

## **Interpretive Methodology from Literary Criticism: Carnavalesque Analysis of Popular Culture: *Jackass*, *South Park*, and ‘Everyday’ Culture**

Various textual practices have been interpreted within the Bakhtinian framework of carnival, including popular cultural texts such as *The Big Lebowski* (Martin & Renegar, 2007), *Terminator*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and *12 Monkeys* (Dimitrakaki & Tsiantis, 2002); the animated series *The Simpsons* (Gray, 2006); the news and entertainment journal *The Onion* (Achter, 2008); horror fiction *The Shining* (Holland-Toll, 1999) and Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (Holquist, 1994), the television series *Jackass* (Brayton, 2007); and even the political campaign of Jesse Ventura (Janack, 2006). In these academic works, popular culture has been theorized in many different ways: as escapist, as resistant to the ideology of capitalism, or as containing “visions of utopia, collectivity or even emancipation” (Dimitrakaki & Tsiantis, 2002, p. 209). However, the carnivalesque is not restrained to popular culture texts, but transcends to ‘everyday’ life encompassing the lives of creators, those of audiences, and the directors of television programs and shows. Contemporary carnival is ‘everyday’ life itself. The social environment contains the ambiguous traces of carnival: it resists the ideology of capitalism and, at the same time, reproduces the capitalist social order. Thus, a carnivalesque analysis provides additional information not only to various phenomena of

popular culture, but to the social and political environment of ‘everyday’ life.

The article opens with a discussion of the Bakhtinian notion of carnival then continues with an analysis of various popular culture texts, such as *South Park* and *Jackass*. Further, the study reveals how carnivalesque futures penetrate not only popular culture texts but also the contemporary social environment and thus, these organize one inseparable system. Finally, the conclusion discusses the findings of the analysis.

### **The Bakhtinian Perception of Carnival**

Many authors have devoted their works to interpreting carnival in different ways and have constructed particular discourses of carnival. Various events that have taken place at different times (Castle, 1986; Kolyazin, 2002) and in different countries (Mitchell, 1995; Lewis and Pile, 1996; Lindahl, 1996; Nurse, 1999; Tokofsky, 1999) have been described as being a ‘carnival.’ The matrix of ideas introduced by these different authors organizes the discourse of carnival.

This study however, focuses on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1895 - 1975) concept of carnival and its influence on modern popular-cultural texts and ‘everyday’ life. For Bakhtin, carnival is a world of ambivalent festive laughter, which brings together oppositions, sublimates death and dispels the fear of death by bringing birth and death together (Bakhtin 1984, p. 51). Laughter for the sake of laughter; mocking the present official political system, religious dogmas and authoritative figures; grotesque realism; billingsgate language; degradation of high images; celebration of the lower bodily stratum; crowning and decrowning of the king (Bakhtin 1984); and masquerade are some distinguishing characteristics of the discourse of carnival constructed by Bakhtin. Bakhtinian carnival implies the ambiguity of life and a blurred borderline between actors and spectators which could have interesting consequences for the study of popular culture, because all these carnivalesque forms can be found in popular-cultural texts.

According to Bakhtin (1984), carnival is a utopian world of renewal, festivity and laughter (p. 9). For Bakhtin, everyone participates and lives in a second life that is beyond hierarchy, religious dogmas, official norms, and prohibitions. Yet this study will show that these traces are ap-

parent not only in what Bakhtin (1984) calls, “a second life” (p. 8), but also in ‘everyday’ life of people.

As described above, the Bakhtinian concept of carnival has already been applied to various phenomena of popular culture. Yet some important aspects of carnivalesque analysis seem to be overlooked by previous research. Carnavalesque analysis sets forth an alternative interpretation of some phenomena of popular culture by revealing its carnivalesque features. Although some features of the carnivalesque genre transmute with time, other elements are preserved. The transition of these elements from carnival cultural praxis to popular culture text represents, in the words of Lachmann (1988-1989), “creative memory.” The following examples demonstrate how “creative memory” is enacted in popular-cultural texts and how they present “the unconscious turn to the past” (Holquist 1994, p. 129). Moreover, this study will show how “creative memory” is also enacted in the contemporary social environment.

