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# Serious Play: Evaluating the Comedic, Political and Religious Relationships Between The Daily Show, The Colbert Report and South Park

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SERIOUS PLAY: EVALUATING THE COMEDIC, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS  
RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN *THE DAILY SHOW*, *THE COLBERT REPORT*, AND *SOUTH  
PARK*

by

Noah Springer

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
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TITLE: SERIOUS PLAY: EVALUATING THE COMEDIC, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN *THE DAILY SHOW*, *THE COLBERT REPORT*, AND *SOUTH PARK*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Walter Metz

The goal of this paper is to create a framework through which the television programs *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* can be evaluated collectively. The framework of “serious play” permits the analysis of the relationship between the three programs, specifically regarding their comedic, political and religious functions. This textual analysis proposes that when examined together through serious play, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are best visualized through a legal analogy which is supported by serious play.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 1997, Comedy Central picked up an animated pilot about four eighth grade boys in a small red-neck mountain town. Trey Parker and Matt Stone's animated program the boys Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Kenny McCormick and Erik Cartman was immediately successful and is currently Comedy Central's highest rated program, netting 3.1 million viewers per episode. Additionally, it earned Comedy Central an estimated \$34 million in advertising revenue.<sup>1</sup> These ratings and revenues supersede Comedy Central's other large asset, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Originally hosted by Craig Kilborn, *The Daily Show* began as a satirical look at popular culture and current events. However, after Jon Stewart replaced Kilborn in 1999, the program began to focus more on political satire. Although *The Daily Show* is presented as "fake news," the Pew Research Center announced that Stewart had been voted as the fourth most trust-worthy journalist on television in 2007.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, in 2005, *The Daily Show* correspondent, Stephen Colbert, created a spin-off called *The Colbert Report* that airs directly after Stewart. During his half-hour parodic examination of the day's news, Colbert adopts the persona of "high-status idiot" who has an "attention to sartorial detail like Anderson Cooper, absolutely bullheaded holding onto an idea, no matter how shallowly considered, like Hannity, and almost a physical aggressiveness that O'Reilly has."<sup>3</sup> Since 2005, Colbert's performance has garnered him multiple awards, including two prime-time Emmys, a Peabody and a Grammy.

As an avid watcher of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*, I have noticed recurring similarities between the programs. The shows used to premiere back-to-back-to-back on Comedy Central, creating a ninety minute block. Although scholars have generally analyzed the programs separately, this thesis aims to analyze the three programs as a collective.

I suggest that they should be examined in relation to each other to fully comprehend the political and cultural implications of the three satirical programs. Because of the playful manner that each program uses to approach serious issues, I conduct a textual analysis of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* using the framework of “serious play.” Through the guise of “fake news” and animation, these programs are allowed to comedically play with current events. However, through their play, the shows seriously interrogate contemporary issues and cultural events. I posit that through serious play these three programs function symbiotically. It is best to view this relationship via the metaphor of a courthouse. Stewart acts as the prosecuting attorney, interrogating media and politicians. Alternatively, Colbert acts as the defense attorney, deflecting Stewart’s attacks through parody. Stone and Parker are the jury, weighing each side of the argument and reaching a verdict at the end of each episode.

The term “serious play,” which I have adopted to describe the relationship between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* requires a definition. In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga argues that “play is non seriousness. But apart from the fact that this proposition tells us nothing about the positive qualities of play, it is extraordinarily easy to refute. As soon as we proceed from ‘play is non-seriousness’ to ‘play is not serious,’ the contrast leaves us in the lurch – for some play can be very serious indeed.”<sup>4</sup> Huizinga acknowledges that there is a false binary separating play and the serious. *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each attack serious problems in a playful manner, eroding the false binary between seriousness and play. The collision of this binary connects the three television series, enabling a collective understanding of the programs.

To establish the validity of serious play as a reading frame, I begin the first chapter by using psychoanalysis to describe the relationship that forms the basic connection between the

three programs. By comparing *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* to Sigmund Freud's concepts of ego, super-ego and id, I establish the basic psychological connection. From there, I examine the comedic techniques used in *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* through Freud's three-part joke structure. Freud argues that "if a joke enters the service of the purpose of exposing or of a hostile purpose, it may be described as a psychological process between three persons" and that "the psychological process in jokes is accomplished between the first person (the self) and the third (the outside person)."<sup>5</sup> I assert that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* act out the three parts of this structure. Colbert functions as the object of Stewart's ridicule, while Stone and Parker act as the outside entity laughing with Stewart at Colbert's idiosyncrasies. Through a psychoanalytic understanding of the structure of jokes, the relationships in the programs become more apparent.

Following, I look at how the three programs represent aspects of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque." Bakhtin discusses the medieval practice of Carnival, where peasants were allowed to switch roles with nobility. He argues that this acted as an outlet for peasants to release political tension. However, as carnivals disappeared during the Renaissance, the carnivalesque began appearing in literature as a motif that Bakhtin dubs "grotesque realism," which is the literary version of Carnival. Bakhtin states that the carnival-grotesque form "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."<sup>6</sup> I argue that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* present an alternative interpretation of current events, encouraging critical analysis of media through grotesque-realism and the carnivalesque.

Finally, I analyze these three programs through Henri Bergson's comedic theory of rigidity. In examining the pleasure children experience in playing, Bergson argues that the comic

is obtained through repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series, which emphasize the “mechanization of life.” “You take a set of actions and relations and repeat it as it is, or turn it upside down, or transfer it to another set with which it partially coincides – all these being processes that consist in looking upon life as a repeating mechanism, with reversible action and interchangeable parts.”<sup>7</sup> I propose that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* respectively interfere, repeat and invert popular discourses on current events, exposing the rigidity and formulas of contemporary political discourse. The linkages established through these three comedic theorists serve as the playful courthouse where each program acts as a part of the legal process. Each comedic theory that links the three programs further explains the legal relationship between the programs.

The next chapter focuses on the legal procedure that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* conduct when critiquing a given cultural phenomena. In order to understand the criticisms of politics and media, it is important to see how other scholars have viewed the critical processes of the three programs. I will use Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch’s concept of television as a cultural forum to found my assertions that the three programs act as a legal system.<sup>8</sup> This will establish how the shows interact through their critique of serious cultural problems, providing the serious side of “serious play.” The criticisms presented in these programs, when viewed as serious play, create a complex and negotiated reading of cultural events.

The final chapter focuses on how this legal analogy functions as the groundwork for Robert Bellah’s concept of “civil religion,” and how these programs replicate the civil religion of the United States through “serious play.” Through an examination of political speeches, Bellah explains that civil religion developed from “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with

respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity.”<sup>9</sup> Bellah argues that there are benefits to civil religion, like “a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality,” but there are also detriments, like how manifest destiny “has been used to legitimate several adventures in imperialism since the early nineteenth century.”<sup>10</sup> Religion is the third main critical target of the three programs, and through their critique of religion *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South* exemplify elements of civil religion, such as religious pluralism, ecclesiastical fusion of church and state and the possibility of a universal civil religion.

Although this thesis will not specifically employ a political economic framework, a solid understanding of the ownership structures behind these programs, and Comedy Central, is beneficial when considering the potential political ramifications. HBO formed “The Comedy Channel” in 1989 as a rival to the Viacom’s station “HA! The TV Comedy Network,” which premiered that same year.<sup>11</sup> However, in 1991, the two channels merged to form “Comedy Central,” which would be jointly owned by HBO and Viacom.<sup>12</sup> In 2003, Viacom bought HBO out of the other half of Comedy Central, and gained total control of the station.<sup>13</sup> Viacom is a transindustrial corporation that owns multiple networks including MTV, VH1, and BET. However, Viacom is controlled by National Amusements, which also owns a majority stake in CBS.<sup>14</sup> While *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* would be unlikely candidates for airing on network television, their position on a cable network is possible because they are not required to abide by the strict codes of network television. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the critiques presented by these programs are less likely to have a detrimental effect on Viacom and National Amusements because their holdings are horizontally integrated across media.<sup>15</sup>

*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* were all picked up for Comedy Central by Doug Herzog, who is the head of MTV Networks Entertainment Group. Herzog was the president of Comedy Central from 1995-1998, and again in 2004.<sup>16</sup> He recently acknowledged the debt that Comedy Central owes to *South Park*, stating “there are a lot of people doing great envelope-pushing, groundbreaking stuff every day on basic cable, whether it’s us or MTV or FX. But I think *South Park* was literally the battering ram that started the whole thing.”<sup>17</sup> This “battering ram” was especially beneficial to the burgeoning station when it produced the second highest ratings on cable with the Christmas episode that ran on December 17, 1997. “Mr. Hankey, The Christmas Poo” drew 51% of males age 18-24, and earned a 5.4 rating on the Nielsen ratings system. By the next year, advertisers including Snapple, AOL and Calvin Klein were demanding spots on the show.<sup>18</sup>

*The Daily Show* also pulls in impressive ratings on a regular basis. Recently, Stewart and company finished first in late night talk show programs among people ages 18-49, averaging 2.3 million viewers per episode, which is a very large audience for a cable program. Furthermore, the website for *The Daily Show* also dominates the digital front, receiving 2.6 million unique visitors in April 2011.<sup>19</sup> *The Colbert Report* is also a strong force among late night talk shows. It recently rose to the number two spot on cable behind *The Daily Show*, with 1.6 million viewers. Colbert’s website is the second highest visited website among late night talk shows, again behind *The Daily Show*.<sup>20</sup> The consistent earnings of the three programs for Comedy Central has provided them a large amount of artistic creativity and freedom from corporate interference.

Despite their similarities, it is clear that *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are different than *South Park*. Although separated by formal elements, such as narrative structure and generic norms, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each conduct similar

cultural criticisms. Scholars have often looked at *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in relation to each other, but have deemed it necessary to separate *South Park* because of its conflicting aesthetic elements. In *Entertaining Politics*, Jeffrey Jones calls *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, “new political television” “as they have refashioned television’s fundamental relationship to politics by offering something new and creative as an alternative.”<sup>21</sup> However, he only gives passing notice to *South Park* as a form of this new genre. In *Taking South Park Seriously* by Jeffery Andrew Weinstock, *The Daily Show* is mentioned only in an end-note, and *The Colbert Report* is entirely absent.<sup>22</sup> In *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson often include *South Park* in their discussion of satire at large, but relegate it to a separate chapter to discuss in-depth.<sup>23</sup> In the just released, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*, Amber Day does not mention *South Park* once.<sup>24</sup> Only Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx flesh out the connection in their article “Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Intergration in *South Park*.”<sup>25</sup>

The framework of “serious play” also allows a reinterpretation of two recurring criticisms of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. In “*The Daily Show* Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth,” Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris conducted a quantitative study of viewers of *The Daily Show*, and determined that “exposure to the show lowered trust in media and the electoral process” and “decreased external efficacy may dampen participation among an already cynical audience (young adults) by contributing to a sense of alienation from the political process.”<sup>26</sup> Stephen Groening levels the same charge at *South Park*, stating that “the real cultural villainy of *South Park* is not its depictions of swearing schoolchildren but its espousal of an emergent cynicism that discourages its viewers from

asserting political agency.”<sup>27</sup> After releasing “*The Daily Show Effect*,” Baumgartner and Morris focused on *The Colbert Report*, and found that “exposure to Colbert increases support for President Bush, Republicans in Congress, and Republican policies on the economy and the War on Terror. Furthermore, Colbert’s dual messages (explicit and implicit) appear to increase the chance that young viewers will become less confident in their own ability to understand politics.”<sup>28</sup> These results are similar to the studies on the sit-com, *All in the Family*, which argue that Archie Bunker’s satirical racism may have been misinterpreted by viewers who identified with these views, creating a format where “one viewer’s satire may be another viewer’s secret truths.”<sup>29</sup> These scholars fear that youth become cynical and confused by the political process because of these programs and apathy will set in and the democratic process will suffer. Through the textual analysis in this thesis, I hope to address these concerns even though they are centered in audience effects research.

The second major criticism is that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* represent the negative impact of entertainment on news and information. Jones presents the argument concisely:

Robert Putnam’s problem with television is ontological – citizens have forgotten the importance of social connections and the benefits those connections have in producing a rich, democratic polity because we have divorced ourselves from each other throughout isolated acts of watching entertainment television. For Neil Postman, the problem is epistemological – television is an inferior (even dangerous) means of knowing the arena of politics. Due to the technological biases of electronic communication (as opposed to his privileging of the written word), television offers little more than amusement, entertainment, and distraction because the medium is incapable of helping us think in any other way. For Roderick Hart, the problem is phenomenological – television is a cynical medium that may encourage us to feel engaged or empowered politically, but ultimately such feelings are false and temporal, certainly not residual or behavioral.<sup>30</sup>

Putnam, Postman and Hart understand contemporary television as a tool for amusement, and bemoan the loss of traditional news systems. They believe an erosion of the traditional binary of entertainment and information is detrimental to democracy and general systems knowledge.

Ironically, Postman offers a solution to these debates surrounding *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. He argues for the creation of a television program that would “demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conceptions of news, political debate, religious thought, etc. I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of ‘Saturday Night Live’ and ‘Monty Python,’ the idea being to induce a nationwide horse laugh over television’s control of public discourse.”<sup>31</sup> While Postman may not believe that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are beneficial, I assert that the programs achieve his goals more than he would be willing to admit. These three programs use the collapse of the entertainment/information binary as a catalyst to conduct institutional critiques of media, politics and religion through serious play. Furthermore, when viewed together their critiques create a symbiotic whole, crafting a larger, more constructive social critique. By examining the collective functions constructed through “serious play” and the political actions that have resulted from *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*, I will conclude my thesis by redeeming these three programs from the purgatory of cynicism and apathy into which they have been thrown by other scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> David Leonard, “‘South Park’ Creators Haven’t Lost Their Edge,” *CNN Money*, last modified October 27, 2007, [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2006/10/30/8391792/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/30/8391792/index.htm).

<sup>2</sup> “Today’s Journalists Less Prominent,” *Pew Research Center*, March 8, 2007, <http://people-press.org/2007/03/08/todays-journalists-less-prominent/>.

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Rabin, “Interview with Stephen Colbert,” *The AV Club (The Onion)*, last modified January 25, 2006, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/stephen-colbert,13970/>.

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<sup>4</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, (New York, NY: Roy Publishers, 1950), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1960), 176-177.

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy* ed. by Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," in *Television: The Critical View*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 503-515.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, no. 1 (1967), 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-14.

<sup>11</sup> Jane Hall, "Cable Comedy--Will HBO Have the Last Laugh?: Television: The 24-hour Comedy Channel premieres tonight, but Viacom has plans to launch its own comedy channel, HA!, in the spring," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified November 15, 1989, [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-15/entertainment/ca-1886\\_1\\_comedy-channel/](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-11-15/entertainment/ca-1886_1_comedy-channel/).

