so that contemporary culture can also be parodied freely. Chapter 2 will

²⁶ Major 2013:137.

²⁷ The goal of the terrorists is to create chaos in our imagination by letting the evil imaginary things free to fight the good imaginary things. A general in the pentagon explains: “It’s only a matter of time before... our imaginations start running wild.”

²⁸ Michael Bay and M. Night. Shyamalan are mocked in this trilogy.

discuss the judgments that allow such parody and grant *South Park* the freedom to be as offensive as possible.

There are certain issues that come up frequently within Aristophanes' writing. The demagogue Cleon, men becoming weakened through sophists and the work of Euripides, women becoming engaged in politics, and the distribution of wealth all feature prominently in his extant plays. These issues drive the story of many plays, and the way they are presented changes over the course of his career. Chapter 3 will be devoted to how Aristophanes addressed these issues, and changes they undergo.

There are over 267 episodes of *South Park*, and there are a many themes that come up frequently. Presidents and the wars in the Middle East, the rise of political correctness and Donald Trump, the decline of quality entertainment, and the role of excessive spending in the American economy; all these themes crop up throughout multiple episodes of *South Park*, with many years passing between them. Chapter 4 will examine how these issues are displayed, and how the reaction to these issues change over time.

The way in which *South Park* and Aristophanes create their comedies is not the only similarity they share. They also share many similarity in the issues that pop up, and the way the satiric comedies discuss them. Chapter 5 will discuss how these issues are similar, and how it shows a similarity between the zeitgeists of Ancient Athens and Modern America.

In the episode "The Losing Edge," the character Randy Marsh gets into fights with the other fathers at the Little League games. Every time he is arrested, Randy shouts "I'm sorry, I thought this was America!" at the cops as he is being hauled away. Though 2400 years separates these two cultures, we share a similar zeitgeist when faced with these issues. The problems we face are not uniquely American, nor are our answers. If there was a Little League in Athens at that time, there would most likely be a drunk dad arrested for fighting at those games too.

Chapter 1- "A Dog on Trial: The Legal Freedom in Old Comedy"

Aristophanes drew inspiration from many things when writing his comedies. One influence would be what Thucydides described as "the greatest movement yet known in history" (1.1.2), the

Peloponnesian War. This war impacted all Athenians, even those who were safe behind the Athenian walls. This war influenced Aristophanes' plotlines but did not impact the manner in which he wrote. What impacted that were the laws regarding defamation, which limited satirists in some ways, but still granted them much freedom. This did not stop certain rulers from enacting decrees to limit the satirists, nor stop the demagogue Cleon from charging Aristophanes with defamation of the city before foreigners. All these aspects shaped Aristophanes' writing as he created his satiric comedies.

The multi-faceted effects of the Peloponnesian War can be seen throughout all of Aristophanes plays. These effects were often seen through the lens of the citizens of Athens. Under Pericles' leadership, all had gathered within the city walls for safety, including the farmers. While they were safe from foreign harm within the city walls, the situation was not ideal. The farmers were incensed at having to leave their farms and homes to live in the city, where they would have been incredibly cramped.²⁹ Aristophanes captures a sentiment shared by farmers in his *The Acharnians*. Dicaeopolis, a farmer and the protagonist of the story, says:

I pass the time complaining, yawning, stretching,
I fidget, write, twitch hairs out, do my sums,
Gaze fondly Countryward, longing for Peace,
Loathing the town, sick for my village home,
Which never cried, *Come, buy my charcoal*, or
My vinegar, my oil, my anything;
But freely gave us all; no *buy-word* there.³⁰

Forced into the confined walls of Athens, the farmers were quite miserable. To add to this misery, the overcrowding of the city led to an outbreak of plague, which killed almost a quarter of its citizens, including their leader Pericles.

The plague occurred in the year 430 BC, and by the year 427 BC had claimed the lives of roughly 25% of the citizens of Athens, including their leader, Pericles, in the year 429 BC.³¹ The very strategy designed to protect the citizens ended up destroying a large portion of them. The massive loss of life had a devastating impact on the citizens and their morale, and forced a change in leadership that carried through

²⁹ Kagan 2012:165.

³⁰ Rogers' 1962 translation.

³¹ Littman 2009:456/8.

after Pericles' death. Many citizens blamed Pericles for the outbreak of the plague, as his policies had led to the quick spread of the disease.³² In response to this, Pericles changed to a more aggressive stance. Instead of advocating restraint, as he had previously, he adopted a more aggressive stance, quelling any hopes for peace.³³ Pericles' died in 329 BC, but this more aggressive stance did not die with him. Instead, the demagogue Cleon rose to power and maintained this stance. It was this Cleon that brought up charges against Aristophanes for defamation of the polis, in his play *The Babylonians*.

The Babylonians, produced in 427/6 BC, was Aristophanes' second comedy. This play simultaneously won the first prize at the City Dionysia, and the condemnation in the form of charges of defamation from Cleon. The impact of this is seen throughout Aristophanes' works, as his latter plays show his displeasure at officials like Cleon who would seek to silence his works. In addition, as Cleon failed to secure a conviction, Aristophanes was able to remain secure in his freedom to mock the officials.³⁴ Aristophanes continued to mock Cleon and other political leaders in his later plays, protected by Athenian laws and love of satire. However, the laws and attitude did not grant him total freedom, as there were some restrictions still in place.

These laws came in the form of the laws of defamation, the δίκη κακηγορίας. These forbade the use of certain words which would damage the honor and reputation of those against whom they were used.³⁵ As honor and reputation were sensitive concerns in Athens, these words would be very damaging.³⁶ While every citizen of Athens was fair game for mockery, the mockery was required to be just. These words would be allowed, therefore, in cases where they were an apt description.³⁷ This caused the comedians to frequently mock those who had committed such actions. This was also allowed for other

³² Kagan 2012:78.

³³ Kagan 2012:87.

³⁴ Atkinson 1992:60 The charges brought up against Aristophanes were that of ridiculing the polis in front of foreigners. While no written records of the case itself remain, the case itself is known on account of the references in his next play, *The Acharnians*.

³⁵ Phillips 2013:129 The forbidden words include: *androphonos* ("killer"), *patraloias* ("father- beater"), *mêtraloias* ("mother- beater"), and *apobelêkenai* (used with *tên aspida* for "to throw away one's shield"). Off-shoots of these words would also be punished by the same law, as the meaning of the words were forbidden, rather than just the words themselves.

³⁶ Halliwell 1991:48.

³⁷ Phillips 2013:130.

citizens, but there were some laws regarding defamation that the comedians were given special freedom for.

The use of the forbidden words was not the only reason for a charge of defamation. One could also be charged for speaking ill of the dead, the magistrates, or those working in the Agora.³⁸ If one were successfully accused of this crime, he would be fined by a set amount of drachma. Aristophanes routinely violated these rules, though he was not the only one. In the fragmentary works that remain, his fellow comedians are also shown to ridicule such people.³⁹ Of these comedic targets, the mockery of the magistrates contain the least amount of extant examples. This is not due to the comedians restraining themselves, but a dearth of knowledge with respect to the magistrates' identities. As the identities of the *thesmothetae*, *polemarchs*, and *archons basileus*, positions of the magistrates, for certain years are unknown or uncertain, is it difficult to gain precise knowledge of the magistrates mocked.⁴⁰ The connection between the mockery and official title is unknown, while the identities of the dead and agora-workers are known. However as the *strategoi* were heavily mocked by Aristophanes and his fellow comedians, it does not seem likely the lack of evidence is due to a lack of mockery, but rather a lack of intellectual transmission. Though the charge of defamation was created to limit unfair mockery, there was a special freedom granted to these satiric writers. This freedom was bound to certain laws, but to cultural acceptance.

There are two known decrees which were enacted specifically with the old comedians in mind, the Decree of Morychides, and of Syracosius. While relatively little is known about these decrees, they are believed to be authentic.⁴¹ What is known, is that these decrees tried to limit satirizing, specifically the use of ridicule.⁴² These decrees share the similarity of being enacted for a relatively brief amount of time.