### **Carnavalesque Analysis of the Television Show and Film *Jackass***

Billingsgate language, which can be characterized as a familiar speech of the marketplace (a local trade affair), “abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 16), is one of the features of carnival. The billingsgate language of the body is manifested in the series and movies titled *Jackass*. The program’s name is partially constructed of the word “ass,” which can either mean a donkey or can be used to describe the lower part of the human body. In true carnivalesque fashion, the nature of this program is mostly concerned with the lower bodily stratum and grotesque realism. The characters in the program inflict pain on themselves or each other for no specific purpose but for their own amusement and that of the audience. The pointless suffering endured by the characters creates audience laughter, but for Bakhtin (1984), the essence of carnivalesque laughter is in its liberating and regenerating power (p. 51). The laughter in *Jackass* liberates the viewer from certain social norms and hierarchies by celebrating the lower bodily stratum, and by inversion and exaggeration. But, at the same time, these carnivalesque features can be used to reproduce the hierarchal order. Brayton (2007) draws readers’ attention to the fact that the film has earned \$79,493,831, which

acknowledges that “the cast is financially fused with the very bourgeois culture which it allegedly rejects” (p. 70). The film *Jackass* brings together such contradictory phenomena as heteronormative masculinity, homoeroticism, and aggressive and receptive identities (Brayton, 2007, p. 57). A vivid example of this fusion of contradictions takes place in the opening scene of the film (*Jackass*, Part II). One of the film’s main characters, Johnny Knoxville, enters a demolition derby, but not in any stereotypically straight-forward manner. In the film,

The working-class white masculinity of the redneck derby is spectacularized and curiously juxtaposed with Knoxville’s crash helmet, which bears the ‘rainbow flag’ insignia of gay/lesbian solidarity. The ‘double voicing’ of heteronormative and homoerotic sensibilities ‘refuses resolution into either pole; the doubleness is held in tension always’ (Hutcheon, 1991, p. 12, cited in Brayton 2007, p. 69).

This combination of multiple contradictions is congruent with the principles of Bakhtinian carnival. The laughter in *Jackass* is itself ambiguous: it liberates viewers from hierarchal structures and at the same time reproduces them; it frees viewers from social norms and at the same time sustains them.

In another replication of Bakhtinian carnival, there are numerous reversals of front and back and top and bottom within the context of the program. In the film *Jackass* (Part II), there are many scenes focusing on pain inflicted on each character’s genitalia. In testament to Bakhtinian carnivalesque reversal and focus on the lower body, in one scene, one of the film’s characters cauterizes the backside of another character with a chiseling iron in the shape of a phallus. This pain evokes laughter among the participants of the show. This laughter has a universal spirit as even those who are injured share in it. For Bakhtin, the lower bodily part has regenerative, reproductive and renewing power. Thus, the laughter evoked by *Jackass* characters has a regenerative power, as the organs which are hurt symbolize fertility. Such are some of the characteristics of carnivalesque festive laughter.

Another interesting carnivalesque feature regarding *Jackass* is that there are costumes, masks, and make-up involved in the production of the movie, giving it a carnivalesque flair. The characters often dress in costume to resemble the devil, a baby, an Arab terrorist, an old man, etc., which are

all illustrations of becoming the 'other' as it is in carnival. The members of the cast are all male and so often engage in cross-dressing. In one scene, a young man is turned into an old woman, and, by accident, her dress is torn off her, causing the spectators to laugh.