<sup>12</sup> Bill Carter, "2 Comedy Channels Will Merge," *The New York Times*, last modified December 19, 1990, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE7D7163FF93AA25751C1A966958260/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Viacom buys Comedy Central," *CNNMoney.com*, last modified April 22, 2003, <http://money.cnn.com/2003/04/22/news/companies/viacom/index.htm/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Who Owns What," *Columbia Journalism Review*, last modified December 23, 2010, <http://www.cjr.org/resources/?c=viacom/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> "Bio-Doug Herzog," Comedy Central Press, N.D. accessed June 9, 2011, <http://www.comedycentral.com/press/bios/dougherzog.jhtml?fromExecBios=true>.

<sup>17</sup> Lacey Rose, "MTV Network Boss Doug Herzog: 'There's a Real Opportunity to Expand Comedy Central's Late-Night,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified April 1, 2011, accessed June 9, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mtv-networks-boss-doug-herzog-173653>.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Introduction," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Gorman, "'The Daily Show With Jon Stewart' Tops the Competition in May as the Most-Watched Late Night Talk Show Among Persons 18-49, Persons 18-34, Persons 18-24, Men 18-34, and Men 18-24," *Tvbythenumbers*, last modified June 2, 2011, accessed June 9, 2011, <http://tvbythenumbers/zap2it.com/2011/06/02/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-tops-the-competition-in-may-as-the-most-watched-late-night-talk-show-among-persons-19-49-persons-18-34-persons-18-34-men-18-34-and-men-18-24/94506/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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- <sup>21</sup> Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, *Taking South Park Seriously* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008).
- <sup>23</sup> Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson eds., *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).
- <sup>24</sup> Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).
- <sup>25</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, "Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in South Park," *Journal of Film & Vide* 61, no. 2 (2009): 5-18, accessed April 14, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688621/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth," *American Politics Research* 34, no. 3 (2006): 362-363. Accessed April 14, 2011, DOI: 10.1177/1532673X05280074.
- <sup>27</sup> Stephen Groening, "Cynicism and Other Post-Ideological Half Measures in *South Park*," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 125.
- <sup>28</sup> Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "One 'Nation' Under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth," *The Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 4 (2008): 634, accessed April 14, 2011, DOI: 10.1080/08838150802437487.
- <sup>29</sup> Michael V. Tueth, "Breaking and Entering; Transgressive Comedy on Television," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Scewed*, ed. by Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Jones, 14.
- <sup>31</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1985), 161-162.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE PSYCHOANALYTIC AND COMEDIC RELATIONSHIPS

The initial basis for the relationship between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* can best be seen through a psychoanalytic comparison. This relationship is constructed as if each show represents one aspect Sigmund Freud's concepts of the id, ego and super-ego. Through this psychoanalytic framework, I will establish the comedic relationship between the three programs using Freud's three-part joke structure where one program acts as the joke teller, one as the target and the other as the audience. This triadic dynamic functions individually *and* collectively within the programs. Having constructed the foundation of serious play through Freudian psychoanalysis and joke theory, I next examine how *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each construct humor through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. In serious play, the carnivalesque acts as melding agent, further solidifying the psychoanalytic connections. The final level of the serious play framework relies on Henri Bergson's argument that laughter derives from the exposure of rigidity and mechanization of life. I will apply Bergson's notion of rigidity to the three shows. The addition of Bergson's emphasis on rigidity will provide the solid exoskeleton on top of which Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker construct serious criticisms of religion and power structures. The underlying and supporting comedic structure that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* create through their interlinking play enables and enhances their serious criticisms of contemporary culture, media, religion and politics.

The establishment of the comedic relationship between the three programs is designed to create a solid theoretical basis for their collective examination of politics, media and religion. This comedic relationship is best visualized as a playful courthouse. In this courthouse *The Daily*

*Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* analyze politics, media and religion through comedic methods. The connections that create this comedic courthouse extend into the psychoanalytic connections that link the three programs together. Freud's concepts of the id, ego and super-ego form the primary connections of the three programs. He developed these concepts as constructs to organize a schema of mental activity. Before proposing these three structures, Freud examined the differences between the conscious and the unconscious. He expanded his original theories by examining the phenomena that linked the two separate mental processes. Freud determined that the ego, id, and super-ego struggle in the mind. This schema of mental activity proves useful in analyzing the relationship between these three programs as well, with *South Park* acting as the id, *The Daily Show* as the ego, and *The Colbert Report* as the super-ego. This triadic formation is fundamental to the design of the structure of serious play. Additionally, it provides a solid theoretical base to craft my resulting argument.

To fully understand the complexities of the unconscious, Freud constructed the theory of the "id." The id is the "unknown and unconscious, upon whose surface rests the ego."<sup>1</sup> Freud claims that the id is driven by instinct and that there are two main instincts that both derive from the libido: Eros (the love instinct) which "comprises not merely the uninhibited sexual instinct proper instinctual impulses of an aim-inhibited or sublimated nature derived from it, but also the self-preservative instinct," and Thanatos (the death instinct) which leads "organic life back into the inanimate state."<sup>2</sup> These two instincts are constantly in conflict within the id, creating tension within the unconscious that the id fends off "by the discharge of sexual substances, which are saturated vehicles, so to speak, of the erotic tensions."<sup>3</sup> The first several seasons of *South Park* explore the id in a variety of ways. One of the main characters, Stan, has a girlfriend named Wendy. Stone and Parker crafted a running joke where Stan would vomit on Wendy every time

they interacted. However, in the first season episode, “Tom’s Rhinoplasty” the children get a new teacher--an attractive younger woman.<sup>4</sup> When the new teacher asks Stan’s name he vomits like he normally would in front of Wendy. Because Stan is merely a child, he does not understand the process of sex and human intimacy. Further, he does not grasp how humans properly release bodily fluids. Therefore, he releases the Eros drive of the id through his vomiting, as this is the only way he knows how to discharge bodily fluids. Throughout the fifteen seasons of *South Park*, the discharge of bodily fluids is a recurrent theme, and nearly every bodily fluid that can be released from a human body has been discharged (another topic of interest when I confront Bakhtin and the carnivalesque later in this chapter.) For now, it is enough to say that with the constant expulsion of bodily fluid, Stone and Parker continually release the tension built-up in the id by Eros instinct by expelling the bile.

The death instinct is evident in *South Park*’s character Kenny McCormick. Kenny is killed in nearly every episode of the first six seasons, yet he returns in the next episode. He also always wears an orange parka that covers his mouth and muffles his words. Having no discernable dialogue, Kenny’s initial role is to die in crude, unimaginable ways. Kenny’s recurring deaths act as a release of the death instinct from the id. Stone and Parker refuse to repress the death and sex instincts through ego. Instead, they revel in them and expose *South Park*’s id.

Although the id is hidden in the unconscious, the sex and death instincts are able to occasionally manifest themselves in the ego. The ego primarily exists in the conscious mind, but part of the ego merges into the unconscious, and “seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for

the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id.”<sup>5</sup> Through the senses, the ego can perceive the real and “represents what may be called reason and common sense.”<sup>6</sup>

Reason and common sense are cornerstones of *The Daily Show*. When Stewart announced his “Rally to Restore Sanity,” in September, 2010, he said:

we live in troubled times with real people facing very real problems. Problems that have real, if imperfect solutions that I believe that 70 to 80 percent of our population could agree to try, and could ultimately live with. Unfortunately, the conversation and process is controlled by the other 15 to 20 percent. You may know them as the people who believe that Obama is a secret Muslim, planning a socialist takeover of America so he can force his radical black liberation Christianity down our throats. Or that George Bush let 9/11 happen to help pad Dick Cheney’s Haliburton stock portfolio.<sup>7</sup>

Stewart then produced a list of edited clips of “the loud folks” who dominate the conversation on important issues (including a clip of himself dancing and telling Fox News “go f\*\*\* yourselves”). He concluded his announcement, stating that his “million moderate march” will spread the “timeless message: take it down a notch, for America.”<sup>8</sup> Stewart’s call for sanity and rationality within public discourse is precisely the role of the ego. Freud states that the ego can be seen as “a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the super-ego” (the super-ego will be examined shortly).<sup>9</sup> Just as the ego is pressed from all other aspects of consciousness, Stewart feels pressed from all sides by the loud folks who dominate the political sphere. Thus, like the ego which sits between the id and the super-ego, Stewart sits between the loud conservatives and loud liberals, attempting to repress the evident dangers within the mainstream media.

While the ego is engaged in repressing the sex and death drives and organizing them into tolerable behavior, it is also combatting the third psychological process, the superego. Freud argues that as a child passes through the Oedipal stage, it first identifies with its father, until its desires

become too strong and the father becomes an obstacle for access to the mother. As the Oedipus complex (theoretically) dissolves with age, the “normal” male child will intensify his identification with his father. Through the changing identification with parents during childhood, the ego is modified and the super-ego is created “to confront the other contents of the ego.”<sup>10</sup> Freud continues, stating that the super-ego “also represents an energetic reaction-formation against those choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: ‘You *ought* to be like this (like your father.)’ It also comprises the prohibition: ‘You *may not* be like this (like your father).’”<sup>11</sup> Because the super-ego helps to repress the Oedipus complex, it then retains certain aspects of the father. The development of the super-ego contributes a large part of an individual’s “character,” and is “the representative of our relation with our parents. When we were little children we knew these higher natures, we admired them and feared them; and later we took them into ourselves.”<sup>12</sup> As the child develops, the super-ego adopts features of the parents.

The adoption of parental figures is the primary connection between the super-ego and *The Colbert Report*. After working as a correspondent on *The Daily Show* for several years, Colbert began in own program in 2005. Although *The Colbert Report* derives many of its formal televisual elements from *The Daily Show*, Colbert no longer identified with Stewart as a father figure. Rather, Colbert began to identify with Bill O’Reilly of *The O’Reilly Factor* on Fox News, affectionately dubbing him “Papa Bear.” Through his adoption of O’Reilly as a father figure, Colbert had successfully modified the ego (*The Daily Show*) and crafted himself in the position of super-ego. The psychoanalytic relationship between the three programs is the basis of the comedic courthouse. Without the connections established through Freud’s theory of the id, ego, and super-ego the relationship between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* is

based only on their comedic tendencies. The mental relationship strengthens the comedic relationship that is the playful courthouse for the analysis of politics, media and religion.

The triadic relationship of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* forms the psychical base for the courthouse of serious play as well as the comedic relationship between the three programs. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud differentiates between “tendentious” and “innocent” jokes. He claims that “in the one case [innocent jokes] the joke is an end in itself and serves no particular aim, in the other case it does serve an aim – it becomes *tendentious*.”<sup>13</sup> As I will explain in the following chapters, the jokes created on *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are primarily tendentious, aiming to critique various religious and power structures in the United States. Freud argues, “generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke’s aim of producing pleasure is filled.”<sup>14</sup> *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each contain this three part structure between the creator, the audience and the target of their joke. While the individual nature of the humor in each program is relevant, the goal of this thesis is to posit the linkages between the programs. Therefore, rather than explaining how each show works by itself, I examine how *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* work through Freud’s three part joke form as a collective, dynamic structure.

In order to establish this structure I am going to use one subject that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* have all targeted: the 2008 presidential campaign. This historic race between John McCain and Barack Obama signified the desire for change which permeated the populace of the United States. In November 2008, Obama became the first black man to hold the office of President of the United States. The importance of this election cannot be

understated, but it is equally notable that all three programs involved themselves in the final result, acting as parts of Freud's three-part joke structure.

Freud claims that people tell jokes “to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously.”<sup>15</sup> Stewart used his platform as host of *The Daily Show* to expose the ridiculous aspects of the McCain-Palin campaign. After sarcastically calling then-candidate Obama a socialist, Stewart plays a clip of John McCain saying that Obama “wants to spread the wealth around.” He follows with another clip of Sarah Palin saying “now is no time to experiment with Socialism.” Stewart responds, “now is not the time to experiment. Now is the time to stick with what hasn't been working.”<sup>16</sup> He then cuts to a clip of Tom Brokaw asking McCain:

Brokaw: How would you describe the seven hundred, billion dollar bailout that has the United States government buying shares in American banks?”

McCain: We are in a financial crisis of monumental proportions. The role of government is to intervene when a nation is in crisis.

*[camera cuts to Stewart]*

Stewart: So now is not the time to experiment with socialism. It's ... NOW.<sup>17</sup>

He also plays a clip where Palin refuses to be labeled as a feminist, and Stewart concludes that “the McCain-Palin team know that labeling people, reducing them to a single word is demeaning and simplistic, and they know that voters ... they don't like it. Voters like...” and the camera cuts to a montage of clips featuring Palin referring to “Joe the plumber,” “Ed the dairyman,” “Doug the barber.”<sup>18</sup> In a later chapter we will return to this as an example of redactive editing, but for now it will suffice to say that Stewart is using jokes to ridicule Palin's hypocrisy. He plays the part of the joke-maker through interrogating contemporary political figures.

Before Stewart targeted the political figures of the 2008 presidential campaign, Colbert tried to become one in late 2007 when he announced that he would run for president in 2008. Groups supporting his candidacy on the popular social network Facebook began popping up, and

within one week “1,000,000 Strong for Stephen T. Colbert” had 88,000 followers and still has over one million members over three years later.<sup>19,20</sup> Colbert attempted to get on the Democratic ticket in South Carolina (his home state). Although he paid the \$2,500 application fee, the South Carolina Democratic Party rejected his application, voting 13-3 against him, and stating that “he did not meet two basic requirements: that the person be generally acknowledged or recognized by the media as a viable nationwide candidate: and be actively campaigning for the South Carolina primary.”<sup>21</sup> Despite dropping out of the 2008 presidential race, Colbert’s decision to run is indicative of his secondary role in the Freudian structure. Freud claims that “in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile [...] aggressiveness.”<sup>22</sup> Colbert presented himself as the target of the hostile aggressiveness of Stewart’s tendentious jokes.

While Stewart attacks the political figures that Colbert wishes to be, Stone and Parker ridicule them. The *South Park* episode, “About Last Night,” premiered the day after the election. Stone and Parker incorporated direct quotes from Obama and McCain’s speeches. The episode is a parody of heist movies, most notably *Ocean’s 11*, and supposes that Obama and McCain actually worked together during their campaigns to pull off the greatest heist in history on election night. As Obama announces his victory, his supporters in South Park get drunk and celebrate in the streets while some of McCain’s supporters attempt suicide. Others build an ark, fearing that the end of the world is near. While the citizens are distracted with celebration and depression, it is revealed that the election was rigged so McCain and Obama could access the Oval Office and steal the Hope Diamond. After the crew steals the diamond, Stan’s little brother Ike changes their records to declare them legally dead. The gang assembles at the airport where Obama announces that he is going to stay behind and “give this president thing a try.”<sup>23</sup>

McCain's supporters emerge from the ark to realize that the world still exists and decide to give Obama a chance.