³⁸ Halliwell 1991:52-3.

³⁹ Halliwell 1991:52-3 Halliwell creates a list for the different parts of defamation, and when they would be broken.

⁴⁰ Halliwell 1991:52.

⁴¹ Shaw 2014:98.

⁴² Shaw 2014:98.

The Decree of Morychides was the first of the decrees enacted to limit the comic writers, in the year 440/39 BC.⁴³ This decree sought to ban the use of ridicule. This ban would not make satire illegal or impossible, but would have an adverse effect on it, changing how it would be created. This is shown through the staging of the satyr play, the predecessors to Old Comedy, *Satyrois* in 437 BC.⁴⁴ These satyr plays had heavily utilized ridiculing in the previous installments but found other ways to create humor under the decree. One satyr play-writer reacted to the decree's enactment in a unique way. In the year 438 BC, instead of adding a satyr play to a trilogy of tragedies, as was standard, Euripides instead added another tragic play, named *Alcestis*. Euripides frequently mocks the language decree in *Alcestis*, with the king Admetus forbidding "revelry," only to later desire the enjoyment it brought.⁴⁵ These allusions show Euripides' opinion of the harmful effects of the Decree of Morychides, which is also shown by the juxtaposition of the more serious *Alcestis* in place of a traditional satyr play. Euripides wished to show that ridiculing was necessary for the satires, and that the banning of ridicule would destroy essence of the satyrs and the enjoyment which came from them.⁴⁶ According to Euripides, if ridiculing continued to be banned then satyrs would be replaced by tragedies. Athens seemed to agree with Euripides, at the very least likening to the king Admetus' desire for the return of entertainment, as the decree was annulled in 437/6 BC, shortly after *Alcestis*'s production.⁴⁷

The Decree of Syracosius was the second decree enacted to limit ridicule. It differed by not seeking a ban on the ridiculing of anyone, instead seeking a ban on the ridiculing of a certain "class of people."⁴⁸ This class of people were undefined in the fragments of Phrynichus, from which the connection to Syracosius is obtained.⁴⁹ Most likely, this decree sought to protect those accused of mutilating the Herms, so that those who had been wrongly accused could be protected.⁵⁰ Though decree was enacted for

⁴³ Phillips 2013:136.

⁴⁴ Shaw 2014:98.

⁴⁵ Shaw 2014:98-9.

⁴⁶ Shaw 2014:100.

⁴⁷ Phillips 2013:136.

⁴⁸ Atkinson 1992:61.

⁴⁹ Atkinson 1992:61.

⁵⁰ Atkinson 1992:64.

seemingly altruistic reasons, it did not last long, as it was enacted and annulled before the year 414 BC.⁵¹ The old comedians mocked the decree numerous times in the following years, showing their displeasure at having been silenced in any way. The rest of Athens seemed to agree, as the decree was shortly annulled after its enactment and no other known decree was enacted afterwards.

Athens was in an interesting state when Aristophanes started writing. It had started a massive war with its neighboring poleis, and in trying to defend its citizens, had accidentally orchestrated the death of a quarter of them. The aggressive demagogue Cleon had rose to power, and chose Aristophanes, who dared to mock Athens, as a target of attack. However, this attack failed as the satirists were granted much freedom. This freedom was not granted solely by the laws, but by the culture, which thoroughly enjoyed the use of ridicule. The works of Aristophanes were created in a time when satire was able to direct, and could be quite vicious in their ridiculing. Though around 2400 years separate this culture to that of modern day America, there are many similarities in the freedom granted to satirists.

Chapter 2- “I’ll Sue You in England: Obscene Freedom in America”

⁵¹ Phillips 2013:136.

Aristophanes started writing as war raged, but *South Park* was created not long after the end of the Cold War. The country was at peace when the show first aired in 1997, and there was much freedom to be had. While McCarthyism silenced many at the start of the Cold War, certain Supreme Court cases had arose towards the end of the war which secured the freedom of speech. When speech was seen as damaging to their reputation, some tried to limit what could be said. This ended up backfiring on them, instead granting a large amount of freedom for writers.

South Park is known for making fun of everyone, but there are restrictions in place. These restrictions came about with the case of *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964)*, which created the distinction between public and private officials. After *The New York Times* published a full page add asking for donations to a civil rights group, L. B. Sullivan, the Montgomery city commissioner, sued the newspaper on grounds of libel due to some “minor factual errors” which the add contained.⁵² By focusing on these “minor factual errors,” Sullivan wished to silence speech that disagreed with what they were doing, as shown through similar lawsuits.⁵³ The Supreme Court ruled 9-0 in favor of *The New York Times Co.*, and Justice William Brennan said in his opinion: “erroneous statement is inevitable in free debate, and ... must be protected if the freedoms of expression are to have the ‘breathing space’ that they ‘need... to survive.’”⁵⁴ According to Brennan, it is inevitable for news organization to publish a false statements as factual, but the need for news outweighed this risk. If one false statement was grounds for defamation, then it would be incredibly difficult to report the news, as minor factual errors could lead to substantial lawsuits. The protection granted to the media was through the term “actual malice.” In order to successfully create a charge of defamation, the prosecution must provide clear and evident proof that actual malice was used in publishing the false statement, rather than that a false statement was published. Actual malice was defined by the court as “high degree of awareness of the probable falsity”⁵⁵ of the

⁵² Savage 2014:865 One example is that the add stated that students were expelled after singing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” at the state capital, when it was for “leading a sit-down strike at the Courthouse Grill.”

⁵³ Jammeh 2011:292.

⁵⁴ Savage 2014:870.

⁵⁵ Hancock 2005:81.

defamation, and that there was explicit intention to damage the plaintiff's reputation.⁵⁶ However, it is not necessary in every case to demonstrate actual malice. The judgment also created legal context for the terms "public figure" and "private figure," of which only the former needed to prove actual malice. As actual malice is rather difficult to prove, many cases of defamation focus on whether or not one is a public figure. To do so, one must show that he is not someone who "thrusts himself into a public controversy in order to affect its outcome."⁵⁷ The reason for the separation is that anyone who tries to use his influence as a persuasive force on the public should be more easily mocked and open to critique by the press. As private figures did not purposefully seek attention, they only need to present proof of negligence in the publication of falsities.⁵⁸ Those most often critiqued by satirists are these public figures. This is seen especially in *South Park*, as nearly every episode includes a reference to a public figure.⁵⁹ While the 1964 court case is known for granting freedom to the press, it also granted much freedom to satirists in who they could mock.

The case of *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell (1988)* granted satirists much freedom in their use of obscenities and parody. This case was brought about after *Hustler Magazine* published a full-page parody of an ad campaign for Campari Liqueur, which insinuated that Jerry Falwell, a Fundamentalist minister, had drunken intercourse with his mother in an outhouse.⁶⁰ Falwell sued under two pretenses: that they produced libel, as *Hustler* knowingly published falsehoods with Larry Flynt desiring to "assassinate" Falwell's integrity," and that reading such obscene satire had caused him "severe emotional distress."⁶¹ The court of Virginia, where Falwell sued, dismissed the first claim against *Hustler Magazine* as "AD PARODY—NOT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY"⁶² was written at the base of the ad, showing the

⁵⁶ Hancock 2005:81.

⁵⁷ Wilson 2015.

⁵⁸ It is possible for people to become public figures if they are accused of a crime. This ruling did not come the *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan (1964)*, but from a later ruling.

⁵⁹ While certain websites have compiled lists of the mockeries up to certain years/seasons, there is no comprehensive, routinely updated list.

⁶⁰ Post 1990:606.

⁶¹ Post 1990:610.