Another property of carnival is the mocking of social values. Laughing at cosmic fears in medieval times was an essential part of carnival. Bakhtin (1984) asserts, "In the sphere of imagery cosmic fear (as any other fear) is defeated by laughter" (p. 336). Mockery plays a great role in *Jackass*: God is mocked by the depiction of a red devil; the official fear of global terrorism (Bauman, 2004, p. 10) is mocked by the image of an Arab terrorist, and a mother is mocked by her son. Through their painful and playful antics, the characters are constantly challenging death and laughing at it. In one of the episodes, a raging bull is unleashed into a field where four of the characters are sitting on children's see-saws. The danger of death and of being ravaged by the bull's horns is apparent, but the participants laugh and mock it. The characters are put in situations of which they should be fearful for their lives, but this fear is downgraded.

Further, mocking death is symbolically expressed in the show's logo. The *Jackass* logo is depicted by the skull and two crossed walking crutches under it, instead of the more typical image of crossed bones. This represents death as handicapped. The symbol of death is depicted in a way that provokes laughter, thus, fear of death is dispelled by laughter. This laughter gives a sense of freedom, freedom from official and cosmic fears. The billingsgate language of the body adds a sense of happiness and joy by undermining hierarchal establishments. This is, according to Bakhtin (1984), "the gay, liberating and regenerating element of laughter" (p. 51) which exists in carnival.

### **Carnavalesque Analysis of the Animated Television Series and Film *South Park***

*South Park* can be considered the epitome of carnival culture because it exhibits many carnivalesque features such as festive laughter, grotesque realism, images in tremendously exaggerated forms, abusive language, and celebration of the lower bodily stratum. As noted, billingsgate

language, which can be characterized as a familiar speech of the marketplace, “abusive . . . , insulting . . . expressions, some of them quite . . . complex” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 16), is one of the features of carnival and is apparent in *South Park* as well as *Jackass*. Like the language of the marketplace, the abusive language of *South Park* refers to the lower bodily stratum; it has a liberating power and an ambiguous hue. (Editor’s note: See Janssen, *Studies in Popular Culture* Oct. 2003, on *South Park* as Juvenalian satire.) Gardiner (2005) explains that the language used by the *South Park* characters is

premised on anti-authoritarian laughter against the adult order. Polymorphously perverse, it confounds boundaries between oral, anal, and genital drives; the human and the animal; the ideal and the debased; masculine and feminine; an older and younger generations and the order of kinship. (p. 59)

The abusive language used by the *South Park* characters is directed towards the adults’ authority and destroys the borderline between adults and children. In the animated film *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, one of the leading characters is a child by the name of Eric. His assaults directed at Saddam Hussein, “shitty boner bitch, muff, pussy, butthole, Barbara Streisand,” refer mainly to the zone of genital organs and therefore have not only destructive and degrading powers, but also regenerative and reconstructing ones. This abusive language liberates the speaker from social orders and conventional rules through expressions which are broken in syntax, illogical and, by many accounts, senseless.

Billingsgate language also manifests itself through bodily forms. In *South Park*, bodily principles are shown through the images of characters that eat, drink, fart, vomit and have sexual intercourse. In the show, Stanley vomits any time the girl he loves talks to him; Mr. Garrison has sexual intercourse with various men; Stan’s dad produces ‘the biggest crap’; Terrance and Phillip’s jokes are based on bodily functions, etc. These acts create the billingsgate body language which is part of the Bakhtinian concept of carnival.

In carnival everything is “inside out, vice versa,” and “upside down” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 370):

All . . . thrust down, turn over, push head first, transfer top to bottom, and bottom to top, both in the literal sense of space, and in the metaphorical meaning of the image.

In the episode *How to Eat with Your Butt*, one of the *South Park* children, Kenny, makes a joke by posing for a school picture by flashing his buttocks to the camera instead of his face. In *South Park* the top and bottom exchange places in a literal sense. Another such reversal can be detected in the representation of the *South Park* children as more reasonable than their parents as they are able to draw more logical conclusions from the various situations they find themselves in.