This episode contains many elements that are typical of *South Park*. Stone and Parker use the adults to represent two ridiculous sides of an issue. However, the adults are missing the real situation. Meanwhile, the children are the identifiable protagonists, acting as the rational and responsible characters. Although Stone and Parker do not avoid controversy, "About Last Night" was remarkably apolitical. When discussing the episode Parker said "we've all heard about everything; we've talked about everything to death, and it's like, let's just put him in a diamond heist movie. They're just diamond thieves, and it's not about the politics at all anymore."<sup>24</sup> Through this apolitical standpoint, Stone and Parker function as the third party of Stewart and Colbert's dynamic. Freud claims that the third party is the one in whom "the joke's aim of inducing pleasure is fulfilled."<sup>25</sup> By identifying the apolitical position of children, Stone and Parker simply watch, and listen, for society to produce the jokes.

The playful relationship between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *South Park* is further strengthened through this triadic joke structure of joke-teller, target and audience. Although Stewart acted as the joke-teller in this instance, this may not always be the case. Unlike the roles of id, ego and super-ego, which are fixed, the relational joke role is mobile and dynamic, allowing various viewpoints and epistemological stand-points to be voiced. Freud claims that through the three-part joke structure, tendentious jokes offer a way of escaping the repression of civilization and "provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost."<sup>26</sup> Through serious play *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* act dynamically in the comedic courthouse to expose what has been culturally repressed. The triadic joke structure reinforces the serious criticisms that are developed by the three programs.

Furthermore, Freud's theories provide the basic groundwork for establishing the comedic courthouse in which the three programs interact in serious play.

Although the serious play between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* is partially exemplified through Freud's id, ego and super-ego, and the triadic joke structure, the comedic dynamics that integrate the three programs extend beyond Freudian analysis. As noted previously, *South Park* is especially known for its use of scatological humor. These are aspects of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms "the carnivalesque." Through the analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century author François Rabelais, and his novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin argues carnivals in the middle-ages offered peasants a "second world of folk culture" that "is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out'."<sup>27</sup> Opposing the official culture of the feudal state and the church, the carnival inverted traditional societal norms, and offered the working class a brief period of respite in their otherwise stressful lives. Bakhtin continues by claiming that the carnivalesque moved into literature, where it has consistently operated on a different aesthetic realm from most "high" culture. Bakhtin dubs this literary trope, "grotesque realism," and explains that "the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."<sup>28</sup> He points out the long tradition of grotesque realism in literature (including Cervantes and Shakespeare), but focuses primarily on Rabelais. I argue that the carnival spirit runs through each program as a symptom of the playful seriousness in which they engage.

The primary carnivalesque elements of *South Park*, *The Daily Show*, and *The Colbert Report* are regeneration, the fool and challenges to the center of discourse. *South Park* is most frequently associated with the carnivalesque. Alison Halsall argues that Stone and Parker

“excrementalize the U.S. sociopolitical landscape;”<sup>29</sup> Ethan Thompson claims that “*South Park* uses the carnivalesque to recapture politics for a pissed-off public,”<sup>30</sup> and Gulnara Karimova asserts that Stone and Parker use the carnivalesque “for mocking the fears of society in the form of homophobia and terrorism.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that *South Park* engages in carnivalesque humor is obvious. Yet, it is interesting that there is little reference made to the regenerative aspect of the carnivalesque. Through the use of bodily fluids and cursing, Stone and Parker exemplify Bakhtin’s concept of degradation, which “means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs: it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one.”<sup>32</sup> Thus far, it appears that scholars have only commented on the degrading capabilities of *South Park*, but have yet to examine the its regenerative capabilities.

As I mentioned previously, for the first six seasons the Kenny’s primary role was to die. Although Kenny miraculously regenerated at the beginning of the next episode, his rebirth is rarely seen. However, in the fourth season episode, “Cartman Joins NAMBLA,” the regenerative power of the carnivalesque is made explicit.<sup>33</sup> Kenny’s story is the sub-plot of a larger story about Cartman, who is attempting to seem mature by joining the North American Man Boy Love Association. Early in the episode, Kenny’s parents announce that they are trying to have another child. Fearing that another child would threaten his limited food supply and give him extra responsibilities, Kenny attempts to halt the conception. First, he throws a baseball as hard as possible at his father’s crotch. Although this shatters his father’s left testicle, and makes him vomit, Mr. and Mrs. McCormick successfully conceive. Kenny decides to add a “super-size” bottle of “pregnant-no-more” pills to his mom’s favorite alcoholic drink.<sup>34</sup> However, because she

cannot drink alcohol, his father drinks it and rushes to the bathroom to vomit and defecate excessively. Kenny then convinces his parents to ride the “John Denver Experience” rollercoaster with him, hoping that it will cause a miscarriage. Instead, Kenny’s father breaks his nose, vomits, defecates and bleeds into a trash can. Having run out of options, Kenny ends up chasing his mother around their house with a toilet plunger. As Mr. McCormick tries to stop Kenny from murdering his unborn brother, he accidentally enters a room where a number of NAMBLA members are waiting for a young boy. However, they accept Mr. McCormick as a substitute when he enters. After the members of NAMBLA are arrested, Mr. McCormick is loaded into an ambulance which reverses over Kenny, killing him instantly. The episode closes with Mr. and Mrs. McCormick holding their new child who is wearing the same orange parka as Kenny. The couple decides to name the newborn Kenny after their dead son. Mr. McCormick says “god, this must be the fiftieth time this has happened.” Mrs. McCormick replies “Fifty second.”<sup>35</sup>

Through the degradation of his father, and the death of the original Kenny, a new Kenny, and thus a new story are born. The bodily fluids of Mr. McCormick complete the life-death circle of Kenny’s weekly trial. Bakhtin argues that “excrement is gay matter; in the ancient scatological images [...] it is linked to the generating force and to fertility. On the other hand, excrement is conceived as something *intermediate between earth and body*, as something relating the one to the other.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, he defends Rabelais’ use of “the slinging of dung, the drenching in urine, the volley of scatological abuse hurled at the old, dying, yet generating world. All these images represent the gay funeral of this old world; they are (in the dimension of laughter) like handfuls of sod gently dropped into the open grave, like seeds sown in the earth’s bosom.”<sup>37</sup> Stone and Parker’s liberal use of lower bodily functions act as a regenerative force, destroying

old discourse (like the defense of NAMBLA which is that the Ancient Greeks had sex with children) and creating a new paradigm, which may not have been accessible to the viewer without the use of the carnivalesque.

Although the relationship between *South Park* and the carnivalesque is evident, the relationship between Bakhtinian theory and *The Daily Show* is more obscure. However, Stewart often assumes the role of the fool when interrogating contemporary media outlets, exposing the vulgarity of their discourse. For example, after the government avoided a shut-down in April, 2011, Stewart wanted journalists to ask a question.

Stewart: the real question is ...

*[cuts to video clip of a journalist]*

Journalist: Who came out ahead politically?

Stewart: No, no. That's ... No. The real question, I was going to say is what does the bipartisan agreement say about the direction of our fiscal policy? Or...

*[cuts to video clip from MSNBC]*

Journalist: Who do you think are the winners and the losers?

Stewart: What, no. I don't ... Well, do you mean in terms of the social safety net programs or those who relied on this type of discretionary spending and have been used as pawns? Those people?

*[cut to clip from CNN]*

Journalist: Who actually came out looking good in this process? A: Obama B: Republicans C: Democrats or D: none of the above.

Stewart: Are we \*\*\*\*ing idiots? I don't understand this.<sup>38</sup>

Bakhtin states that the fool plays the role of the "other," and maintains "the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Bakhtin claims that the fool "acquires special importance when we consider that one of the most basic tasks for the novel will become the laying-bare of any sort of conventionality, the exposure of all that is vulgar and falsely stereotyped in human relationships."<sup>40</sup> In his role as the fool, Stewart appears to fail in his understanding of the newscasters' debates. Instead, he offers an alternative dialogue. He points to the conventionality

of the production of the news broadcast, and the stereotyped political roles established by mainstream media. Through the carnivalesque, Stewart offers a new understanding of the interpretation of political events, which extends beyond what is portrayed within mainstream media.

Colbert also produces alternative forms of discourse through grotesque realism. In “Bakhtin, Colbert and the Center of Discourse,” Priscilla Marie Meddaugh claims that Colbert challenges the center of discourse through carnivalizing the news production process. She argues that “carnival laughter positions audiences as insiders, in contrast to their traditional roles as outsiders of official discourse and authorized modes of communication.”<sup>41</sup> Through inverting traditional news processes, Colbert crafts a carnivalized news room where the viewer engages with the material. Meddaugh concludes that through the carnivalesque, Colbert

provides a temporary suspension from officialdom, inviting audiences to observe and question the shortcomings of political life through parody and satire. It does so through participation rather than instruction, subversion rather than hierarchy, possessing a keen understanding of rhetorical situation and historical reality [...] The *Report* counters the ‘epistemological megalomania’ of official discourse, bearing witness to shortcomings of the political realm.<sup>42</sup>

Colbert invites the audience to engage the news, and bring new epistemologies to the traditionally monovocality of the mainstream press. This comedic move is exactly what Bakhtin means when he claims that grotesque-realism has the ability “to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.”<sup>43</sup>

During the segment “The Word,” Colbert presents an ironic rant on a subject, parodying monologues given by conservative pundits like Bill O’Reilly or Glenn Beck. However, as he presents “The Word,” half of the screen is covered with a logo where various phrases are printed. For instance, in September 2008 Colbert explained why President Bush had failed to capture

Osama Bin-Laden, which prompts him to use the word “powerless.”<sup>44</sup> Colbert begins with a clip of the White House Press Secretary, Dana Perino, answering questions regarding why the administration had yet to find Bin-Laden. She replies that “there are human limitations to anything. This is not the movies. We don’t have super powers.” Colbert emphatically responds, “Good point. Why doesn’t President Bush have superpowers?” Immediately, the text on the right hand side of the screen changes to “G.O.P. Wishes He Was Invisible.”<sup>45</sup> Colbert balances his parodic nonsense with creative text on the screen. After listing the executive powers that President Bush enabled during his terms (wiretapping, search and seize without warrant, go to war without congressional approval), he argues these are not superpowers, “just unprecedented extraordinary powers.” The text again changes to “Can Bypass Constitution In A Single Bound.”<sup>46</sup> Colbert balances ironic statements and facts about the Bush Administration with whimsical references to Superman and The Justice League. Colbert then argues that President Bush should have superpowers and that we should lock him in a room with nuclear waste and “a scientist hell-bent on creating a super soldier.” Again the script changes as a response to Colbert – “To Serve In Texas Air National Guard.”<sup>47</sup> Colbert processes the multiple layers of meaning that are generated between the words and the text. Through the juxtaposition of Colbert’s monologue and the text, *The Colbert Report* effectively decenters the issue that was originally under discussion. Colbert changes the hierarchy of traditional sources of information by complicating and decentering the topic.

After several more ironic quips about the President, Colbert concludes by reminding his audience that “we now know that Bush hasn’t failed to catch Bin-Laden because of ‘errors in judgment’ or ‘policy decisions.’ It is because he doesn’t have superpowers. And he has never claimed to be anything but a human being ... chosen by god to fight an axis of evil and defeat a

mortal danger to all humanity.”<sup>48</sup> Having taken the conversation to its most absurd end, Colbert reminds the audience of the original point – the failure of the Bush administration to find Bin Laden. By juxtaposing archival footage with the ridiculous, Colbert decenters the conversation held by traditional journalists and carnivalizes traditional journalistic and political dialogue.

Bakhtin claims that the Carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.”<sup>49</sup> The Carnival spirit runs through each half-hour of *South Park* where degradation and regeneration are triumphant. It is further evident in *The Daily Show* that the fool is the king. Finally, it pervades *The Colbert Report* where traditional discourse is shoved aside in favor of irrationality. Much like their role in the three-part joke structure, each program’s use of the carnivalesque is malleable and dynamic, much like Bakhtin’s description of the Carnival. Furthermore, it is important to note that the carnivalesque is not readily apparent in *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report* if analyzed individually. However, when they are examined in the triadic structure alongside *South Park*, the Carnival becomes an apparent, and necessary, comedic technique for the three programs. The carnivalesque nature of the comedic courthouse adds additional important methods for criticism. When traditional hierarchies are reversed and the debate in the courthouse becomes decentered through parody and scatological humor, the courthouse is no longer a place where the truth is dictated by those in power. Rather, the comedic courthouse exposes the fallacies and hypocrisies of dominant viewpoints. Through the carnivalizing of logic and prominent discourse in the comedic courthouse, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* promote alternative dialogue about politics, media and religion.

The final piece required for the comedic foundations that form serious play originate from the philosopher, Henri Bergson. Bergson determines that the comic is formed through “something mechanical encrusted on the living” through an analysis of the human, social and aesthetic elements of the comic in his essay, “Laughter.”<sup>50</sup> He argues that humor is found by replacing the natural with the artificial. He also argues that the diversion of the moral to the physical and a person’s similarity with an object are further aspects of the comedy of rigidity and automatism. In order to fully understand the humor of rigidity, Bergson investigates the laughter that a child exhibits after playing with toys like the Jack-in-the-box. He determines that “repetition,” “inversion,” and “reciprocal interference of a series” are “the methods of light comedy.”<sup>51</sup> I posit that the three programs under investigation are each respective arbiters of these techniques. *The Colbert Report* repeats, *South Park* inverts and *The Daily Show* interferes. The establishment of each program’s role in Bergson’s schema will provide the last piece of the comedic framework necessary to fully understand the serious play of their comedic relationships.

Bergson begins his analysis of comedic situations by investigating the childhood Jack-in-the-box. Every time Jack is stuck back in his box he bounces back out to the child’s delight, and the more forcefully he is stuffed in the box, the more forcefully he ejects. Bergson states that the “image of the spring which is bent, released, and bent again” is “one of the usual processes of classic comedy – repetition.”<sup>52</sup> He proceeds to examine the different types of repetition. Initially, repetition can be as basic as the repetition of a line, like in Molière’s *Tartuffe*, when Orgon repeatedly interrupts with “Et Tartuffe?” However, it can become more complex than basic verbal repetition. Bergson states that “sometimes the whole interest of a scene lies in one character playing a double part.”<sup>53</sup> The repetition of character is the main comedic priority in *The Colbert Report*. Through his parody of political pundits like Sean Hannity and Bill O’Reilly,

Colbert repeats the formal elements of their programs, and transposes their characters onto his set. This transposition (which as Bergson notes is “to ordinary language what repetition is to comedy”<sup>54</sup>) is how Colbert achieves his parodic and comedic effect. Bergson argues: “transpose the solemn into the familiar and the result is parody. The effect of parody, thus defined, extends to instances in which the idea express in familiar terms is one that, if only in deference to custom, ought to be pitched in another key.”<sup>55</sup> By taking the solemn job of political commentary and repeating it in a different format, Colbert draws his laughs by exposing the inherent rigidity and formulas used by news stations to craft and market their broadcasts. Furthermore, by repeating jokes that cover the same topic over several episodes, Colbert plays a game of repetition with his audience, having them wonder whether he will return to the topic in later episodes.