⁶² See fig. 1 in Appendix.

absurdity and implausibility of the ad.⁶³ After the Virginia court ruled in favor of Falwell on the second claim, the case was brought up to the Supreme Court, who ruled 8-0 (one justice, Justice Anthony Kennedy, abstained from the case) in favor of *Hustler Magazine, Inc.* The reasoning for the acquittal was broken down into three parts. The first reason was the core function that satire and political cartoons held in public discourse. Chief Justice Rehnquist stated that the form of speech portrayed in satires has historically harmed the subject's feelings, but has also added much towards public debate and has been beneficial to public discourse.⁶⁴ The second reason was that the freedom for people to share their own opinions and ideas, without fear of government intervention, is necessary for the stability of a healthy society, especially when they involve public figures.⁶⁵ The final reasoning was based on Falwell's claim that the parody was too obscene to be covered under the first amendment. According to Justice Rehnquist, judging "objectiveness" has an inherent subjectivity and basing freedom on this would "impose liability on the basis of jurors' tastes and views."⁶⁶ For this reason, he argued that speech should not lose any protection just because it embarrasses others, or is found offensive by society.⁶⁷ This case secured the freedom for satirists to mock any public figure, as long as they adequately showed that the parody was false, no matter how obscene the mockery. In addition, the case solidified satire's status as a necessary function for democracy.

Every episode of *South Park* starts out with a disclaimer stating: "All characters and events in this show—even those based on real people—are entirely fictional. All celebrity voices are impersonated... poorly. The following program contains coarse language and due to its content it should not be viewed by anyone." Just as *Hustler Magazine* stated their parody should not be taken seriously, *South Park* gains legal protection through this disclaimer. This allows the show to depict public figures in obscene ways, such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg raping Indiana Jones.⁶⁸ The audience is expected to

⁶³ Post 1990:609.

⁶⁴ Post 1990:613.

⁶⁵ Post 1990:613.

⁶⁶ Post 1990:613-4.

⁶⁷ Post 1990:613-4.

⁶⁸ "The China Problem" s12e08.

understand that the show is not being literal in its depictions, though there is at least one episode which is an exception to this rule. In the episode “Trapped in the Closet,” the president of the Church of Scientology tells Stan the secret behind Scientology. The secret is that the reason people are depressed is because an evil overlord Xenu imprisoned a large amount of alien slaves and destroyed them in the volcanoes of Hawaii.⁶⁹ These alien souls were then brainwashed and released into the world, latching onto human bodies bringing bad feelings. As this story is explained, the phrase “This is what Scientologists actually believe”⁷⁰ is printed at the bottom of the screen. Truth can be stranger than fiction at times, and the writers of *South Park* wished to show that this portion was not a parody. *South Park* worked very closely with their lawyers on this episode, in order to make sure that everything was done legally, as Scientology is known for suing people.⁷¹ *South Park*'s lawyers give their input on every episode, but this episode required special care to avoid a lawsuit. For instance, *South Park* could not say that Scientology was a pyramid scheme, nor could they say that Tom Cruise was gay, as these would be possible grounds for a lawsuit.⁷² To get around this, they describe Scientology as a “scam on a global level,” and have Tom Cruise physically locked in a closet, refusing to come out.⁷³ These differences may seem minor, but a scam does not hold the same legal definition as pyramid scheme, and being physically trapped in the closet does not necessarily relate to homosexuality. In this way *South Park* was able to portray certain beliefs without risking litigation. Even though the Church of Scientology and Tom Cruise have histories of suing and threatening lawsuits upon others, neither sued *South Park* for this episode. These juggernauts, who had silenced previous mockery at their expense, were not able to blunt the sting of the satirists who worked safely within the confines of the law.

The mockery in *South Park* is not limited to actual people; it reaches into the depths of our imagination. Fictional characters who have been mocked include Mickey Mouse, Popeye, and even

⁶⁹ “Trapped in the Closet” s9e12.

⁷⁰ See fig 2 in Appendix.

⁷¹ *Making Fun of Everyone on “South Park.”*

⁷² *Making Fun of Everyone on “South Park”*: Tom Cruise has a penchant for suing and threatening lawsuits against people for calling him gay, and by having him set in the closet for the episode, they can imply it, without actually stating it.

⁷³ “Trapped in the Closet” s9e12.

Cthulhu. These depictions are possible due to the fair use of their depictions as a transformative work.⁷⁴ This allows *South Park* to properly satirize popular culture, as these characters have been very impactful. Satirists are given special freedom, with respect to copyright laws, in order to comment or critique certain issues. One example of this is the Imaginationland trilogy of *South Park*, which took place in the collective imagination of America, and starred the characters who lived there. To put it plainly, in this episode “our imaginations are running wild.”⁷⁵ In this trilogy, characters such as the Hulk, the Flash, and the Cavity Creeps were depicted not only to “poke fun at the original,”⁷⁶ but also to “comment on a bizarre social trend.”⁷⁷ Satirists are allowed to freely parody contemporary culture in this way, so that they can discuss certain issues in creative ways, while also comparing the impact these fictional stories have had on the zeitgeist and how they have changed alongside it.

The end of the 20th century saw many changes that factored into the creation of the satiric comedy *South Park*. Certain domestic issues had started to gain more prominence, and became necessary to discuss. Freedom was given to those who wished to discuss these issues, so that they could publicly disagree with influential people without fear of reprisal. This freedom has been insured by the Supreme Court, and celebrated in American culture. The freedom to be obscene has been given, as long as it is shown that facts are not being purporting falsities as factual. This sense of freedom has allowed *South Park* to mock any public figures they wish, even those who try and silence any form of criticism. It is important to understand the setting in which a work is created, as it helps create an understanding for why certain changes occur. The zeitgeists of these countries have changed over time, and it is shown in the satiric comedies of Aristophanes and *South Park*.

⁷⁴ Chiger 2012:51.

⁷⁵ “Imaginationland, Episode III” s11e12.

⁷⁶ Chiger 2012:50.

⁷⁷ Chiger 2012:50.

Chapter 3- “Head up in the Clouds: The Issues for the Athenian Zeitgeist”

Athens faced many issues when Aristophanes wrote which include the involvement in the Peloponnesian War, sophist education, the decline in the quality of tragedies, the enfeeblement of the citizens, and economic problems. It is easy to write about these issues after they have occurred and their outcomes have been observed, but what is often lost is how the citizens felt about them. The works of Aristophanes grants such an insight, allowing us to view how the zeitgeist felt about these issues.

The first extant work of Aristophanes is *The Acharnians*, performed in 425 BC, a comedy that focuses on the possibility for peace with Sparta, with occasional references to Cleon's charging Aristophanes with slandering the polis. To suggest peace has become a dangerous notion, as the normal process for peace had been damaged by the rule of Cleon. Peace had to be proposed through the lens of a tragedy, with death a possible consequence.⁷⁸ This is shown in *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis gives his speech for peace. Dicaeopolis spoke with his head on a chopping block and wearing the rags of the tragic hero Telephus, denoting the danger Dicaeopolis faces by his desires (*Ach.* 366-84). Dicaeopolis claims in his speech that the reason for the war was Pericles, who had started it for private interests.⁷⁹ After Megarians had stolen three prostitutes, whom Pericles favored, he created a decree which starved the Megarians and necessitated a war in order for them to survive (*Ach.* 526-37). Even if this was not the direct cause of the war, the depiction here would have been a widely-known, and likely held, belief.⁸⁰ This would have been compounded by the plague which had killed many Athenians. This disdain towards leadership is not just shown in Pericles, but also through Cleon's depiction in *The Knights*, performed in 424 BC. Cleon is a corrupt politician who has blackmailed Athens and its allies for monetary gain.⁸¹ Though this depiction was likely false, Cleon's role in increasing burdens on Athens' allies and the prosecution of the elite made these accusations believable.⁸² Nevertheless, Cleon still had much support when Aristophanes wrote his early comedies, because many feared Cleon.⁸³

This changed when Cleon died in the battle of Amphipolis in 422 BC. With his death, a lasting peace was possible, perhaps even inevitable. Aristophanes' appropriately titled *Peace* was produced in 421 BC, shortly before the signing of the Peace of Nicias, and shows the change in attitude towards peace. In *Peace*, Aristophanes focuses on two issues: how the former leaders had not behaved in the best interests of Athens, and the hopeful opportunities brought by peace. Aristophanes mocks both Cleon and

⁷⁸ Major 2013:53.