The theme of death recurs in each episode with the death of one of the children, Kenny McCormick. For Bakhtin (1984), “gay death” is one of the attributes of grotesque imagery (p. 51). In each episode, Kenny dies in an unexpected and terrifying way, but at the same time, generates laughter. In one of the episodes, *Scott Tenorman Must Die*, Kenny actually dies from laughter. According to Bakhtin (1984), death from laughter is one of the forms of gay death (p. 408), and an ambivalent image of carnival. Randall Auxier (2007) undertakes an attempt to explain the reasons for Kenny’s death in almost every episode. For this purpose he addresses the theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung (1875-1961) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). According to Freud’s schema “Cartman is the Id, Kyle is the Superego, and Stan is the Ego” (Auxier, 2007, p. 231). In this case, Kenny represents the Death Impulse (p. 232). In order to explain his role, Auxier (2007) refers to Jung’s theory. Kenny fulfils the “transcendental function” which “arises from the union of conscious and unconscious contents” (Jung 1976, cited in Auxier, 2007, p. 233). Kenny is thus necessary to unite the boys and the entire cast of *South Park*. Yet it is still not clear why Kenny should be killed in each episode. The understanding of this act can be provided by Heidegger’s concepts of “ontic” and “ontological” levels of experience. To explain these terms, Auxier gives an example of a person who is standing at the top of a cliff and experiences fear (“ontic”) and, at the same moment, anxiety (“Angst”).

Fear is “ontic,” which is to say that fear is associated with your everyday self and its bundle of survival instincts and social skills . . . , but Angst is “ontological.” Angst brings you into an awareness of your total-self, your self-as-a-whole, by bringing into your vague awareness the limits of it (2007, p. 236).

One can enjoy standing at the top of a cliff because it gives a feeling of total-self. One can jump but does not do it; “your death is a possibility, but not an actuality” (Auxier, 2007, p. 238). People can understand their own

deaths by watching other people die. By his death Kenny enables viewers to experience themselves-as-a-whole and reminds them of the value of life (p. 240). The death of Kenny contains procreative and regenerative forces; his death gives birth to the viewers' self-as-a-whole. This carnivalesque image helps us to defeat the cosmic fear of death. It also helps us to defeat or cope with the absurdity of life. Karen Fry (2007) compares Kenny's destiny to die in almost every episode with Sisyphus's destiny to roll a heavy rock up and down a hill. Albert Camus (1913-1960) thinks that acknowledging the absurdity of life and yet accepting the continual struggle is "enough to fill a man's heart" (Camus, 1955, p. 123, cited in Fry, 2007, p. 86). With his death, Kenny generates laughter, which helps to overcome the fear of death, mortality and absurdity of life.

The fear of death has been closely interrelated with the notion of hell. In medieval carnival, hell was illustrated in ridiculous forms: such as "a dragon, spitting fire, an elephant with men astride, a giant devouring a child, an old devil eating wicked wives" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 393), etc. All these images are ambivalent because they "include in one way or another symbols of fear defeated by laughter" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 394). In one of the episodes, "Death," the children meet Death, who laughs at the jokes on the *Terrance and Phillip* show that the children love watching. A laughing Death is the ambivalent symbol of birth and death, renewal and destruction.

Hell during the Renaissance "was pictured as more and more filled with kings, popes, clerical and political leaders, not only the dead, but also those still living" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 396). In the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, hell is the residence for politicians and celebrities. It has an ambiguous nature because this hell brings together people such as Adolf Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi, Michael Landon,<sup>1</sup> and Saddam Hussein.