Bergson also determined that the inversion of events also provides a source of laughter. Bergson states that “if you reverse the situation and invert the *rôles*, you obtain a comic scene [...] Thus we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of ‘topsyturvydom.’”<sup>56</sup> The term “topsyturvydom” only begins to describe a world where Satan is in an abusive relationship with Saddam Hussein, Santa and Jesus team up to fight fundamentalist Islam and Crab-people live in the middle of the earth. However, this is the inverted world of *South Park*, and Stone and Parker comedically invert nearly every societal norm they can. Stone and Parker even use Bergson’s observation literally that the children teach the parents.

The 2004 episode, “Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes” exemplifies Stone and Parker’s inversion of political positioning and adult-child relationships.<sup>57</sup> When the new mega-store “Wall-Mart” is built in South Park, all of the adults become very excited, and begin

shopping there immediately. Only Kyle expresses some concern, lamenting “isn’t this where Starks Pond used to be? Where we used to kayak and fish?”<sup>58</sup> As other stores begin to close because they cannot compete with Wall-Mart’s low prices, the adults decide that they no longer want the Wall-Mart in South Park, and ask the manager to leave. However, Wall-Mart is an autonomous entity that kills the manager. In order to fight back, the adults decide to burn down Wall-Mart. Kyle exhibits rationality, and tries to convince the adults that “all we have to do is not shop at Wall-Mart any more. If you want it to go away all it takes is a little self control and personal responsibility.”<sup>59</sup> The adults think for a second, and then the scene cuts to show the Wall-Mart aflame.

The town quickly discovers that the Wall-Mart is being rebuilt the next morning. Resigned to the inevitability of Wall-Mart, the adults give up and shop there exclusively, and in some cases, begin working there. The boys decide to travel to Bentonville, Arkansas (the home of Wall-Mart) and ask the head of the company how to destroy it. Before committing suicide, the owner of Wall-Mart tells the boys that they must destroy its heart, which is located at the back of the store, behind the television department. When they finally arrive there, they find a man who claims he is Wall-Mart. He tries to confuse the children with easy riddles which the boys answer correctly. The man then shows them the heart, which is a mirror. He explains, “that is the heart of Wall-Mart. You, the consumer.”<sup>60</sup> Despite his speech, Stan and Kyle destroy the mirror and the Wall-Mart begins to implode. As the Wall-Mart disappears, the adults congratulate the boys and vow to never shop at large corporations again. Instead, all the adults begin to shop at Jim’s Drug, and through a quick montage, Jim’s Drug expands into another mega-corporation, which the adults burn down. In the final line of the episode, the adults all decide to go shop at “True Value.”

This episode is emblematic of the comedic inversion which interlaces the majority of *South Park* narratives. Bergson states that comedic inversion often constructs “a character, who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught.”<sup>61</sup> In this episode, the adults lay the trap of the Wall-Mart for themselves. Eagerly awaiting its arrival, their initial love of Wall-Mart is quickly turned to hate as they discover the negative effects of the mega-corporation. Furthermore, it is the children who are the most rational and productive. Kyle attempts to convince the adults to simply stop shopping at Wall-Mart, rather than burn it down. Additionally, it is Stan and Kyle who destroy the business after it has enslaved their elders. By inverting the traditional child-adult relationship and trapping the adults in their own greed, Stone and Parker generate laughter by making the tragic fate of the South Park citizens into their own doing.

Beyond repetition and inversion, Bergson argues that humor may also be derived from the interference of a traditional series. Bergson’s basic definition for the “reciprocal interference of series” is when a “situation belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time.”<sup>62</sup> Geoffrey Baym echoes this notion, stating that *The Daily Show* “interweaves at least two levels of discourse, borrowing equally from the traditions of authoritative nightly news and the entertainment talk show. Although the opening may suggest that a discourse of entertainment supersedes a discourse of news, the two are placed not in binary opposition, but in complementary arrangements.”<sup>63</sup> Complete with news correspondents, recurring segments and political guests, *The Daily Show* owes much of its formal design to traditional televised news programs like those on MSNBC, CNN and Fox News. However, through the addition of a live audience, a comedic host and pop culture guests, *The Daily Show* owes an equal amount of its design to the late-night talk show format exemplified by *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and

*The Late Show with David Letterman*. Jeffrey Jones explains that “the conventional lines that once segregated the ‘serious’ from the ‘entertaining’ in television programming are now largely eroded,” and *The Daily Show*’s combination of traditional news structures and the late-night talk show format is emblematic of this shift.<sup>64</sup>

Although Bergson refers to the interference of a series, the same idea can be extended to the interference of a tradition. Stewart’s role as the host of *The Daily Show* allows him to interfere with the traditions of “serious” and “play” (entertainment), using one to augment the other. Bergson argues that in order for humor to develop from reciprocal interfering series such as this, the author must constantly renew “the vain threat of dissolving partnership between the two coinciding series. Every moment the whole thing threatens to break down, but manages to get patched up again; it is this diversion that excites laughter, far more than the oscillation of the mind between two contradictory ideas.”<sup>65</sup> The humor evident within *The Daily Show* is not simply derived because it combines information and entertainment. Rather, it is because Stewart often threatens to let the serious or the play take total control of *The Daily Show*.

For example, in late April 2011, Stewart conducted an analysis of the proposed Democratic and Republican budgets.<sup>66</sup> The opening shot reveals the tension of serious and play as the camera swoops past ticker boards, a large globe and expensive television sets all reflecting the serious side of *The Daily Show*. However, as the camera swoops, a loud guitar starts playing, and Stewart is sitting at his desk, fooling around with sheets of paper, shuffling them across his desk. The serious nature of an expensive news studio is immediately challenged by the playful nature of the program. After announcing his guest Ricky Gervais would be there for the interview later in the show, Stewart begins with a topic of some considerable seriousness – the massive debt accrued by the United States. First, he examines Republican Congressman Paul

Ryan's budget, which would decrease the national debt "by four trillion dollars in ten years, mostly by limiting our pie chart colors to stark white, and getting everyone to agree to sensible no-frill haircuts, and by building a machine that beats old people and poor people to death with a giant copy of *The Fountainhead*."<sup>67</sup> To counteract the seriousness of Ryan's proposal, along with our national debt, Stewart jokes to keep the traditions of information and entertainment from separating into binaries again. However, after joking, Stewart acknowledges that Ryan's bill has "some stuff about massive tax cuts, free-market solutions, flashy government spending." He then raises his voice and says, "I'm not your father, look it up."<sup>68</sup>

Stewart then switches positions and examines clips of President Obama announcing his budget, along with his reaction to Ryan's. In fact, Obama invited Ryan to sit in the front row at his press conference, but only to denounce his bill, saying that "there is nothing serious or courageous about this plan [...] Worst of all, this is a vision that says even though Americans can't afford to invest in education at current levels or clean energy, even though we can't afford to maintain our commitment on Medicare and Medicaid, we can somehow afford more than one trillion dollars in new tax breaks for the wealthy. They want to give people like me a \$200,000 tax cut, that's paid for by asking 33 seniors each to pay 6,000 dollars more in health costs." Here, Stewart chimes in with a thick Brooklyn accent: "Hey, this plan is so far right, I wouldn't f\*\*\* it with Barry Goldwater's d\*\*\*."<sup>69</sup> Stewart let Obama's clip play for a considerable amount of time, so the serious and the play would grow farther and farther apart. When the serious and the play again collide, it provides an opportunity for Stewart to say something quite outrageous. He proceeds to air more of Obama's conference where he argues that we can invest in the future without spiraling into debt. Stewart responds: "This is America. We don't have to choose between the pancake of debt reduction and the sausage of investing in the future. We can have

them both, on a stick.” As he says this, an image of “Jimmy Dean Chocolate Chip Pancakes & Sausage On A Stick” flashes on the screen.<sup>70</sup> Once again, after the serious issue is displayed using a clip, Stewart begins to play with the idea until a funny statement appears, reassembling the separating series of the serious and the play. Through the divergence and convergence of the serious and the playful, Stewart draws laughs by exposing the inherent flaws within the traditional rigid binary between the serious and the playful, information and entertainment, and news shows and talk shows.

Bergson provides the final theoretical element of the structure of serious play conducted through *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. Bergson’s essential argument is that:

the comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.<sup>71</sup>

Through repetition (*The Colbert Report*), inversion (*South Park*) and reciprocal interference with a series (*The Daily Show*) Colbert, Stone and Parker, and Stewart act symbiotically to expose the mechanistic aspects of mainstream media, cultural fads and political figures. Bergson claims that laughter is the corrective of the mechanization of life. The exposure of the mechanization of life is a driving force for laughter, and Bergson’s theory of comedic rigidity completes the theoretical comedic basis of the framework of serious play.

The goal of this chapter was to link comedic techniques and methods of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* through the theories of Sigmund Freud, Mikhail Bakhtin and Henri Bergson in order to establish the comedic bases for the framework of serious play. Freud’s concepts of the id, ego and super-ego established the initial unconscious relationship between the

shows, which was reinforced through his three part structure of the joke. If each program acts as part of the joke structure, they create a triadic entity which is the second element of serious play. Through the investigation of the triadic relationship between the three programs, the image of the carnivalesque is produced and implemented into the structure of serious play as a third element. The by and final element of the comedic structure of serious play is developed through interrogating *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* into Bergson's theory of comedic rigidity.

Although I am using Bergson's theory of rigidity, it is crucial to remember that that our model of serious play is the opposite of rigid. The only permanent functions are the roles of *The Daily Show* as the ego, *South Park* as the id and *The Colbert Report* as the super-ego. This is the solid base for the construction of the rest of the elements of serious play. The triadic structure, the carnivalesque and exposure of rigidity are all dynamic and mobile until the episode is broadcast. Once the set up of the three elements is established in an episode, they cannot be changed. Just as the comedic courthouse is full of humor and play, the structure of the dialogue is also playful and mutable. Much like the work of a prosecutor, defense attorney and jury, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* use the comedic courthouse to interrogate the issue at hand. The courthouse is one of humor rather than one of the law. Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker rely on comedy as the critical method for interrogation. Whether it is forming jokes, carnivalizing politicians or exposing the rigidity of the news process, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* use the comedic courthouse to craft funny, yet important statements about contemporary society.

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. by Peter Gay (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and company, Inc., 1989), 635.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 645.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 650.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, “Tom’s Rhinoplasty,” *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:25, February 11, 1998, <http://southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s01e11-toms-rhinoplasty>.

<sup>5</sup> Freud, “The Ego,” 636.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 636.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Stewart, “Rally to Restore Sanity Announcement,” *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 11:11, September 16, 2010, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-september-16-2010/rally-to-restore-sanity>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Freud, “The Ego,” 656.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 641.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 641-642.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 643.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1960), 106-107.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>16</sup> Jon Stewart, “The Candidates’ Labels,” *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 4:04, October 27, 2008, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-october-27-2008/the-candidates--labels>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Stelter, “Colbert’s Facebook Flock,” *The New York Times*, last modified October 25, 2007, accessed June 2, 2011, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/25/colberts-facebook-flock/>.

<sup>20</sup> “1,000,000 Strong for Stephen T. Colbert,” *Facebook.com*, accessed June 2, 2011, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7406420086&ref=mf>.

<sup>21</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, “S.C. Democrats Say No to Colbert,” *The New York Times*, last modified November 1, 2007, accessed June 2, 2011. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/01/sc-democrats-say-no-to-colbert/>.

<sup>22</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 118.

<sup>23</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, “About Last Night,” *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:29. November 5, 2008, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s12e12-about-last-night>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Malcolm, “‘South Park’ Creator on His Tricky Obama-Bets-McCain Election Episode,” *The Los Angeles Times*, last modified November 7, 2008, accessed June 2, 2011. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/11/south-park-crea.html>.

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<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Jokes*, 118.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Halsall, “‘Bigger, Longer & Uncut.’” *South Park* and the Carnavalesque, in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Ethan Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste: South Park as Carnavalesque Satire,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, eds. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 231.

<sup>31</sup> Gulnara Karmova, “Interpretive Methodology from Literary Criticism: Carnavalesque Analysis of Popular Culture: *Jackass*, *South Park*, and ‘Everyday’ Culture,” in *Studies in Popular Culture* 33, no. 1 (2010), 45.

<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, “Cartman Joins NAMBLA,” *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, June 21, 2000, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s04e06-cartman-joins-nambla>.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 175.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>38</sup> Jon Stewart, “Countdown to the Next Countdown – I Can’t Believe It’s Not Shuttered,” *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 5:27, April 11, 2011, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-april-11-2011/countdown-to-the-next-countdown---i-can-t-believe-it-s-not-shuttered->.

<sup>39</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 159.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>41</sup> Priscilla Marie Meddaugh, “Bakhtin, Colbert, and the Center of Discourse: Is There No ‘Truthiness’ in Humor?,” in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 27, no. 4 (2010), 379, accessed April 17, 2011, DOI: 10.1080/1529030903583606.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Colbert, “The Word-Powerless,” *The Colbert Report*, Video-Television, 3:05, September 17, 2008, <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/185019/september-17-2008/the-word---powerless>.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy* ed. by Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 84.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 140-141.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>57</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, November 3, 2004, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s08e09-something-wall-mart-this-way-comes>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Bergson, 122.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>63</sup> Geoffrey Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," *Political Communication* 22 (2005), 262. Accessed April 14, 2011. doi: 10.1080/10584600591006492.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 6.

<sup>65</sup> Bergson, 124.

<sup>66</sup> Jon Stewart, "Slashdance – Democratic Deficit Reduction Plan," *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 6:16, April 14, 2011, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-april-14-2011/slashdance---democratic-deficit-reduction-plan>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Bergson, 117.

## CHAPTER 3

## MEDIA AND POLITICAL CRITICISMS

The idea of serious play may appear paradoxical. If one is playing, how can he/she be serious? I hope to resolve this paradox in this chapter by using the metaphor of the comedic courthouse that I have developed through the examination of comedy theories. The last chapter focused primarily on the playful aspects of the show, but I will now turn to the more serious ways that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* critique media and political institutions through serious play. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch argue for a model based on the concept of television as a cultural forum which “presents a multiplicity of meanings rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. It often focuses on our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those that are repressive, and reactionary, as well as those that are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed.”<sup>1</sup> By rejecting the traditional effects and ritual models of television analysis, Newcomb and Hirsch argue that the confusing and contradictory nature of television is best viewed as a forum where contemporary culture is negotiated by the viewer.