⁷⁹ Sidwell 2009:118.

⁸⁰ Sidwell 2009:147.

⁸¹ Dorey 1956:139.

⁸² Dorey 1956:138.

⁸³ Solomos 1974:89.

Pericles in this play, though Cleon takes a bit more prominence. Aristophanes again blames Pericles for the start of the Peloponnesian War and Cleon for hampering the adoption of peace for personal gains.⁸⁴ Peace comes to Athens with her companions Harvest and Festival: the farmers are now able to leave the polis and return to their farms, engaging in their old livelihood, and a festival can entertain the citizens. Instead of peace being a dangerous proposition as in the *Acharnians*, it is inevitable and will bring its citizens much joy. In this play, Aristophanes captures Athens' excited for peace to return, and its possibilities.

When *The Birds* was produced in 414 BC, peace already seemed in the past and a failure. Athenians were ready for the return of war, and had sent out the Sicilian Expedition in 415 BC. Though this expedition would turn out to be a major disaster for Athens, the citizens had great hope for it. In fact, Thucydides notes that those who did not agree with the expedition kept quiet, so as not to be satirized and branded disloyal.⁸⁵ This did not stop some citizens from mutilating the Hermae, which was considered an ominous omen, perhaps even a warning for the expedition.⁸⁶ The expedition still set forth, but the event create much controversy in Athens, including the adoption of the Decree of Syracosius, as discussed in Chapter 1. The citizens maintained much hope in the expedition, and felt a sense of comradery and togetherness. This hope is mirrored in the plot of *The Birds*, as “journeying to a new location” and creating happiness there is the focus.⁸⁷ Aristophanes captures these feelings in his play, in addition to a belief that a decisive victory was inevitable. As war returned and an oligarchical revolution threatened Athens, that hope and belief evaporated.

The depiction of Socrates in *The Clouds*, originally performed in 423 BC, falls in line with sophists rather than his normal depiction.⁸⁸ This Socrates ran a school named the Phrontisterion, “The Thinkery,” where he charged students money in order to learn. In the play, an old man named Strepsiades forces his son, Pheidippides, to study there, in order to get Strepsiades out of his debts. This backfires, as

⁸⁴ Major 2013:110.

⁸⁵ Sidwell 2009:247.

⁸⁶ Kagan 2013:194-5.

⁸⁷ Ruffell 2014:210.

⁸⁸ Lazier 1966:159.

Pheidippides uses his acquired knowledge to justly beat his father. The depiction of Socrates and his teachings in this play were not simply a creation by Aristophanes; rather, they seemed to be how the citizens viewed him.⁸⁹ This unflattering view of Socrates stuck around, as oratorical skill became more of a necessity in politics. Socrates even mentions his depiction in *The Clouds* in Plato's *Apology*, saying that it had led to the charges being drawn against him (*Apol.* 18b). Aristophanes mocked this rhetorical skill, which had started to gain prominence, used by Pheidippides to justify beating his own father without question. The charges brought against Socrates were for corrupting the youth. In *The Clouds*, we see the youth being influenced into only acting for their own self-interest, questioning everything and making the weaker argument stronger in order to achieve their goals. In this play, we see the belief that this education was considered dangerous for Athens and its citizens.

The youth were also being weakened by the failure of the play-writes to capture the heroic style and grandeur of their predecessors, as shown in the criticism of Euripides in *Frogs*, performed in 405 BC. This comedy features a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, judged by Dionysus, over who is the better tragedian. This contest brings out Aristophanes' belief that Aeschylus was not simply a better poet than Euripides, but better for Athens.⁹⁰ Tragedians were supposed to be teachers for the Athenian citizens, but the tragedians in Aristophanes time were teaching something different from their predecessors. Aeschylus taught Athenians to be brave and disciplined, but Euripides taught them to be weak, and to excessively question.⁹¹ Euripides promoted degeneracy through his depictions of women and "beggar-heroes."⁹² This degeneracy also negatively impacted the democratic process, as seen in the play *The Mephoriazusae*. Euripides tries to convince women, who would not normally be engaged in political discourse, to free his friend Mnesilochus by taking on the appearance of his tragic heroes. He does so to convince the women to let his friend go, but ultimately fails, and has to agree to some of their demands in

⁸⁹ Lazier 1966:159.

⁹⁰ Solomos 1974:220.

⁹¹ Solomos 1974:222-3.

⁹² Hughes 2011:27.

order to free his friend (*Thes.* 1160-1169). The characters Euripides creates are weak and powerless in Aristophanes play, and weakened the citizens who watched them.

There are two extant comedies for the year 411 BC, *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*, both of which focus on women, implying that women had recently engaged in Athenian politics.⁹³ These engagements were not a frequent occurrence, but were shocking enough to warrant Aristophanes' satire. In *Lysistrata*, the women engage in debates with the Probouloi, while those in *Thesmophoriazusae* square off against Euripides. *Lysistrata* herself is likely a parody of the priestess of Athena Polias, Lysimache, who had publicly stated her disagreement with the Sicilian Expedition.⁹⁴ This occurrence was exaggerated in *Lysistrata*, in order to satirize Lysimache's engagement in politics, and what allowed for it to happen. The women in the play seize the treasury because since they manage the budget of the house, they can manage the state's (*Lys.* 494-5). The leaders fight back, but are defeated both militarily and rhetorically, and must give in to the women's demands.⁹⁵ These women would not have usually defeated the men in battle, but Athens had become weakened enough for this to happen, because most Athenian adult males had left Athens due to the war, and those who remained had become greatly weakened by the sophists and demagogues.⁹⁶ These theme is further explored in *Thesmophoriazusae*, with a speech by the chorus of women. These women mock the men, saying that while they have not changed, the men have lost their spears and shields (*Thesm.* 819-29).⁹⁷ It was not that the women gained much in power, they simply started overpowering men who had become weak.

These theme is further explored in Aristophanes final plays *Ecclesiazusae*, produced in 392 BC, and *Plutus*, produced in 388 BC. In addition to the enfeeblement, the discussion of wealth is involved. An injection of Persian financial aid invigorated the economy and brewed discussions on how the money

⁹³ Sidwell 2009:255.

⁹⁴ Sidwell 2009:256.

⁹⁵ Major 2013:137.

⁹⁶ Lape 2014:349.

⁹⁷ The words *ἔρριπται τὸ σκιάδειον* are used to describe the men's loss of shields, but is not the literal definition. The reason for this is that the phrase was still grounds for defamation, and by using the word for "parasol," Aristophanes could still imply what he wished while remaining legally safe.

would be used.⁹⁸ This work mocked the possible distributions of wealth, and some views of sharing it communally. This is first done in *Ecclesiazusae*, with women convincing the assembly that everything should be shared equally under the control of the women. They were successful in engaging in the assembly as they had all dressed in their husbands' clothing. Their idea was agreed upon as "it's the one and only innovation that has not yet been tried at Athens." (*Ecc.* 455-6) This leads to problems as some people do try and cheat the system, while others were forced into sharing objects they did not wish to. *Plutus* focuses purely on the equal sharing of money. This was seen as a good idea because at the time wealth was being unfairly distributed, purely by chance rather than by virtue. The characters of the play then cure Plutus' eyesight, so that he could see clearly and distribute the wealth equally to all. While this is beneficial to many, it is not entirely beneficial. As everyone is rich, nobody desires to work or is compelled to sacrifice to the gods. Poverty notes this in her discussion with the characters who heal Plutus' eyesight, warning them that they would desire her again one day (*Pl.* 598). Both of these plays show a similar thought that while their current distribution of wealth was unfair, it was the best system that they could have.