Another ambivalent image related to hell and death is the figure of Satan, who is represented as a red sentimental giant with the body of a champion bodybuilder. In one episode, he lies in bed with Saddam Hussein and speaks affectionately in a deep voice. This creates a gay (joyful) laughter which demolishes the fear of death. The connection between the carnival of *South Park* and Bakhtinian carnival can be detected in the gay laughter that is embodied in the gay (homosexual) devil. The creators of *South Park* use the word *gay* (homosexual) for invoking the *gay* (cheerful) laughter described by Bakhtin. These ambiguous images disclose the ambiguity of

American popular culture of the 1990s. In her article *Why Saddam Is Gay: Masculinity Politics in South Park - Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, Judith Kegan Gardiner (2005) points out contradictions in American popular culture of the 1990s between “male dominance and gay liberation, extended childhood and the absence of innocence, free speech and media hegemony, and liberal humanism and U.S. imperialism” (p. 51) which are reflected in *South Park*. A gay Saddam Hussein becomes an embodiment of such contradictory strategies as “sexual liberation and free speech” and “masculinism and ethnocentrism” (Gardiner, 2005, p. 61). All these different aspects are captured within the figure of Saddam Hussein.

Defeating fears by laughter is one of the main aspects of Bakhtinian carnival. As people of the Middle Ages used carnival for defeating their fears by mocking them, the creators of *South Park* use the animated series for mocking the fears of society in the form of homophobia and terrorism. The fear of homosexuals is mocked through one of the characters: Mr. Garrison, who is gay (homosexual). In the episode “Mr. Garrison’s Fancy New Vagina,” Mr. Garrison decides to change his sexual orientation by having a sex change operation. After the operation, Mr. Garrison becomes a lesbian. There is an irony in Mr. Garrison’s transformation into a lesbian. The character of Mr. Garrison is illustrated as a woman with the face of a middle-aged bald man who is a lesbian. This depiction generates a festive laughter which liberates people from particular fears. In his “Flatulence or Philosophy: A Lot of Hot Air, or the Corruption of Youth?” William W. Young III (2007) writes that, “through its vulgarity, *South Park* verbalizes the drives and desires that we often repress; and it allows us to laugh so as to reveal these inhibitions” (p. 14). Carnavalesque laughter frees the viewer from the restrictions and regulations imposed by society.

### **‘Everyday’ Life as a Contemporary Carnival**

*South Park* can be viewed as a representation of the contemporary social system. The fears and problems that fourth-grade children, the main characters of the animated series, encounter in each episode are familiar to the viewers of *South Park*. The characters face the fear of global terrorism, AIDS, homosexuality, drug addiction, corporate capitalism, sexual harassment, and molestation—fears which, towards the end of each epi-

sode, are downgraded through laughter. The act of crowning and decrowning, as well as other aforementioned carnivalesque features, creates a carnivalesque atmosphere. This atmosphere generates a new form of carnival which represents the contemporary carnival that is part of social life. For Bakhtin, carnival changes over time, and if Medieval carnival was a “second life” for people, the contemporary carnival is ‘everyday’ life. *South Park* reinforces and charges this atmosphere in different ways, such as the behavior and actions of the creators, and the production. These points will be analyzed further in more detail.

The show’s producers, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, usually appear in public together, and seem inseparable while giving interviews or walking the red carpet. Such fusion of two separate entities creates a grotesque carnivalesque image. Their appearance at the Oscar awards ceremony, in 2000, wearing Gwyneth Paltrow’s and Jennifer Lopez’s dresses can be interpreted as carnivalesque not only because of the involved cross-dressing but also because it mocks the society of the spectacle (Debord 1995), branded environment and celebrity culture. Yet, although they ridicule celebrities, they themselves have acquired celebrity status. This contradiction is itself carnivalesque in nature.

*South Park* criticizes existing norms, but, at the same time, it maintains social constructs. As Gournelos (2009) puts it,

*South Park* is obviously within the arena of dominant cultural production, but it also creates and maintains a critical perspective traditionally associated with alternative culture. (p. 162)

There are two opposite motifs that run through the production of the *South Park* episodes: the critique of capitalist ideology and millions of dollars generated by the animated series. In 2005,

according to TNS Media Intelligence, it generated \$34 million in advertising revenue. In 2004, Comedy Central sold the syndication rights in a deal said to be worth \$100 million. But “*South Park*’s” real value may lie in the future - particularly in new media, where the show performs spectacularly. It dominates the iTunes top 100 television show downloads list. Amp’d Mobile, a cell phone service provider, is in discussions to launch a 24/7 “*South Park*” channel for its customers. (Leonard, 2006)

Thus, *South Park* includes oppositional themes: resisting the dominant capitalist ideology and reproducing the capitalist order. This motif re-

flects the nature of ambivalent humour. Such co-existence of contradictory traits reveals the carnivalesque nature of the *South Park* series, as well as the carnivalesque nature of everyday life and socio-cultural system.