*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* function together as a cultural forum, presenting a variety of contemporary viewpoints ranging from the egregiously traditional and conservative viewpoints of Colbert and the standard liberal leanings of Stewart, to the fanatical political ambivalence of Stone and Parker. My comedic courthouse metaphor is a manifestation of the cultural forum that Newcomb and Hirsch postulate. In the following chapter I investigate the relationship between the critical voices of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* through the concept of the cultural forum, the courthouse and serious play. I begin with a brief analysis of how other scholars have explicated each program’s critical

methods. Having established these techniques of criticism, I will examine how each program has attacked media and political discourse surrounding the issue of global warming, focusing specifically on the use of Al Gore and his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, as targets. Through this close textual analysis I conclude that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* perform the roles of prosecutor, defense attorney and jury as they critically engage contemporary issues. I will provide one example from *The Daily Show* and one from *The Colbert Report*. However, I provide two examples from *South Park* to show how the legal roles and apparent critical target can change based on which episodes are studied under this framework. The ability to draw different critical threads from the programs through the use of serious play is one of its primary advantages.

The methods that Stone and Parker use to interrogate media and political institutions in *South Park* are based in the medium of animation. After Stone and Parker finished their collegiate work at the University of Colorado at Boulder they moved to Los Angeles to shop their college film, *Cannibal! The Musical*. Although they were unable to find an audience for their initial project, Fox producer Brian Graden, offered them \$1,200 to produce an animated short for a holiday video in 1995, which became the now infamous five minute short, “The Spirit of Christmas.” Borrowing from their work in animation in college, Stone and Parker created cardboard cut-outs and used stop-motion animation to create the short film, which focuses on an extended fight between Jesus and Santa while the prototypes of Stan, Kyle, Kenny and Cartman sit and laugh on the sidelines. Although the short was only distributed to a small number of Hollywood insiders, it began to attract attention and became one of the first internet viral videos.<sup>2</sup> Comedy Central’s Doug Herzog also saw the short and then asked Stone and Parker to develop the program that became *South Park*. The pilot season performed exceptionally well

among viewers, earning a 5.4 Nielsen rating, which was Comedy Central's highest rating ever at that point. Stone and Parker have maintained the impressively low budget aesthetic that dominated "The Spirit of Christmas," even though their advertisers now include RadioShack, CBS, The Gap and others prominent businesses.<sup>3</sup> They refuse to outsource their work and "early on they hired a software consultant to make the computers 'retarded,' [...] so that the shows would have the same homemade look as the crude cartoons Parker and Stone made in college with construction papers and scissors."<sup>4</sup> Although the animated aesthetic of *South Park* began as a solution to a tiny budget, Stone and Parker purposefully maintain it because it supports important critical elements of their work.

After Stone and Parker created the pilot episode, "Cartman Gets an Anal Probe" by hand, they realized that hand producing every episode would take much too long. Instead, they moved into computer animation while maintaining the low budget quality of *South Park*. The combination of low aesthetic demands and increasing computer speed has allowed them an incredibly quick production schedule for each episode. Often they create the main elements of an episode within a week. Ethan Thompson argues that because of its fast production schedule, "*South Park*, thus, may very well be the most current non-news (or non-news satire) program on television."<sup>5</sup> Stone has even complained about the speed, claiming that people are always wondering when they will make a comment on a specific current event. Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx claim that Stone's complaint "point[s] to a larger conception of the program held by Americans and how the public looks to *South Park* for relevant social commentary, not just satire-derived laughs."<sup>6</sup> As noted in the last chapter, Sienkiewicz and Marx also argue that *South Park* is an example of discursively integrated media. They believe that through its quick production and discursive integration, *South Park* undermines "the positions of its prejudiced

characters [...] *South Park* does not take the easy way out by blaming one bad apple, but instead takes aim at the structure of American discourse on prejudice.”<sup>7</sup> The speed of production allows Stone and Parker to engage the dialogue of media and politics as they are produced, inserting themselves into contemporary discourse in a timely and relevant manner. Sienkiewicz and Marx argue that this quick engagement provides contextualization of the offensive aspects of *South Park*, making them a method of criticism, rather than merely a quick joke. The ethnic, religious, and sexual stereotypes that pervade *South Park* are actual critical methods that Stone and Parker use to comment on clichéd discourse in mainstream media.

Further, the medium of animation provides *South Park* with deeper, theoretical means of criticism. In *Understanding Animation*, Paul Wells argues “the language of animation [...] works as a system of images which interrogate social conditions, and resist the *fiction* of reported fact, and the selective representations of reality through the state-controlled systems of mass communication.”<sup>8</sup> Wells argues that animation inherently lends itself to issues of representations of reality, especially as displayed through the mass communication system. This reflects Alison Halsall’s argument that “the poorly drawn characters [...] emphasize first the primitiveness of the animation itself, and second the witless thinking that distinguishes many of its characters [...] Parker and Stone’s two-dimensional cutouts thus are poised to be effective at tackling difficult sociopolitical issues facing the United States.”<sup>9</sup> Based in the language of animation, *South Park* inherently questions and intervenes in the representations of reality as proposed by other media sources and politicians. Thompson agrees, stating “the *South Park* aesthetic is more than a visual style – it’s a distinctive mode of making sense of controversy and the ‘real world’ social conflict.”<sup>10</sup> Through animation, Stone and Parker offer alternative modes of addressing contemporary real world issues.

Although the crude animated style of *South Park* provides ample room for Stone and Parker to conduct critiques of almost every contemporary political position and ideology, their own political leanings of *South Park* are much more difficult to grasp. In *South Park Conservatives*, Brian C. Anderson argues that Stone and Parker represent the resurrection of conservative ideology in popular culture.<sup>11</sup> Paul A. Cantor argues that Stone and Parker position themselves as traditional libertarians, and present challenges to the traditional left culture of Hollywood.<sup>12</sup> Through an examination of a variety of episodes, Matt Becker offers the most complex understanding of Stone and Parker's politics, arguing that "*South Park* must be seen as deeply politically ambivalent. This ambivalence makes the show an effective mirror for a politically polarized nation racked by culture wars because in it every political stripe can see its own ideologies reflected and thus seemingly justified."<sup>13</sup> Becker's theory of the apathy and ambivalence of Generation X strikes at the core political values of Stone and Parker. It is impossible for *South Park* to stand on a staunch ideological framework. Rather, Stone and Parker focus on critiquing those in power without constructing a politically stable foundation for critique, relying instead on a different foundation – comedy.

The political ambivalence of *South Park* stands in stark contrast to the blinding conservatism that forms the façade of *The Colbert Report*. As noted previously, Colbert's character is a parodic amalgamation of conservative political pundits like Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly. Through a comparative rhetorical analysis of O'Reilly and Colbert, Lisa Colletta concludes that "the rhetorical strategies of Bill O'Reilly and Colbert are identical: reference to anecdote not facts, appeals to emotion rather than reason, use of 'everyman' language and syntax (including a racial slur), and the spinning of a probably racist agenda into something that appears caring and courageous."<sup>14</sup> Colbert uses the rhetorical strategies of conservative pundits to parody

them. Yet his parody is so accurate that some viewers have trouble recognizing it, mistaking it for sincerity. In a study of Colbert's audience, Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville and Michael A. Beam studied Colbert's audience and determined that "*The Colbert Report* is interpreted by audiences in a manner that best fits with their individual political beliefs. This study demonstrates that such assumptions do not seem to hold true when the source is also ambiguous, offering no external cues to guide individuals' message processing."<sup>15</sup> The authors argue that the pre-determined political opinion of the conservative viewer is re-enforced through *The Colbert Report* because Colbert offers no visual clues that his program is a parody. Although some claim that the viewer understands the liberal subtext of *The Colbert Report* because of the inherent polysemic nature of parody, it is apparent that the overt conservative views expressed by Colbert must also be taken into consideration.

The confusing nature of Colbert's on-air persona was apparent when he spoke at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006.<sup>16</sup> Colbert appeared in character before President Bush, members of the cabinet and media representatives. However, the affectionate tone he began with quickly wore off, and Colbert's commentary adopted the sinister tone of true criticism. Colbert began his speech with comparisons between himself and the President, stating "we both get it. Guys like us, we're not some brainiacs on the nerd patrol. We're not members of the factinista. We go straight from the gut."<sup>17</sup> Colbert threw satirical jabs at the President for nearly ten minutes, and as the laughter began to die, his harsh words seemed to hit home. Colbert argued that Bush "believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday. Events can change; this man's beliefs never will."<sup>18</sup> Colbert played with the image of Bush as a man with unwavering positions. In doing so, Colbert addresses the flaws in the logic of such a standpoint.

As the president grimaced from the sidelines, Colbert turned his attention to the press, deriding their capabilities as the supposed “watchdog” of the government. He stated that “I am appalled to be surrounded by the liberal media that is destroying America, with the exception of FOX News. FOX News gives you both sides of every story: the President’s side, and the Vice President’s side.” Then, feigning disgust at news organizations’ recent revelations about NSA wiretapping and Eastern European prisons, Colbert lauded their previous work:

Over the last five years you people were so good, over tax cuts, WMD intelligence, the effect of global warming. We Americans didn’t want to know, and you had the courtesy not to try to find out. Those were good times, as far as we knew.

But, listen, let’s review the rules. Here’s how it works. The President makes decisions. He’s the decider. The press secretary announces those decisions, and you people of the press type those decisions down. Make, announce, type. Just put ‘em through a spell check and go home. Get to know your family again. Make love to your wife. Write that novel you got kicking around in your head. You know, the one about the intrepid Washington reporter with the courage to stand up to the administration? You know, fiction!<sup>19</sup>

Colbert’s criticisms echo Jones’s complaints about the “masterful information management techniques and fear-mongering by the Bush administration and a television news media that helped facilitate these political deceptions and ruses through its weak reporting and tendency towards patriotic spectacle.”<sup>20</sup> Colbert’s parodic persona and conservative appearance allowed him to point out the failure of news media to act as a watch-dog of the government to the very journalists and politicians he was criticizing.

Stewart has not yet spoken at a White House Correspondents’ Dinner, but he criticizes many of the same issues in media and government as Colbert in *The Daily Show*. As *The Daily Show* blossomed during the Bush era, Stewart’s political liberal leanings became evident through his biting criticisms of the Bush administration. However, unlike Colbert’s parodic persona and the animation of *South Park*, Stewart adopts no parodic attitude and relies primarily on redactive

editing of mainstream news broadcasts. Adapting the term from theology studies, John Hartley defines redaction as “the action or process of preparing for publication; reduction to literary form; revision, rearrangement. The result of such a process; a new edition; an adaptation; a shortened form, an abridged version. The action of bringing or putting into a definite form.”<sup>21</sup> He contends that contemporary journalism is primarily redaction, and in a “redactional society” like ours, “editorial practices determine what is understood to be true, and what policies and beliefs should follow from that.”<sup>22</sup> Through his use of edited video clips, Stewart provides a redactive analysis of journalism, media and politics. In *Entertaining Politics*, Jeffrey Jones argues that Stewart’s use of redacted video footage is a productive process. He claims that “through redaction, *The Daily Show* is engaged in a form of constructing ‘news,’ and in turn, reporting something that is ‘new.’”<sup>23</sup> An example of this technique is the 2008 clip discussed in the last chapter where Stewart redacts multiple clips of Sarah Palin referring to “Joe the plumber,” “Ed the dairyman,” “Doug the barber,” “Tito the builder,” “Christine the florist,” “Phil the bricklayer” etc. Stewart follows the clip by yelling out, “Mack the knife, Sam the butcher, Bozo the clown. What is with the name and occupation thing? Is McCain-Palin looking to rule us in the middle ages?”<sup>24</sup> Through redacted video, Stewart summarizes Palin’s primary talking point and exposes the rigidity and lack of diversity in Palin’s political rhetoric. Unlike the traditional journalists who focus on one event at a time, Stewart cuts across swathes of material to expose the artifice of political rhetoric and discourse, generating new material and information from found footage.

Jeffrey Jones introduces the idea of redactive journalism in *Entertaining Politics*. He argues that “perhaps the most appropriate way of describing how *The Daily Show* employs redaction as a form of reporting is through the metaphor of Stewart as prosecutor. By employing

four sets of redactive techniques, Stewart is able to construct evidence in ways that resemble the behaviors of a criminal prosecutor, yet also stand in contrast to that which television does (or fails to do) in its usage of video materials at its disposal.”<sup>25</sup> Jones analyzes the ways that Stewart interrogates multiple witnesses, cross-examines witnesses, summarizes evidence and makes closing statements through redactive video editing.

Jones claims that the audience of *The Daily Show* acts as the jury for Stewart’s prosecutions. However, I propose that through serious play the three shows combine to construct the dynamic of prosecutor, defense attorney and jury *for* the audience. Stewart acts as the prosecutor, but he is accompanied by Colbert who acts as the defense attorney and Stone and Parker who act as the jury. However, just as the comedic theories are flexible, each program could participate as a different step of the joke-telling process or carnivalesque, the legal roles established here are also flexible. Occasionally Stewart will act as the defense, *South Park* as the prosecutor and Colbert as the jury depending on which topic the programs address. The flexibility of the roles encourages engagement from the viewer to understand what role each program will serve as for a given topic. The position is generally processed during production, and then established through the produced episodes. Through serious play, each program’s individual criticisms of journalism, media and the government combine to create a more complex and comprehensive analysis of the given topic.

This legal metaphor is best visualized by examining how *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each engage a particular issue. I have chosen to analyze how they each interrogate global warming, in relation to Al Gore’s documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*. After losing the 2000 presidential election to George W. Bush, Gore focused on promoting environmental consciousness. The basis of *An Inconvenient Truth* is the slide-show that Gore

claimed to have presented over 1,000 times by 2006.<sup>26</sup> In a clip from 2007, called “Welcome Back, Hotter,” Stewart looked at Gore’s return to the Senate chamber.<sup>27</sup> He began with Gore sitting down, and then briefly identified how media and politicians discussed him. Stewart shows various news sources and Dennis Haskert, R-Illinois dubbing Gore “a faker,” “a rockstar,” “a personality,” “a prophet,” and the “Goracle.” Stewart jokingly responds with exclamations of “Gorestradamus,” “Gornac the Magnificent,” “the Goremonger” and others, replicating and exposing the sensationalist rhetoric of television journalists.<sup>28</sup> Stewart plays another clip of Gore saying, “the planet has a fever.” The scene cuts back to a confused-looking Stewart who proposes “the planet needs Motrin.” It cuts back to Gore, saying “if your baby has a fever, you go to the doctor.” More perplexed, Stewart now asks Gore, “could you take that metaphor too far,” and instantly cuts back to Gore stating, “if the crib’s on fire, you don’t speculate that the baby is flame-retardant.” Stewart is flabbergasted by Gore’s infantile metaphor, stating “ignoring Gore’s powerful message is like leaving a baby on fire. It’s kind of a tough image to counter. Missouri’s Kit Bond ... whad’ya got?” The scene cuts to Bond, a Republican from Missouri, showing a picture of a young girl and claiming that she is cold because her family cannot afford to pay the heating bills, which he blames on recent “carbon-cap legislation.” Bond concludes, “will this little girl have to wear two coats inside?” Stewart offers an idea, “a compromise, if you will. Let the cold child room with the flaming baby.”<sup>29</sup>

Stewart continues his interrogation of political rhetoric through another redacted montage of Senator James Inhofe, a Republican from Oklahoma, “who tried squeezing an ice-age worth of contempt into fifteen minutes of questioning.” Each brief clip of Inhofe portrays him berating Gore, telling him when to talk and what to say. When the camera cuts back to Stewart he quickly adopts the persona of a young boy and screams “Mom! Dad! I hate this ... I hate this!”<sup>30</sup>

Stewart's redactive technique exposes the pedantic discourse that Gore participates in, as well as the Senate's hostile demeanor toward Gore. Stewart concludes with a clip of Gore offering to take Inhofe out to breakfast with their mutual friend. Stewart spends the last 45 seconds impersonating Gore's slow speaking style, offering to take Inhofe out to a "hole-in-the-wall sub shop," "visit and all-you-can-eat rib joint," and maybe they might "head off to a new place I found on K Street called 'Just Pudding.' As you can imagine, they serve a variety of puddings. My point is, senator, I'm real hungry."<sup>31</sup> Stewart does not directly address the issue of global warming in this clip. Instead, he focuses on the discourse that develops around Gore through media outlets and political structures. The clip exemplifies how Stewart acts as a prosecutor, specifically by interrogating multiple witnesses. Through the exposure of the sensationalist news vernacular, inflammatory political metaphors and pure bullheadedness (on the part of Inhofe) Stewart demonstrates the theatrical nature of the political and media processes. Jones argues that "Stewart is violating the tacitly agreed-upon news values – and the choices that follow from them – that largely determine how most news organizations present information."<sup>32</sup> Stewart uses redactive editing to show the rigidity of contemporary political dialogue.