Though there were some common themes in Aristophanes' works, they changed over time to mirror what Athens society felt. This took the form of disdain towards Cleon and his aggressive strategies, and it showed the desire for peace, and the exhaustion for war. After a tentative peace had been obtained, exhaustion turned into hope; hope for the Sicilian Expedition to succeed, even though some tried to sabotage it. But the war was not the only concern for Athens, as the enfeeblement of the citizens by the sophists was a major concern. The distribution of wealth was also seen as troublesome, but the system they had in place seemed to work best. The attitudes towards these issues were all captured in Aristophanes works, and were the attitudes of the zeitgeist even as it changed over time. Similarly, the American zeitgeist has changed in the 19 years since *South Park* first appeared.

⁹⁸ Sidwell 2009:337.

Chapter 4- “Douche and Turd: American Attitudes Toward Different Issues”

Over the course of 19 seasons, two things have remained constant for *South Park*. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the original creators, have been part of every aspect of the show, and have consistently

created episodes on a weekly basis, taking only six days to make an episode.⁹⁹ The speed with which an episode airs allowed them to almost immediately depict President Obama's election victory speech.¹⁰⁰ It also allows them to be relatively uncensored by business who wish to do business with Comedy Central or its parent company, Viacom.¹⁰¹ This helps the show capture the zeitgeist of America as it changes, following the changing attitudes towards certain issues. *South Park* varies in what they mock, but there are some consistent issues towards which it gravitates, such as political leaders and the role of the military, political correctness, declining quality in certain forms of entertainment, and different economic problems. The way the show discusses these issues vary, mirroring the changes in American attitudes toward these problems.

The early seasons of *South Park* differ from the later, mostly with respect to engagement in politics. While the first three seasons had occasional jokes about then President Clinton's sexual activity,¹⁰² they did not touch on people's average attitudes towards politics and the political climate. It was only after the tragedy on 9/11 that these attitudes came to be portrayed to a greater extent. The first episode to air after the events was "Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants," which satirized peoples' attitudes right after the attacks. The episode starts off as it often does, with the kids at the bus stop. However, this time they all are wearing gas masks, perpetually fearing another attack. And they are not the only ones who have succumbed to fear: Sharon Marsh is unable to turn away from watching the news. Many citizens were left frightened by the attacks, wondering if there was another attack soon to come. The culture was later satirized when the kids go to Afghanistan to return a goat that had been gifted to them after a donation. There, they find other kids their age, and engage in conversation with them:

Kyle: All right, I've had just about enough of this! They told us in school, and on TV, that most people in Pakistan and Afghanistan like America.

⁹⁹ Their process can be seen in the documentary "6 Days to Air" which follows the creative team as they make the episode "HumancentiPad."

¹⁰⁰ See fig. 3 in Appendix.

¹⁰¹ As discussed in the NPR interview *Making Fun of Everyone on "South Park,"* there is not enough time for these groups to look at the show before it is produced. Only the lawyers and the standards and practices look at the episode and decide what they can and cannot say on the show.

¹⁰² Jokes were made about Clinton engaging in sexual activity with Cartman's mother in "Cartman's Mom Is a Dirty Slut" and Marisa Tomei in "The Red Badge of Gayness."

Boy in Blue Vest: And you believe it? It is not just the Taliban that hates America. Over a third of the world hates America!

Stan: But why? Why does a third of the world hate us?

Boy in Blue Vest: Because, you don't realize that a third of the world hates you!!!¹⁰³

This discussion shows the change in attitudes after the war, with many people coming to terms with the fact that America is not universally liked. The episode shows the support that many people had for the war, as the kids plant an American flag at the end and announce their support.

This support waned over time as the wars continued, with many beginning to question the war and the president. This is shown in the episode “I’m a Little Bit Country,” which satirized the disagreement in supporting the war. In the episode, the citizens are split between supporting and going against the war, and hold rallies and engage in fights in order to support their stance.¹⁰⁴ These disagreements and anger helped create an apathy towards elections, as shown in “Douche and Turd.” In this episode, the 2004 presidential election was satirized, and shared many people’s beliefs towards elections in general by having the vote literally be between a “Giant Douche” and a “Turd Sandwich.”¹⁰⁵ This feeling of apathy is seen throughout the seasons of *South Park*, demonstrating the usual reaction to politics. This attitude was overcome when change became inevitable and a new beacon of hope emerged, as the episode “About Last Night…” shows. This episode satirized the 2008 election, by showing the different attitudes towards the election of President Obama. Those who had voted for Obama were filled with immediate hope for change for a better tomorrow, while those who supported McCain were afraid and cowered in fear of some of these promised changes. Citizens held these emotions strongly through the election, but they quickly returned to apathy when they realized that their situation would not immediately change.

Political correctness (PC) is satirized throughout the series, with more emphasis placed upon it within the later seasons. The show goes against political correctness through the depiction of many

¹⁰³ “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” s5e09

¹⁰⁴ These dual attitudes are also expressed in the movie *Team America: World Police* which was created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone and released October 15, 2004.

¹⁰⁵ After PETA activists had forced the grade school to change their mascot away from the Cows, these were the two options chosen by the students.

characters in the show, such as the two disabled children, Timmy and Jimmy, and Mr. Garrison, who has two sex change operations and come out as gay and lesbian at different times throughout the series. While PC culture had frequently been a target at the start of the series, greater importance is placed on it in the last season. This season introduced the character PC Principal, who forcibly attempts to defend those who are marginalized by society. He does so by silencing anyone who says things that could be considered inappropriate or harmful. This can take the form of physical intimidation, exemplified by PC Principal's beating up of the fourth grader Eric Cartman for using the words "capisce" and "spokesman" in "Stunning and Brave," or silencing such comments, as shown in "Safe Space" where Butters removes all negative comments from social media so people do not have to see it.¹⁰⁶ What PC Principal and the rest of PC culture have done is weakened the American citizens, creating a "shameless America."¹⁰⁷ They stifle growth and make it difficult for people to make valuable changes. The PC Culture differs in this season from the others because it is shown to be utilized by a different group of people: college students and a majority of those in power. In the earlier seasons, PC culture was supported by few small groups of mothers and politicians, whose political influence were rather minor in comparison. This changed over time as many politicians and youthful citizens started to become engaged in political correctness, and started silencing others. It is more difficult to fight against these forms of PC, as they have become more entrenched with the citizens. The actions of the PC crowd eventually leads to the rise of a "brash asshole" who speaks his mind and does not care about offending others with his speech. This person is, of course, Mr. Garrison. Angry at being censored, Garrison ran for president in the episode "Where my Country Gone?" and gained support through his aggressive dismissal to being silenced and promise to "make our country great again."¹⁰⁸ Garrison represents the rise of Donald Trump in politics, as their slogans are intentionally similar¹⁰⁹ and Garrison promises to build a wall to keep the Canadian immigrants out.

¹⁰⁶ Butters is forced by PC Principal to remove any harmful comments from Cartman's social media posts before showing them to him. This success leads to others hiring Butters to do the same for them, such as Demi Lovato, Steven Seagal, and Vin Diesel.

¹⁰⁷ "Safe Space" s19e05.

¹⁰⁸ "Where My Country Gone?" s19e02.

¹⁰⁹ Trump's campaign slogan is "Make America Great Again."

Neither officious PC nor Garrison's politics are portrayed as healthy for America or its citizens, but they are the natural, extreme reactions to each other.

The characters of *South Park* are all heavily influenced by the television they watch in the show. The television they watch is often crude and base, even when it comes from sources that should educate their viewers. The episodes "Raising the Bar" and "A History Channel Thanksgiving" focus on this absurdity, commenting on the decline of The Learning Channel (TLC) and History Channel through programs such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* and *Ancient Aliens*. These episodes bemoaned the decline in quality on such channels that should perpetuate learning and knowledge. TLC features a show following the exploits of an obese child performing in beauty pageants, while the History Channel makes claims that aliens and ghosts were at the first Thanksgiving. It is not just television that has fallen according to *South Park*, as they mock the decline in video games and movies. The episode "Freemium isn't Free," *South Park* mocks the use "Skinner Box manipulation"¹¹⁰ in freemium video games, which focus on making money from addicted consumers, rather than creating interesting gameplay. The episode "Imaginationland Episode 1" mocked the lack of imagination in modern writers, specifically mocking the overuse of "twists" and "special effects."¹¹¹ Modern entertainment was seen to have degenerated, as shown through *South Park*. One partial reason for this is the change in economic interests, which is discussed in multiple episodes.