Another example of how carnivalesque features percolate into everyday life is the controversy deployed over the prophet Mohammed episode (season 14, episode 6), aired on April 14, in 2010. The episode was censored after the producers received a warning from a New York-based group of extremist Muslim converts that could be construed as a death threat. The group, through its website Revolutionmuslim.com, had reacted to last week's episode of *South Park* which first depicted Muhammad dressed as a bear by saying its originators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "will probably wind up like Theo van Gogh" (Baddie 2010).

In the episode, the prophet Muhammad is brought into the show by Tom Cruise and several other celebrities who have been ridiculed in previous *South Park* episodes. They believe that the prophet can make them immune to further ridicule. In the episode, Muhammad is dressed as a bear because he cannot be portrayed "as a cartoon in the wake of death threats made against Danish cartoonists by Islamist extremists, who see any depiction of Muhammad as a gross insult to their religion" (Baddie, 2010). *South Park's* laughter takes away fear, but by mocking fear it becomes the fear itself. This fear has evoked a warning and death threat from a New York-based group of extremist Muslims. By undermining fear, *South Park* creators become fear themselves. Such is the ambivalent image of the carnivalesque system that creates the link between birth and death, and between destruction and regeneration.

These are a few examples that demonstrate how popular culture texts reinforce and change the carnivalesque traits embedded in the contemporary social system.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how carnival culture is at work in the text of modern popular culture such as the *Jackass* TV show and the *South Park* animated series as well as in the social structure of 'everyday' life. Many studies have displayed how some phenomena of popular culture are situ-

ated within the paradigm of carnival popular culture which can be characterized by grotesque realism, billingsgate language, celebration of the lower bodily stratum, masquerading, crowning and decrowning, festive ambivalent laughter, dispelling of cosmic fear, suspension of hierarchal structures, and bringing oppositions together. However, popular culture texts cannot be viewed in isolation from the social system. This study has demonstrated how both of these elements organize one inseparable system. The discourse of carnival offers the possibility to perceive popular culture texts as not only containing carnivalesque features but also as reinforcing modern society. The study has conceived of three ways in which such reinforcements take place, illustrated clearly in *South Park*. First, a reinforcement of the carnivalesque atmosphere of social life appears through the behavior of *South Park* originators. They create a grotesque carnivalesque image by incorporating such contradictory traits as mocking celebrities and, at the same time, attaining celebrity status. Second, the *South Park* series combines such conflicting motifs as critiquing capitalist ideology and simultaneously gaining large profits from the production. Third, *South Park* dispels the fears of social life by mocking them, but at the same time, the show becomes a fear for certain social groups. This combination of death (destruction of fears) and birth (generation of fears) is a part of carnivalesque imaginary.

The significance of the carnivalized text of popular culture is that it offers an alternative way of looking at the accepted order of life and establishes a dialogue between various, often contradictory, voices. Carnivalization is an “artistic form of visualization” (Bakhtin, 2003, p. 166) that helps to depict in life “unknown depth and possibilities” (Bakhtin, 2003, p. 174). Such readings allow us to view popular culture texts and the socio-cultural environment as organizing one indivisible carnivalesque system, permeated with contradictions and ambivalence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Michael Landon (October 31, 1936 – July 1, 1991) was an American actor, writer, director, and producer associated with the television series *Bonanza* (1959-73) and *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-82).

<sup>2</sup>Theo Van Gogh is a Dutch filmmaker killed in 2004 after he made a documentary about the abuse of women in Muslim countries.

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