As Stewart attacks the discourse propagated by media and politics, Colbert replicates and defends it. Although parodic, the face value of his actions and words also function as a defense attorney to Stewart's prosecution. In the 2007 clip "Gore's Garbage," Colbert defends the political and media discourse used to discuss Gore following the release and acclaim of *An Inconvenient Truth*.<sup>33</sup> After The Tennessee Center for Policy Research (TCPR) claimed that "Gore uses massive amounts of energy in his Tennessee home," Colbert states "I'm glad to say it didn't take long for Gore to get knocked off his high horse."<sup>34</sup> Colbert recycled the now defunct Fox News show, "Hannity and Colmes," who were unable to get Gore to appear on their

program. However, as Colbert puts it, “Hannity attacked the next logical person: Darryl Hannah.” The scene cuts to a clip of Hannity interviewing Hannah, informing her that the TCPR discovered that “Gore devoured nearly twenty times the national average in electricity. Does that make Al Gore an environmental hypocrite?” Hannah begins to say that she can only speak for herself when Colbert cuts her off with a scene of Hannah in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*. Hannity’s pointless question to Hannah is a remark that Stewart would attack. However, Colbert views this as a legitimate form of discourse and defends Hannity’s interview as “logical.”<sup>35</sup>

After hearing the Hannity clip, Colbert believes that “Gore is nailed here. I mean he’s up against The Tennessee Center for Policy Research. Sure it’s a conservative think-tank, funded by Republicans that the Department of Revenue says ‘is not a legitimate group.’ But it says right on their website that they are ‘non-partisan.’ Who you gonna believe?”<sup>36</sup> Clear conservative biases and illegitimacy of the TCPR are not factors in Colbert’s logic. However, Colbert does not believe that the TCPR has adequately discredited Gore. He reveals his new think-tank, “The American Al Gore’s Garbage Institute,” which he runs with the help of his colleague, Jimmy Fingers who appears to be a homeless man. Colbert proceeds to produce a garbage bag from Gore’s house and dig through it. Colbert pulls out a “copy” of Gore’s cell phone bill. He chastises him for “calling outside his five, going over his minutes. That is rank hypocrisy.” Colbert also finds a box of hair dye, a not-quite-empty Capri Sun, which he drinks, and bread heels that “are not great for sandwiches, but you could easily crumble these up and bread a chicken. That’s a smoking gun if I ever saw one.” After clearing off his desk, Colbert finds a final item of trash, “Iron Maiden tickets. Tipper’s a hypocrite too.”<sup>37</sup> Colbert’s creation of “The American Al Gore’s Garbage Institute,” along with his interrogation of Gore’s garbage reify the methods and discourse produced by the TCPR. Colbert itemizes Gore’s trash to how they

represent the wastefulness, and to use Hannity's term, the "environmental hypocrisy" of Al Gore. Colbert functions as the defense attorney for the conservative pundit and the conservative think-tank, replicating their rhetoric through the play of his parodic persona.

As Stewart and Colbert inhabit the roles of prosecuting and defending attorneys in my legal metaphor of serious play, Stone and Parker act as the jury. Stone and Parker's conclusions determine the nature and import of the criticism that is produced through serious play. In order to understand how *South Park* can vary the focus of the criticisms, I examine two episodes from the tenth season that deal with global warming. Following, I compare how each episode produces different readings of the episodes of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*.

The episode, "Smug Alert!" focuses on the potential effects of alternative energy sources on the environment, and the discourses that surround such new technologies.<sup>38</sup> The episode begins with Kyle's father driving his new Prius hybrid. As his friends notice his new car, Gerald Broflovski explains that "I just couldn't sit back and be a part of destroying the earth anymore," and takes Kyle and his little brother Ike to the "hardware store [to] hand out awareness citations to S.U.V cars in the parking lot."<sup>39</sup> As the rest of the town begins to loathe Gerald because of his "holier-than-thou attitude," he decides that his family needs to live in a more progressive city, so they move to San Francisco. Although Stan begs him to change his mind, Gerald says that he will not return until everyone in South Park has changed their minds about hybrids. Stan decides to write a song about how everybody should drive hybrids, and when it receives radio play the townspeople are moved and immediately purchase new hybrids. However, after getting everybody to buy a new car, Ranger McFriendly informs Stan "when people drive hybrid cars they get so full of themselves that they spew tons of self-satisfied garbage into the air. It's smug. Hybrid cars are better for emission level but people who drive hybrid cars are the leading cause

of smug. You get enough smug in the atmosphere and you know what that leads to? Global laming. Thanks to your gay little song, South Park is now the second smuggiest city in America!”<sup>40</sup> According to McFriendly, the smuggiest city in the United States is San Francisco, where Kyle now lives. Further, Kyle has discovered that all the children in San Francisco are on drugs because their parents are so smug they love the smell of their own farts. After seeing Gerald sniff his own fart Kyle accepts half a hit of acid, while Ike ingests three. Drugged out and high on fart fumes, the Broflovski’s are unaware of the impending disaster that is resulting from the smug.

Back in South Park, McFriendly explains to Stan that the newly formed smug of South Park is moving west, and “the smug from George Clooney’s acceptance speech at the Academy Awards [where] he talked about how people in Hollywood are ahead of the curve on social matters” is moving steadily north. McFriendly continues, stating that “South Park and San Francisco smug is already at a critical mass. If it gets hit by George Clooney’s acceptance speech it will be a disaster of epic proportions. The perfect storm of self-satisfaction.”<sup>41</sup> In order to save South Park, McFriendly makes Stan destroy each of the hybrid cars to stop the production of smug. Meanwhile, Cartman and Butters cooperate to save the Broflovski’s from death in San Francisco which “disappeared up its own asshole” after a devastating “smug storm.” After Kyle and Stan are reunited, the adults declare that they will never buy hybrids, but Kyle says “hybrids are a good thing [...] Hybrid cars don’t cause smugness, people do. Look, hybrid cars are important. They may even save our planet one day. What you all need to do is just learn to drive hybrids and not be smug about it.” Randy ponders, “perhaps... one day... we can learn to drive hybrids without being smug about it, but for now... the technology is just too much for us,” and they all go off to “buy wasteful gas guzzlers!”<sup>42</sup>

“Smug Alert!” exemplifies Stone and Parker’s methods of criticism that are based in the crude animation of *South Park*. In the commentary on the episode, Stone and Parker explain that the idea for an episode about “smug” was influenced by their experience at a dinner with “high-level Hollywood people,” where “literally everyone at the table, except for us, flew in private jets almost exclusively. These people hadn’t flown commercial in years, and all of them, to a person had a hybrid and were congratulating themselves about having this hybrid [...] And a woman at the dinner actually said ‘Yeah, well it’s important for us to set an example’ [and] ‘it’s up to people like us to set an example for the little people.’”<sup>43</sup> Stone and Parker used animation as a vehicle to voice their displeasure with the self-satisfaction of the people at this dinner, and to interrogate the dominant cultural discourse of the elite Hollywood left.

Less than a month after the premiere of “Smug Alert!” Stone and Parker tackled the issue of global warming again in the episode “Manbearpig,” this time focusing on Al Gore and *An Inconvenient Truth*.<sup>44</sup> Trouble begins when Al Gore visits the boy’s class to discuss “the single biggest threat to our planet. You see, there is something out there which threatens our very existence and may be the end of the human race as we know it. I’m talking of course about... [*a projector comes on and a picture of a monster appears*] Manbearpig.”<sup>45</sup> Gore believes that the half-man, half-bear, half-pig creature is stalking the children of South Park and pictures himself as a sort of superhero who can stop it. Gore distributes bumper stickers and pamphlets to the boys and has them sign an “awareness sheet.” When Stan’s father discourages the boys from being friends with the ex-Vice President, Stan responds “I feel kind of bad for him, Dad. I don’t think he has any friends.”<sup>46</sup>

Gore informs the boys that he has located Manbearpig in the nearby “Cave of the Winds,” and together they attempt to track it. Once they arrive, Gore believes he has spotted

Manbearpig. He grabs his shotgun and begins shooting wildly, which triggers the cave to collapse, trapping the four boys inside. As the boys search for exits, the escaped Gore explains to the tour guides that Manbearpig caused the cave to collapse on the boys. He claims that they “need to fill the cave with hot molten lead, ‘cause it’s the only way to make sure ManBearPig never comes out!” When the tour guide asks how the hot lead will affect the boys inside, Gore responds that “they’re already dead! Didn’t you listen to me?? They got attacked by a Manbearpig and ManBearPig leaves nobody alive! I’m super serious!” However, when a police officer offers to take him away the tour guide says “Naw, I feel kind of bad for him. I don’t think he has any friends.”<sup>47</sup> Three days pass and as the boys grow weak inside the cave. Meanwhile, Gore has gained control of a crane and blocks a river with boulders, diverting the water into “The Cave of the Winds.” As the rescue team watches the flood waters rise, they determine that “there’s nothing left alive down there.” Gore exudes excitement because “I killed ManBearPig. I’ve saved the earth from certain destruction. Everyone is super-stoked on me, even if they don’t know it.”<sup>48</sup>

Despite Gore’s celebration, the boys are still trapped inside the cave, panicked by the rising water. As the boys finally emerge from the cave Gore rushes to them and says, “kids, I saved you,” but Stan rejects him: “Stay away from us, asshole! I was nice to you because I felt sorry for you, because you don’t have any friends! But now I see WHY you don’t have any friends! You just used ManBearPig as a way to get attention for yourself because you’re a LOSER!!”<sup>49</sup> However, Gore is undeterred, and declares, “well, my work here is done. I’ve killed Manbearpig, and now I must save the world from something else. Maybe I’ll make a movie. A movie starring me.”<sup>50</sup> Gore’s final allusion to *An Inconvenient Truth* resolves the metaphor that dogged the episode from the beginning. Stone and Parker use “Manbearpig” as a metaphor for

Gore's incessant cries for attention to global warming. Although Stone and Parker's portrayal of Gore is far from flattering, they say that they really like Gore's character because he is a complex character, who "you feel sorry for, but he's also the antagonist." Furthermore, Stone and Parker do not take issue with *An Inconvenient Truth*; rather, they argue that it is "bullshit that that won for best documentary. It doesn't matter if it's a good movie or not, it's not a fucking documentary, it's a power-point presentation."<sup>51</sup> "Smug Alert!" and "Manbearpig" present views on the contemporary crisis of global warming, and are viable criticisms in their own right. "Smug Alert!" addresses the hypocrisy of the leftist discourse regarding the environment. "Manbearpig" addresses the seemingly foolish political/celebrity figure of Al Gore. *South Park* acts as the jury in both situations, helping the viewers understand the debates and criticisms presented by all three programs.

If "Smug Alert!," "Welcome Back, Hotter" and "Gore's Garbage" are analyzed as a collective unit through serious play, the trial conducted by *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* concerns the contemporary mediated political discourse surrounding global warming. Stewart assumes the role of prosecutor and attacks contemporary political and mediated discourse through his redacted videos. Through the redacted clips of newscasters terming Gore "the Goracle," Gore's analogy of a child on fire, and the hostile debate between Inhofe and Gore, Stewart implies that newscasters and politicians participate in infantile, sensationalist and brutish conversations. Colbert then accepts the role of defense attorney, using the logic and techniques of media outlets and politicians to craft arguments that would discredit Gore. Colbert's creation of the fake "The American Al Gore's Garbage Institute" provides a defense of the non-partisan actions of the TCPR (a facetious defense, but a defense none the less.) As the jury, *South Park* sides with Stewart, and determine that the discourse surrounding

global warming is too self-righteous. However, they also note that efforts to reduce carbon emissions and aid the environment are beneficial. Rather, it is the discourse that requires critique.

However, if “Manbearpig,” is substituted for “Smug Alert!” in this schema, a different critical thread develops that is focused on the political celebrity of Al Gore. Stewart becomes the defense attorney, arguing that although Gore has achieved fame and fortune, his political points are still valid. Colbert now acts as the prosecutor, hoping to knock Gore from the spotlight and to provide evidence of Gore’s ecological hypocrisy. He even mentions Gore’s wife, Tipper, and plays with her work in establishing the rating system for modern music industry. Although Stewart and Colbert switched positions after incorporating the new episode, *South Park* retains the role of the jury. Stone and Parker determine that Gore is a sad character who does what he thinks is right, no matter how crazy it may sound to others.

The individual critical methods of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each function differently. Yet, they serve specific functions in their seriously playful relationship. Stewart uses redactive editing techniques to expose hypocrisy; Colbert uses his parodic persona to replicate and expose faulty logic; Stone and Parker use animation to resist traditional modes of discourse. *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* craft dynamic and complex negotiations of media and politics through their roles as prosecutor, defense attorney and jury. When examined as a collective, separate critical threads can be drawn out of the three programs. The relationship between the critical faculties of the programs is also combined through their lack of conclusiveness. They rarely present answers to the problems they critique, but as Thompson states about *South Park*, “the raising of issues, the way they are raised (the televisual mode of representation), and how they are put in dialogue with one another (the dialogic nature of the mode of representation) are more important than how a single episode

ends.”<sup>52</sup> These three programs are more focused on raising issues that actively provide answers to their criticisms. Through the continual questioning and interrogation of media and political discourse *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* act as prosecutor, defense attorney and jury. Through this courthouse setting they emphasize “process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction rather than coherence. It is with this view that we turn to an analysis of the texts of television that demonstrates and supports the conception of television as a cultural forum.”<sup>53</sup> The structure of serious play that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* engage encourages the understanding of television as a cultural forum by discussing, complicating and negotiating the world of contemporary media and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 506.