A major economic critique in *South Park* is that people spend too much money on frivolous items, usually because they got a "good deal." This has held true over many years, with episodes on the topic airing in 2004, 2009, and 2013. The first time the issue was discussed, was through the lens of Wall-Mart. The store allows for extensive casual spending with low prices on bulk deals. One character, Randy Marsh, explains the reasons why they all shop there: "It's simple economics, son. I don't understand it at all, but, God I love it."¹¹² All the citizens have become so engrossed in getting low prices for their goods,

¹¹⁰ "Freemium isn't Free" s18e06

¹¹¹ M. Night Shyamalan and Michael Bay are specifically mocked in the episode, while Mel Gibson is specifically praised for his imagination.

¹¹² "Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes" s8e09.

they are willing to let other businesses suffer. This frivolous spending is furthered by sales during Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving on which many stores have sales offering huge discounts on a variety of products. Crowds at these sales often become violent as shoppers fight each other in order to get the best deals. This is mocked in the Black Friday trilogy of episodes¹¹³ whose plot centers on Black Friday bundles for different video game systems, and the violence that surrounds this day.¹¹⁴ While the events are exaggerated, seven deaths and 98 injuries have been reported due to Black Friday shopping since 2006.¹¹⁵

One reason for the 2008 financial crisis was the sale of houses to citizens who could not afford them through the use of irresponsible mortgage lending. This recession was ended, in part, by the government's injection of money into the system, and buying some of the debt created by the selling of subprime mortgages,¹¹⁶ a situation satirized in the episode "Margaritaville." This episode showed the despair right after the crisis, through the depiction of multiple people giving their explanations for the crisis. Some blame the government for keeping interest rates too low, others the "fat cats" corporate greed, and one the covetous Jews stealing and hoarding gold in a cave. The reaction accepted by most citizens is the one given by Randy Marsh. He stated that the citizens of South Park had angered the "economy" by recklessly spending on things they couldn't afford, and that they should therefore try not to buy anything. Instead, Kyle Broflovski ends up paying for everyone in towns' debt, so that they are encouraged to shop again, boosting the economy. These attitudes represent the different views facing the economic crisis, and the actions taken towards it.¹¹⁷

The portrait of America that *South Park* depicts is quite varied. In the two decades that the show has been on the air, there have been three different presidents, with another soon to come. The show has satirized multiple parts of American culture, from its politics, to its economy, to its forms of

¹¹³ This trilogy is named this based on the common theme of Black Friday, and the name for the first episode. The three episodes that make up this trilogy are "Black Friday," "A Song of Ass and Fire," and "Titties and Dragons."

¹¹⁴ At the end of "Titties and Dragons," the animation is mixed with footage of violence in stores on Black Friday.

¹¹⁵ The site <http://blackfridaydeathcount.com/> has compiled a list of articles referring to distinct injuries/deaths which have occurred since 2006.

¹¹⁶ Blinder 2010:2.

¹¹⁷ Shenker-Osorio 2012.

entertainment. The attitudes the series takes often changes at times, as it mirrors the American zeitgeist. The issues discussed in *South Park* are not unique, and many have also been discussed in Aristophanes.

Chapter 5- “We’re not so Different After All: Similarities and Differences between American and Athenian Zeitgests”

The topics that *South Park* and Aristophanes satirized are quite different. They were produced with over 2400 years separating them. Despite this, they are similar in their method and issues. The issues both satiric comedies discuss are the weakening of the citizens, the decline in other art forms, the

differing feelings towards political leaders, and the economic problems they faced. The similarities in the way they discuss these issues show a similarity between the zeitgeists.

Both works were written during times of war, but in differing stages of it. Aristophanes shows the viewpoint of citizens who have been holed up inside Athens and are desiring peace in *The Acharnians*, *The Knights*, and *The Wasps*. These citizens disagreed greatly with the leadership, but were unwilling, or unable, to create the change many wished for. *South Park* shows the viewpoint of citizens who are tired of war, and have become apathetic to the leadership. There were many reasons for citizens to feel this way in both societies. In Athens, it did not seem like the war could be favorably settled in piece. Although peace had been offered by Sparta in 426/5 BC, it had been wholly rejected by the leaders including Cleon, as it was not seen to be favorable to Athens.¹¹⁸ Although they did not agree to those terms, a tentative peace was created between Sparta and Athens in 423 BC, but it was quickly broken. Within two days of the peace being brokered, the city Scione had revolted against Athens, and was bolstered by Spartan soldiers from Brasidas. In response to the rebellion, Athens agreed to a proposal by Cleon to destroy Scione with an expedition.¹¹⁹ Athenian citizens wanted a favorable peace, but it did not seem possible, especially with Cleon still being so influential. A similar feeling gripped American citizens through the Iraq war. Though President George W. Bush declared “Mission Accomplished” on May 1, 2003, the war still raged. The episode “I’m a Little Bit Country,” which aired April 9, 2003, satirized the attitude just before this announcement, and the movie *Team America: World Police*, which was released October 15, 2004, showed that the attitude had continued after the announcement. Though American citizens naturally wanted peace, it did not seem like the war would end anytime soon. This belief turned into a rather apathetic reaction, which transferred over into the election. When they voted, many citizens felt like they were either voting for a “douche” or “turd,” with the result that President Bush succeeded in gaining a second term.¹²⁰ This apathetic belief continued through the rest of the war, until 2011, with only a brief

¹¹⁸ Atkinson 1992:57.

¹¹⁹ Kagan 2013:309 The expedition was unsuccessful in capturing the city, and instead surrounded the city for two years, until the Peace of Nicias led to an agreement.

¹²⁰ This is satirized in the episode “Douche and Turd,” which aired October 27, 2004.

change during the 2008 presidential election. The episode “About Last Night...” discussed the brief belief that everything would change when Barack Obama was elected president, though it quickly reverted back to apathy not to long after the election.

The episode “About Last Night...” showed American’s belief that everything would change with Obama’s election, just as *Peace* showed Athenian hope in Cleon’s death. American citizens hoped that Obama’s messages of “hope” and “change” would come true immediately after his election, with one result being that the war would be quickly over. In *Peace*, the Athenian reaction to the death of Cleon and the Spartan commander Brasidas is shown to be that of hope. They believe that not only will peace be returned to Athens, but so will festival and harvest. Both cultures felt a sense of hope for as their leaderships changed, but the hopes of Ancient Athens and modern America did not last long. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ended in 2011 in 2014 respectively, and the Peace of Nicias, enacted shortly after *Peace’s* production, had shown signs of trouble not long after its adoption. Some of Sparta’s allies, “the Boeotians, Eleans, and Megarians, rejected the treaty and refused to swear the oaths,” and not all of the conditions for the treaty were met by the Spartans or Athenians.¹²¹ Both cultures thought that a change of leadership would bring about peace, as it had been the previous leader forcing the aggressive strategies.

While the previous comedies displayed hope for peace and calm, *The Birds* and “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” display hope for victory and success, mixed with patriotism. Both plays were produced with certain events in mind. When *The Birds* was performed, the Sicilian Expedition had recently commenced, and the Hermae mutilated. When “Osama bin Laden Has Farty Pants” aired, the Twin Towers had recently fallen and Afghanistan been invaded. Though the zeitgeists capture similar things, there are differences. For America, there was a great amount of fear towards future events, as the event was the deadliest foreign attack on American soil since the bombing of Pearl Harbor¹²² and American citizens feared a subsequent attack. The mutilation of the Herms enraged Athenians: it was a blasphemous event, which was done most likely in response to the commencement of the Sicilian

¹²¹ Kagan 2013:19.

¹²² Morgan 2009:222.

Expedition. As the mutilation was done by Athenian citizens for a singular purpose that had already transpired, they would not fear another attack. However, what is captured in both satires, is the zeitgeist of a desire for success and patriotism. These satires showed these emotions, mixed with scenes of success in accomplishing deeds that would better their countries.

Another theme Aristophanes and *South Park* capture is the belief that the quality of entertainment and art was declining. This is found more in *South Park* than in Aristophanes, partially because of the variety in which entertainment can come in today compared to the amount of works that are not extant. *South Park* discusses the decline in quality movies, video games, and, most frequently, television, which has led to decline in intelligence and critical thinking. Major targets of this satire include The Learning Channel and The History Channel, which, as their name would suggest, are supposed to promulgate learning, but instead have “lowered the bar”¹²³ and put forth ridiculous fantasies as truthful.¹²⁴ This leads to citizens acting irrationally, rather than thinking things through. For Aristophanes the decline comes through Euripides and his plays. Aristophanes charges that Euripides’ works celebrate degenerate characters while promoting sophistry.¹²⁵ The works of Euripides’ predecessors, Sophocles and Aeschylus, were grander, and better for the citizens, according to Aristophanes. Despite these differences, Aristophanes and *South Park* capture a similar sentiment prevalent in their societies.

The action that has been taken to the extreme in both cultures is questioning. PC culture does not simply advise against questioning, it silences it. In *South Park* the politically correct crowd teaches citizens not to question things, but to blindly follow them. People are told that their views are harmful and wrong, and are threatened into changing them. It is not enough to censor oneself, it is necessary to censor other people who have views that could be considered controversial or dangerous. This makes it difficult for people to be active in the democracy, as their questions and comments are silenced and dismissed, rather than answered or engaged. In Aristophanes’ works, sophists have taught people to question

¹²³ “Raising the Bar” s16e09.

¹²⁴ In a show parodying *Ancient Aliens*, they try and prove that aliens and ghosts were present at the first Thanksgiving in “A History Channel Thanksgiving.”

¹²⁵ Hughes 2011:27.

absolutely everything, moving them away from passionate tenacity.¹²⁶ Socrates and the sophistic education led to men using rhetorical skill to trick others into following them, rather than leading them righteously. The sophists teach people to question absolutely everything, to break every argument down so that contradictions can be found and weaker argument can overcome it. This damages democratic discourse, as it makes it easy for arguments to be taken off topic and disregarded. Both methods are the extremes of the same issue, which has a damaging effect on the democratic process.

This has the natural result of people engaging in politics who should not. For Aristophanes, women started speaking out about politics, while it is “brash assholes”¹²⁷ who know nothing about politics but are unafraid of speaking their mind for *South Park*. These groups would not normally have become involved in politics, but the other citizens had become weakened and demoralized enough for them to do so. Both cultures share a belief that the democracy has been damaged, but it has not been damaged by the “brash assholes” or women. The damage was done by the PC crowd and sophists, which force out the moderate viewpoints. The citizens are not able to engage as they should in politics, allowing fringe elements to crop up and gain some support. These fringe elements are not seen as good by either culture. Instead, they are seen as the natural outcome. The citizens had become weak in standing up for democracy, and marginal groups gained authority that they should not have.

Democracy depends upon a stable economy, and such stability had become a problem for both Athens and America, as shown in *South Park* and Aristophanes. After an injection of Persian financial aid, Athenians debated the wealth should be distributed. In Aristophanes, the culture holds the belief that while the current economic system is flawed, it is still better than other methods. In the American culture, a similar belief is held. *South Park* describes the economic standard of excessive spending in “Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes” and the “Black Friday” trilogy. The greed and desire for frivolous things is seen as horrible, but is necessary at times, as shown in “Margaritaville.” In both cultures, we see that other economic practices would be preferred, but maintaining the usual practice is necessary to keep

¹²⁶ Solomos 1974:221,223.

¹²⁷ “Where My Country Gone?” s19e02

things running smoothly in times of economic problems. Both cultures feel dissatisfaction towards their economies, but overall believe that the system is the best possible.

Through their use of parody and ridiculing by name, *South Park* and Aristophanes have been able to capture their respective zeitgeists. Both cultures felt dissatisfied with their leader during wars which were not successful. They hated these leaders' aggressive strategies, and longed for peace. When peace was offered through a change in leadership, there was much hope for the change it could bring. Both have zeitgeists desiring peace and prosperity, but are willing to stand together and fight when they feel that they have been attacked. Athens had just left a perilous, and somewhat debilitating, stage in the Peloponnesian War, but was willing and eager to reengage in battle with the Sicilian expedition. America had recently left the Cold War, which had created large amounts of fear and despair, but patriotism flowed strong as support for President Bush reached 90% shortly after 9/11.¹²⁸ When the wars did not turn out to be as successful as hoped, the feelings of despair and disdain returned.

The leaders are not the only people that have been harming the countries and their democratic process, as both contain zeitgeists despising the silencing rhetoric of the sophists and politically correct. In both cases they are seen as extremes, and result in people such as Lysistrata and Mr. Garrison becoming engaged in politics, as the moderates have been removed. Neither extreme is desired, instead both have a zeitgeist striving for a return to moderation in politics. There is also a zeitgeist for a return to educational and empowering forms of entertainment. Both cultures feel that "the bar has been lowered," that degeneracy and foolishness is being celebrated rather than tenacity and strength. In both instances, there is a strong zeitgeist for a departure from the contemporary authors, and a return to their grand predecessors.

However, despite the other zeitgeists shown, both Athens and America share a zeitgeist for stability, for keeping things the way they are, when it comes to the economy. Both share the belief that their current systems were flawed, but were the best available option. For Athens, they felt that wealth was being unfairly distributed, that those who are just are not benefiting from it while those who cheat

¹²⁸ Gallup poll

and steal do. But when wealth is evenly distributed to all, this causes a plethora of problems as people no longer work or sacrifice to the gods. In America, citizens are spending an excessive amount on goods that they are not necessary, or very beneficial. But when the economy is threatened, this attitude needs to be encouraged so that money keeps flowing and people can continue working. Economic stability is necessary for a democracy, and both cultures share a zeitgeist for maintaining stability through their current practices.

In these ways, the zeitgeists developed in *South Park* and the works of Aristophanes are similar. Both cultures face similar issues, though their causes are often quite different. Politics, wealth, and entertainment are sources for many problems in countries, but the way they react to these problems differ. Both cultures dislike their leaders and hope for peace when they are removed. Both despise the focus on degeneracy and the silencing of rhetoric and the outcomes they have. Even though 2400 years separates them, the zeitgeists of Ancient Athens and Modern America show such similarity.

Conclusion

Though often criticized for containing “juvenile” humor, the satiric comedies of South Park and Aristophanes have been able to capture the zeitgeist of their respective cultures. Through their blend of parody, satire, and ridiculing by name these satiric comedies have shown the issues that their cultures faced, and its reaction to these issues. While satire and parody are not unique to either comedy, their combination with ridiculing by name has granted them the ability to portray the zeitgeists in a fairly unique way, which can be understood by later generations. This was done through certain laws and attitudes which granted the satirists a lot of freedom to create their works. Even with these laws, there

were some who tried to use their influence to silence the satiric comedians, but they still continued in their mockery safe from harm. Judgements were laid down and decrees annulled, so that the direct biting satire could continue.

This freedom allowed Aristophanes to discuss the issues Athens faced, blaming whomever society believed to be at fault. Pericles and Cleon kept the war raging when people wanted peace. Socrates encouraged people to question everything, weakening men so that women would start engaging in politics. Euripides promoted degeneracy instead of tenacity, unlike his predecessors. *South Park* is able to do the same thing, though they will frequently attack institutions such as The Learning Channel and Wal-Mart. There is a similarity to be drawn between these two cultures, and there is much to learn from this. Athens democracy was failing at the end of Aristophanes' career. Having been damaged by the loss in the Peloponnesian War and the rule of the 30 tyrants, Athenian culture changed drastically. We know that Athens changed as a result of these issues, and we can learn from their mistakes, but comparing the zeitgeists deepens this connection. We see a similarity between these two civilizations and can see how they responded to the issues America currently faces.