<sup>2</sup> David Leonard, “‘South Park’ Creators Haven’t Lost Their Edge,” *CNN Money*, last modified October 27, 2007, [http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2006/10/30/8391792/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/30/8391792/index.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, “Introduction,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard, “‘South Park’ creators.”

<sup>5</sup> Ethan Thompson, “Good Demo, Bad Taste: *South Park* as Carnavalesque Satire,” in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathon Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 217-218.

<sup>6</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, “Beyond a Cutout World: Ethnic Humor and Discursive Integration in *South Park*,” *Journal of Film & Vide* 61, no. 2 (2009): 12, accessed April 14, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20688621/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Alison Halsall, “‘Bigger, Longer, and Uncut: *South Park* and the Carnavalesque,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 27.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, “Good Demo,” 230.

<sup>11</sup> Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservative: The Revolt Against Liberal Media Bias* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005).

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<sup>12</sup> Paul A. Cantor, “The Invisible Gnomes and the Invisible Hand: *South Park* and Libertarian Philosophy,” in *South Park and Philosophy: You Know I Learned Something Today*, ed. Robert Arp (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 97-112.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Becker, “‘I Hate Hippies;’ *South Park* and the Politics of Generation X,” in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 160.

<sup>14</sup> Lisa Colletta, “Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009), 862, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00711.x.

<sup>15</sup> Heather L. LaMarre, Kristen D. Landreville and Michael A. Beam, “The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 14, no.2 (2009), 226. doi:10.1177/1940161208330904.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Colbert, *Colbert Roasts President Bush - 2006 White House Correspondents Dinner*, Video, 24:10, April 29, 2006, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-869183917758574879#>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 75.

<sup>21</sup> John Hartley, “Communicative Democracy in a Redactional Society: The Future of Journalism Studies,” *Journalism* 1, no. 39 (2000), , 44. DOI: 10.1177/146488490000100107.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jones, 116.

<sup>24</sup> Jon Stewart, “The Candidate Labels,” *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 4:04, October 21, 2008, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-october-27-2008/the-candidates--labels>.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 116.

<sup>26</sup> Karen Breslau, “The Resurrection of Al Gore,” *Wired* 14.05, May, 2006, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.05/gore.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Jon Stewart, “Welcome Back, Hotter,” *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 4:58, March 22, 2007, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-march-22-2007/welcome-back-hotter>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, 128.

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Colbert, "Gore's Garbage," *The Colbert Report*, Video-Television, 5:16, February 27, 2007, <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/182697/february-27-2007/gore-s-garbage>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Smug Alert!," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, March 29, 2006, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e02-smug-alert>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Smug Alert! Mini-Commentary," 4:15, N.D., [http://www.southparkstuff.com/season\\_10/episode\\_1002/](http://www.southparkstuff.com/season_10/episode_1002/).

<sup>44</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Manbearpig," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:26, April 25, 2006, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e06-manbearpig>.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Manbearpig Mini-Commentary," 2:20, N.D., [http://www.southparkstuff.com/season\\_10/episode\\_1006/](http://www.southparkstuff.com/season_10/episode_1006/).

<sup>52</sup> Thompson, "Good Demo," 217.

<sup>53</sup> Newcomb and Hirsch, 506.

## CHAPTER 4

### RELIGIOUS CRITICISM AND CIVIL RELIGION

The notion of serious play has been used to connect *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* through their similar comedic methods and criticisms of politics and media. However, the three programs are also interlinked through their similar criticisms of religion. Although religious criticism is not unique to these programs, the relationship that is established through serious play creates a linkage between the programs in the form of what Robert Bellah terms “civil religion.” I first examine how *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* each critique specific religions in individual ways. They primarily focus on critiquing the ways that religions are practiced by believers rather than the beliefs themselves. This is fundamental to the religious pluralism that influences the United States government. While critiquing religious practices in the United States, the programs create a new place where the ritual and the sacred are addressed. Through the critique of the belief rather than the believer, I argue that the three programs promote a civil religion. Bellah argues that civil religion is “from the earliest years of the republic a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity.”<sup>1</sup> This collectivity of civil religion in the United States is reflected in the practices of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. Through the framework of serious play, it has become apparent that these programs do not promote cynical apathy and disengagement from political life; rather, they instill an adherence to the civil religion of the United States.

The ways that traditional religion is critiqued by sit-coms is well documented. Mark I. Pinsky’s work exemplifies the ways televisual critiques of religion are traditionally viewed by television critics. In *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, Pinsky examines how the popular

sit-com *The Simpsons* both critiques and supports organized religion. By examining the ways that Matt Groening (the creator of *The Simpsons*) addresses various religious traditions and the ways religious characters are portrayed, Pinsky determines that *The Simpsons* is “cloaking the show’s sacred essence in the guise of profane storytelling.”<sup>2</sup> Pinsky further argues that the program clearly depicts Christians and Evangelicals as out of touch with reality. Religion appears to be an out-dated concept. However, the subtext exposes a richer and more complex appreciation of religion. Instead of maintaining a strictly anti-religious standpoint, Pinsky argues that *The Simpsons* “is a situation comedy about modern life that includes a significant spiritual dimension; because of that, it more accurately reflects the faith lives of Americans than any other show in the medium.”<sup>3</sup> According to Pinsky, the reflection of religious tradition in the United States is the primary religious goal of *The Simpsons* and offers a venue over which people can develop mutual bonds.

The criticisms of religion presented in *South Park* can be viewed in the same way. Through the profanity, bodily fluids and scatological humor, Stone and Parker present an argument that religion has problems, but is overall a constructive force for humanity. Most notably, they have even made a two-part episode focused on the critique of Atheism. In “Go-God-Go,” Cartman travels to the atheistic future in which various denominations are warring over the answer to “the great question.”<sup>4</sup> In the second episode of the story arc the question is revealed. What is the most logical name for their a-religious world: The United Atheist Alliance, The Allied Atheist Alliance, or The Unified Atheist League.<sup>5, 6</sup> Stone and Parker assert that it is not religion that causes the problems of the world, but the dogmatic following of specific beliefs. However, *South Park* has also satirized almost every major religion during their fifteen year run. *The Simpsons* writer Al Jean states that they have stayed away from the topic of Islam because “I

don't think we've had a writer who was Muslim [...] It's a faith where you don't want to offend, because we're not Muslim, and we're not sure what might be offensive.”<sup>7</sup> Although this is the case for *The Simpsons*, Stone and Parker have specifically critiqued Islam on several occasions, specifically because of the recent incidents involving the depiction of the prophet Muhammad. In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published a series of editorial cartoons depicting Muhammad. Soon after these were published, a variety of Islamic groups began to protest the Danish newspaper. Kurt Westergaard drew the most infamous cartoon that depicted Muhammad with a bomb in his turban, and has been in hiding under police supervision since 2005 due to threats on his life.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this violence and controversy, Stone and Parker chose to depict Muhammad on *South Park* in the two part episode “Cartoon Wars” that premiered in 2006.<sup>9,10</sup> However, their attempts to draw Muhammad were censored by Comedy Central. In 2010 the two decided to revisit the idea in the two part episode simply called “200” and “201.” Once again, Comedy Central censored the image, speech and name of Muhammad, fearing for the safety of the *South Park* staff after a blogger wrote a thinly veiled death threat against the program. Stone and Parker's attempted depiction of the prophet reinforces David Koepsell's point that “*South Park*'s ultimately pragmatic view of religion is just this. They mock not the belief, but the believer, and credit believers where their lives reflect good, ethical practice. They also point out hypocrisy wherever possible.”<sup>11</sup> Like *The Simpsons*, Stone and Parker are not interested in destroying religion and religious institutions; rather, they point out the hypocrisies of the followers of these religions and the arrogance of their dogmatic beliefs.

The emphasis on the satirization of the believer (not the belief) is also reflected in *The Colbert Report*. Colbert has constructed his program to mimic an episode of a televangelical television program like Pat Robertson's, *The 700 Club*. Although a devout Catholic, Colbert uses

his set-up to critique the policies and practices of his and other religions through his parodic program. Like *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, *The Colbert Report* is heavily critical of the ways that traditional religious texts can be misinterpreted for political goals. For example, in his recurring segment “Yahweh or No Way,” Colbert recently addressed Harold Camping’s prediction that the world would end on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011.<sup>12</sup> After declaring that Jesus would beat Thor (the Norse god of thunder) in a fight because of the larger box office intake for *Passion of the Christ* as opposed to the new film *Thor*, Colbert informs the audience that Camping’s “Family Radio” has been installing billboards that say “Save the Date: May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011.” Colbert questions Camping’s use of the phrase traditionally ascribed to weddings, and says “this means there are only eleven shopping days, until there are no shopping days.”<sup>13</sup> Colbert does not directly attack the Christian tradition of the apocalypse, but the tendency of American society to relate Christian holidays to consumerism.

Colbert continues, rhetorically asking his audience if God is ending the world in less than two weeks. He adamantly declares “Yahweh” to great applause. After claiming that “I like my doom-crying home-grown,” Colbert calls Camping’s credibility into question, noting that he previously predicted the end of the world on September 4, 1994. Colbert states that “this time Camping’s definitely, probably got it right. Here’s how he does the math. Noah’s flood occurred 7,000 years ago and at the time God told Noah that he had seven days before the flood would start. Then, in second Peter it says ‘With the Lord a day is like a thousand years.’” Colbert produces an old-fashioned calculator and begins crunching numbers: “Seven days, times one thousand, carry the cubits, equals ... May 21<sup>st</sup>.”<sup>14</sup> Colbert is not as interested in critiquing the idea of Christianity itself. Instead, he criticizes those who dogmatically follow the words of holy books. Like Stone and Parker, Colbert criticizes the believers rather than the belief itself.

*The Daily Show*'s criticism of religion is also aimed at the believer, and is most often aimed at how religion is used within the political realm. However, Stewart often interviews guests with specific religious viewpoints and often disagrees with their perspectives. Recently, Stewart conducted two interviews with constitutional scholars who argued different viewpoints on the relationship between church and state. First, Stewart interviewed David Barton, a former member of the board that supervised the public school history curriculum for Texas and California. Barton is also founder and president of "Wallbuilders," which focuses on historical reclamation. As Barton states, "we and our company have about a hundred thousand documents from before 1812. So documents out of black history, out of religious history, out of constitution, you name it. We've got about a hundred thousand originals. So that's what we take a lot of history back to, is those original things that happened." Stewart counters, arguing that "it always seems that the history that you take comes back to the idea that we are a more Christian nation than we are living."<sup>15</sup> Barton disagrees, claiming that in his critique of the history textbooks in California and Texas, Christianity is only mentioned twice and his textbook is now one of the most widely used in the nation. Stewart notes a fundamental issue with the implementation of Christianity in public schools. He takes issue with the way Barton uses Christianity in textbooks, not the religion itself. Furthermore, Barton argues that the Constitution was enacted to limit the power of the federal government, not the state governments. Therefore, he claims the division between church and state is organized within the State government. The states can determine how religion can be implemented within the government. Barton even claims that if the people of a State wanted to institute Sharia law, it would be within their rights.<sup>16</sup>

Stewart later interviewed constitutional scholar, Richard Beeman, as a rebuttal to Barton's segment. Beeman claims that Barton is correct in claiming that the states did not need

to abide by the Bill of Rights when the republic was founded. However, only three states did not immediately adopt the separation of church and state, and by 1833 those three had. Furthermore, Beeman argues that the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Bill of Rights means that “the states and the localities were bound to abide by the federal provisions of the Bill of Rights, so although the federal Bill of Rights initially applied only to actions of Congress, in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world it truly does apply, particularly in the area of the first amendment, to states as well.”<sup>17</sup> Beeman argues that Barton’s inclusion of church and state is acceptable under the original Constitution and Bill of Rights, but is ignoring the 200 years of law that has developed since then and fully separate church and state. However, Beeman notes that the founding fathers did include some religious rhetoric that indicates some sort of permeability of the “wall of separation” between church and state.

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, they talked about providence. They talked about sometimes divine providence, but really when you read those words in context they have a very secular almost naturalistic connotation to them. The most famous of religious phrases are in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. “The law of nature and of nature’s God.” Those were Jefferson’s terms. He wasn’t thinking of a God who came down and directed every single minute of our lives. He was thinking of a creator imbedded in the mother-nature he so love [...] The founding fathers were drafting this doctrine at a time when the law and the common-law was becoming increasingly divorced from the Bible. That was not always the case, so I think they were making a conscious effort to create this legal document that was secular.<sup>18</sup>

Stewart’s presence in the two interviews is indicative of his agreement with Beeman. He interrupts less often and his interjections are most often attributive rather than accusatory. Furthermore, Beeman’s argument and appraisal of the relationship between church and state Robert Bellah and his famous essay “Civil Religion in America.” Bellah’s argues that because the foundation of the United States emphasized a religious pluralism and the separation of church and state, the roles held by the church were adopted into the narrative of the nation. Through an

analysis of presidential speeches and founding documents, Bellah traces the invocation of Biblical archetypes, references to God, and national myths that pervade the political discourse of the United States. He determines that there is a national worship of the nation, which is evident in the political discourse of the country. Bellah borrows the term civil religion from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but readjusts and clarifies some of Rousseau's original concepts.

After his original paper was published in 1967, several scholars began debating the term. Bellah revisits and clarifies the idea of civil religion with the help of Phillip Hammond in his 1980 book *Varieties of Civil Religion*. Rousseau intended it to be the means through which the state and religion harmonize. However, Hammond argues that “there are shadings-between civil religion and ecclesiastical legitimizing or between civil religion and secular nationalism.”<sup>19</sup> It is not a binary position; rather, there exists a spectrum on governmental and religious harmony that ranges from total integration to total absentness. The relationship between civil religion and these television programs is best exemplified through *The Colbert Report*, which seeks to completely integrate religious and political rhetoric. Colbert states that “at the heart of this is America as the chosen country of God. It’s a conflation of the Statue of Liberty and the crucifix: American religiosity and American destiny are one and the same.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially, this is what Bellah means when he argues that “behind the civil religion at every point lie Biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Colbert is adopting techniques of Christian art to emphasize the civil religion of *The Colbert Report*, even telling his set designer

“one of your inspirations should be [DaVinci’s painting] *The Last Supper*.” All the architecture of that room points at Jesus’ head, the entire room is a halo, and he doesn’t have a halo.” And I said, “On the set, I’d like the lines of the set to converge on my head.” And so if you look at the design, it all does, it all points at my head. And even radial lines on the floor, and on my podium, and watermarks in the images behind me, and all the vertices, are right behind my head. So

there's a sort of sun-god burst quality about the set around me. And I love that. That's status.<sup>22</sup>

Using Christian design standards, Colbert establishes himself as a sort of prophet for the civil religion of the United States.