It is said that those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it. Athens history has been explored through a multitude of different lenses, and has granted insight on many different issues. By looking at it through the lens of Aristophanes and *South Park* we can see how these cultures felt about certain topics, and how they responded to them. Modern America has many similarities to Ancient Athens, and we have much to learn from them. But to do so, we must realize what we know about ourselves. Dionysius the tyrant was instructed to read Aristophanes to understand the polity of Athens. If he watched *South Park* he would understand that these satiric comedies share many things in common, as they capture the zeitgeists of their respective countries.

Appendix

1. The ad parody which resulted in the case of *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell (1988)*.
2. Scene from the episode “Trapped in the Closet.”
3. Comparison between President Obama’s victory speech in real life and *South Park*.
4. George R. R. Martin’s house in “A Song of Ass and Fire.”

1. This ad parody resulted in a Supreme Court judgment granting freedom for satirists to be obscene.

Jerry Falwell talks about his first time.*



FALWELL: My first time was in an outhouse outside Lynchburg, Virginia.

INTERVIEWER: Wasn't it a little cramped?

FALWELL: Not after I kicked the goat out.

INTERVIEWER: I see. You must tell me all about it.

FALWELL: I never really expected to make it with Mom, but then after she showed all the other guys in town such a good time, I figured, "What the hell!"

INTERVIEWER: But your mom? Isn't that a bit odd?

FALWELL: I don't think so. Looks don't mean that much to me in a woman.

INTERVIEWER: Go on.

FALWELL: Well, we were drunk off our God-fearing asses on Campari, ginger ale and soda—that's called a Fire and Brimstone—at the time. And Mom looked better than a Baptist whore with a

\$100 donation.

INTERVIEWER: Campari in the crapper with Mom . . . how interesting. Well, how was it?

FALWELL: The Campari was great, but Mom passed out before I could come.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever try it again?

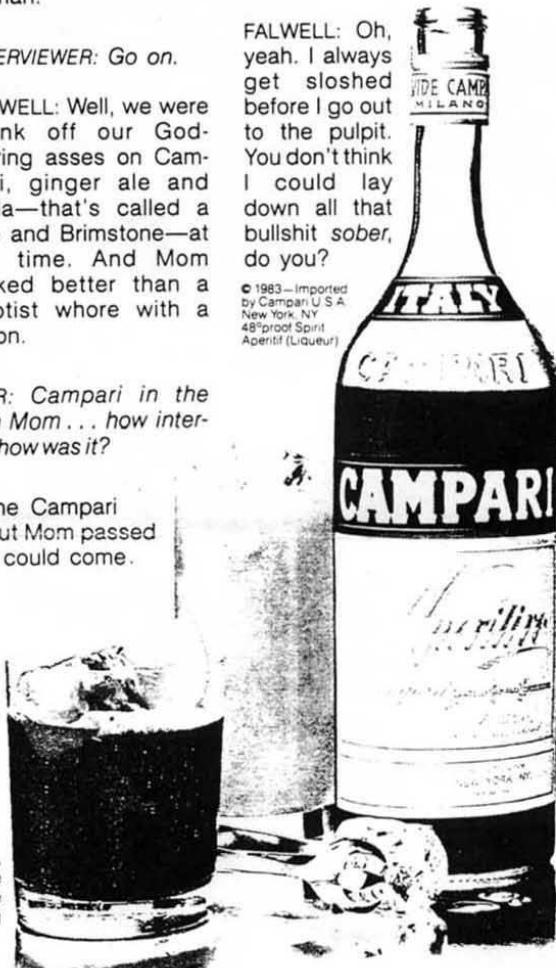
FALWELL: Sure . . .

lots of times. But not in the outhouse. Between Mom and the shit, the flies were too much to bear.

INTERVIEWER: We meant the Campari.

FALWELL: Oh, yeah. I always get sloshed before I go out to the pulpit. You don't think I could lay down all that bullshit sober, do you?

© 1983—Imported by Campari U.S.A., New York, NY. 48° proof Spirit Aperitif (Liquor)

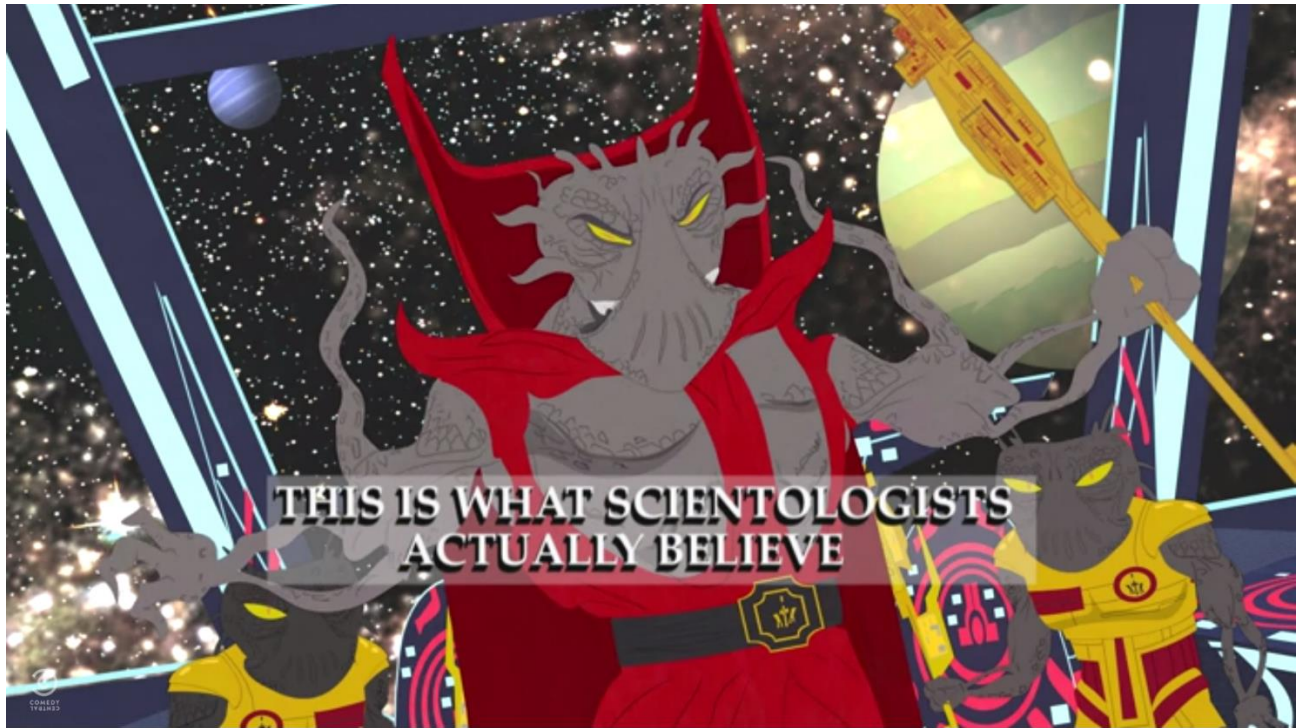


Campari, like all liquor, was made to mix you up. It's a light, 48-proof, refreshing spirit, just mild enough to make you drink too much before you know you're schnockered. For your first time, mix it with orange juice. Or maybe some white wine. Then you won't remember anything the next morning. **Campari. The mixable that smarts.**

CAMPARI You'll never forget your first time.

*AD PARODY—NOT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

2. This scene from the episode “Trapped in the Closet” was depicting what Scientologists actually believe. As it is rather ridiculous, Parker and Stone wanted to make sure that people knew that they were not just making it up.





3.

This scene from “About Last Night...” shows how the episodes are able to be very similar to reality due to their swiftness. This episode occurred two days after Obama was elected as president, and even included sound clips from his speech.

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