Typically, civil religion is a rather ambivalent theory to explain how the government gains the consent of the populace through the use of religious rhetoric and symbolism that has been integrated into secular public sector. However, Bellah argues “civil religion has not always been invoked in favor of worthy causes. On the domestic scene, an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack non-conformists and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds.”<sup>23</sup> Jones notes that after 9/11, by “placing American flag banners in the corner of each screen, Fox embraced the flag and its own patriotic hubris to establish an emotional connection with viewers by cheerleading the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror.’”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Colbert’s over-the-top patriotism is emphasized at the beginning of each episode. Each episode begins with a red, white and blue eagle soaring across the screen as Colbert holds out his hands, raising an eyebrow. Over the years words like “patriot”, “honorable”, “strong” and “originalist” surround him as he runs towards a flag. As he grabs the flag he jumps, and new words like “all-beef,” “star-spangled,” “self-evident,” and “word-hurdler” encompass the screen. Colbert falls through these words and he looks up at the camera before landing as a coliseum erects itself around him. The shot then cuts to the logo of “The Colbert Report” and the same red, white and blue eagle screeches directly at camera, which pans Colbert’s cheering studio audience. The use of colors, the eagle, the seal, the coliseum, and the large words all position Colbert as a parodic prophet of the civil religion of the United States.

Similarly, Stone and Parker echo many of Bellah and Hammond’s arguments through their criticisms of religion. If *The Colbert Report* is emblematic of the civil religion of the United

States, *South Park* reflects its religious pluralism by making fun of every accessible religion. Through their attacks on Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Scientology, and even Atheism, Stone and Parker ridiculed every traditional notion of religion. Lori Lipoma argues that Stone and Parker deconstruct religious dogmas to undermine the fundamentalist viewpoints of believers. In *South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, Satan plays a major role as he plans to take over the world. However, he is constantly undermined by his homosexual lover, Saddam Hussein. Lipoma argues that this abusive relationship creates a sympathetic Satan, which deconstructs the traditional Judeo-Christian lineage. She suggests that Stone and Parker's "deconstruction of the Christian heaven/hell binary suggests, since the reality which this narrative actually depicts is patently absurd, 'thoughtful' viewers [...] may want to consider reconstructing a more logical version of heaven, but in accepting Parker and Stone's challenge, viewers would also be acknowledging that any version of the 'truth' is ultimately individual, ripe for constant revision, and above all, perspectival."<sup>25</sup> By deconstructing the heaven and hell binary, Stone and Parker question the way people use religious meaning-making systems and examine the possibilities of a plurality.

The founding fathers recognized the plurality of meaning-making systems and thus thought it wise not to rest the foundations of a government on a single religion. Bellah argues that the United States government is based partially on republican principles of the common good and public participation, which are embedded in the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution crafts the liberal principles of self-interested motivation and economics. Bellah explains that the founding fathers wanted "to have [their] cake and eat it too, to retain the rhetoric and spirit of a republic in the political structure of a liberal constitution."<sup>26</sup> Bellah uses

this oppositional dynamic as the basis for the establishment of a “civil religion” in the United States.

This sentiment is echoed in the *South Park* episode “I’m A Little Bit Country.”<sup>27</sup> When Mr. Garrison makes the four boys give a presentation about what the founding fathers would think about the war in Iraq, Cartman forces to flashback to the early days of the revolution. By dropping himself in a pool at the same time as a Tivo which has recorded 50 hours of the History Channel, Cartman travels back to 1776 and travels to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. There, he listens to the debates surrounding the decision to declare war against Britain, which is remarkably similar to the contemporary debate about the war in Iraq. Finally, Benjamin Franklin enters and clarifies the situation, arguing that by allowing the citizens to protest the war “as a nation we can go to war with whomever we wished, but at the same time act like we didn’t want to. If we allow the people to protest what the government does, then the country will be forever blameless.” Stone and Parker’s observation about the ability of the United States to go to war and still appear unwilling to go to war is an astute insight, but what is even more interesting is their choice of John Adams’s words which follow Franklin’s and echo Bellah: “It’s like having your cake, and eating it, too.”<sup>28</sup> Stone and Parker’s presentation on the intentions of the founding fathers and the formative documents of the United States are exactly how Bellah perceives them, and re-enforces his concept of civil religion.

Because religious pluralism was a national priority initially, it was clear that religion could not be a meaning making system. As Beeman states in his interview with Stewart, “the founding fathers were drafting this doctrine at a time when the law and the common-law was becoming increasingly divorced from the Bible.”<sup>29</sup> This echoes Hammond’s argument that the

commitment to religious liberty (pluralism) makes impossible the use of the

rhetoric of any one religious tradition; so pressures are great to create a new rhetoric, that is, find a new religion. In the American case this new rhetoric is found in common law and develops in legal institutions. Procedure takes precedence over substantive precepts and standards, not because *procedure* are uniquely required in plural societies – *all* societies require procedures – but because the *rhetoric* of procedures is required to justify outcomes between parties whose erstwhile religions are different. The rhetoric of procedure thus becomes the new common or civil religion.<sup>30</sup>

When a society is based on plural religions, religions can no longer dictate the moral dilemmas of the citizens of different religious groups. Therefore, it is up to the law to determine the morals of the society, and the legal processes and procedures then become the primary focus of the civil religion. Hammond argues that complex legal systems forge complex civil religions, which is exactly how the legal analogy established function with regards to civil religion. Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker argue and debate through a legalistic framework, reflecting the complex civil religion of the United States.

Hammond derives his analysis from Emile Durkheim's concepts of collectivity and ritual. He determines that religion is broader than a variety of ecclesiastical denominations. In fact, it is the determining factor in the moral architecture and meaning-making of a society. In a pluralistic culture, religions "no longer enjoy a monopoly on articulating the ideology by which ultimate meaning is bestowed. Reduction in ecclesiastical power, the transformation of ritual into a 'leisure' time activity, and the 'privatizing' in general of theology into pastoral counseling or religious 'preference' all reflect this altered status. If churches become less religious in some ways, some other places in the social structure may become *more* religious."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the national civil religion instills citizens with the proper meaning making abilities and beliefs that bind the country together. If Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker function in a legal setting within the comedic courthouse, it becomes evident that their legal relationship is a representation of the civil religion of the contemporary United States. Hammond argues that "like all belief systems,

civil religions must be ‘carried’ by organizational ‘vehicles.’”<sup>32</sup> He proposes that the organizational vehicle of civil religion is the legal system established through the state. However, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are also acting as organizational vehicles for civil religion by participating in the legal system established through serious play.

By deconstructing contemporary religious meaning systems and understandings, *South Park* identifies the religious pluralism that is prevalent in the United States, and refuses to accept any one religion. *The Colbert Report* acts as a form of civil religion, arguing for the ecclesiastical bindings between religion and the state. *The Daily Show* then provides the last piece of the legal puzzle. Bellah states that a new set of archetypes and symbolic forms would help provide a civil religion of the world, which “could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than a state system based on the archetypes of a Judeo-Christian tradition, a civil religion would focus on global traditions and archetypes. Stewart’s interviews with Beeman and Barton are emblematic of his desire to see a shift away from the civil religion of the United States, and to a more global and universal civil religion.

The emphasis of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* on civil religion redeems these programs from the charges cynicism and political apathy levied on them by other scholars. Stephen Groening argues that “the real cultural villainy of *South Park* is not its depictions of swearing schoolchildren, but its espousal of an emergent cynicism that discourages viewers from asserting political agency.”<sup>34</sup> Baumgartner and Morris argue “by attempting to mock conservative commentators, Colbert may unintentionally be helping these commentators sway potential voters to the right.”<sup>35</sup> They argue that because of his parodic persona and subtextual messages, Colbert may promote the opposite political message than he had in mind.

Finally, according to Roderick Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius argue that Stewart “claims to advance the tenets of democracy during his nightly assignations while in truth leading the Children of Democracy astray. He plants in them false knowledge, a trendy awareness that turns them into bawdy villains and wastrels.”<sup>36</sup> Hart and Hartelius argue that *The Daily Show* is cynical. However, all of these arguments are mistaken because they refuse to examine the programs in context with each other. This is precisely the benefit of the framework of serious play.

Through the comedic courthouse and trial model of discourse, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* do not promote cynicism and political apathy; rather, they promote the unity of a community bound together by civil religion. Although this thesis is based on a strictly textual analysis of the three programs, recent politically motivated acts on the part of their viewers indicate the political engagement of their audience. Stewart and Colbert’s Rally to Restore Fear and/or Sanity gathered over two hundred thousand people in the National Mall to stand in protest of the contemporary political dialogue.<sup>37</sup> This is not an act of an audience that is politically disenfranchised by the media text they are watching. When Comedy Central censored Stone and Parker from depicting Muhammad, they constructed a strong argument for the importance of free speech. Their message was not overlooked, and inspired Seattle cartoonist Molly Norris to start “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” as an act of solidarity with Stone and Parker.<sup>38</sup> These are not events conducted by audience members who have been driven to political apathy because of cynicism. These are acts conducted by audience members who are politically engaged and inspired by the civil religion promoted by the text of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. By examining the programs in relation to each other, through the

framework of serious play, it becomes apparent that rather than creating apathy and cynicism they promote a civil religion of not only the United States, but also of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, no. 1 (1967), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Mark I Pinsky *The Gospel According to The Simpsons: The Spiritual Life of the World's Most Animated Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Go God Go," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, November 1, 2006, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e12-go-god-go>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Go God Go XII," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, November 7, 2006, <http://southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e13-go-god-go-xii>.

<sup>7</sup> Pinsky, 169.

<sup>8</sup> "Murder Plot Against Danish Cartoonist," *jp.dk*, last modified February 12, 2008, accessed June 29, 2011, <http://jp.dk/uknews/article1263133.ece>.

<sup>9</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Cartoon Wars Part I," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, April 5, 2006, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e03-cartoon-wars-part-i>.

<sup>10</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "Cartoon Wars Part 2," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:27, April 12, 2006, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10ep04-cartoon-wars-part-ii>.

<sup>11</sup> David R. Keopself, "They Satirized My Prophet ... Those Bastards! *South Park* and Blasphemy," in *South Park and Philosophy: You Know, I Learned Something Today*, ed. Robert Arp (Chelsea, MI: Blackwell Publishing, LTD., 2007.), 139

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Colbert, "Yahweh or No Way – Thor and Apocalypse Billboard," *The Colbert Report*, Video-Television, 7:10, May 10, 2011, <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/385915/may-10-2011/yahweh-or-no-way---thor-and-apocalypse-billboard>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Jon Stewart, "David Barton Pt. 1," *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 4:11, May 4, 2011, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-may-4-2011/david-barton-pt--1>.

<sup>16</sup> Jon Stewart, "David Barton Extended Interview Pt. 3," *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, 9:43, May 4, 2011, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-may-4-2011/exclusive---david-barton-extended-interview-pt--3>.

<sup>17</sup> Jon Stewart, "Richard Beeman Extended Interview Pt. 1," *The Daily Show*, Video-Television, May 18, 2011, <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-may-18-2011/exclusive---richard-beeman-extended-interview-pt--1>.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. 1980), 44.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Daly, "Stephen Colbert: The Second Most Powerful Idiot in America," *The Telegraph*, last modified May 18, 2008, accessed June 2, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3673509/Stephen-Colbert-the-second-most-powerful-idiot-in-America.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," 18.

<sup>22</sup> Nathan Rabin, "Interview with Stephen Colbert," *The AV Club (The Onion)*, last modified January 25, 2006, accessed April 14, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/stephen-colbert,13970/>.

<sup>23</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," 14.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey P. Jones, *Entertaining Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 59.

<sup>25</sup> Lori Lipoma, "Deconstructing the Devil: Satan Comedy in Mark Twain's *Letters From Earth*, and Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *South Park*," *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 15 (2007), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Bellah and Hammond, *Varieties*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Matt Stone and Trey Parker, "I'm a Little Bit Country," *South Park*, Video-Television, 21:26, April 9, 2003, <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s07e01-im-a-little-bit-country>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Jon Stewart, "Richard Beeman."

<sup>30</sup> Bellah and Hammond, *Varieties*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 145-146

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>33</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," 16.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Groening, "Cynicism and Other Post-Ideological Half Measures in *South Park*," in *Taking South Park Seriously*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2008), 125.

<sup>35</sup> Jody C. Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "One 'Nation' Under Stephen? The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth," *The Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, no. 4 (2008): 635, accessed April 14, 2011, DOI: 10.1080/08838150802437487.

<sup>36</sup> Roderick P. Hart and E. Johanna Hartelius, "The Political Sins of Jon Stewart," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 24, no. 3 (2007), 263. Accessed June 3, 2011. doi: 10.1080/07393180701520991.

<sup>37</sup> Brian Montopoli, "Jon Stewart Rally Attracts Estimated 215,000," *CBS.com*, last modified October 30, 2010, accessed June 2, 2011, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-20021284-503544.html](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20021284-503544.html)

<sup>38</sup> Jamie Griswold, "Seattle Cartoonist Launches 'Everybody Draw Muhammad Day,'" *Mynorthwest.com*, last modified April 23, 2010, accessed June 2, 2011, <http://mynorthwest.com/?nid=11&sid=313170>.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The collective examination of *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* has revealed substantial evidence that relates the three programs. Through serious play, I have demonstrated that these three television series dynamically engage each other, along with contemporary cultural issues in a variety of ways. Based on Freud's concepts of the id, ego and super-ego, I argued that the three programs are related through comedic theories. Together, they function as various aspects of Freud's triadic joke structure, Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and Bergson's theory of comedic rigidity. I proposed that the comedic relationship between the programs establishes a structure that is best visualized as a courthouse where Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker interrogate and engage contemporary cultural issues regarding media, politics. By prosecuting, defending and analyzing, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* conduct vigorous debates about contemporary issues. However, their roles in this legal system are not static. The playful nature of their relationship lies in their mobile positions in the legal analogy. Their mutability provides a dynamic engagement with the issue at hand. When the viewer is unaware of what role the specific show will play, it makes the serious play all the more engaging. The debates that take place in the comedic courthouse do not foster cynicism and political apathy. Instead, they are examples textual engagements with contemporary politics through humor. Furthermore, the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" and "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day" are examples of how viewers negotiate the messages that lie within them and engage in subsequent political action.

The relationships established between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* reflect the overarching framework of serious play. I contend that the three programs relate

because they engage serious topics in a playful manner. By incorporating disparate televisual formats, like the news show and late-night talk show, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* craft playful versions of contemporary mediated discourse. *South Park* engages in the same playful conversation through Stone and Parker's quick animation process. Unlike other animated programs, *South Park* can address the same issues as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in a timely manner. The timing and comedic methods that link the three programs are emblematic of how serious play functions. Each program interrogates serious discourse through comedy. Furthermore, the programs use comedy as a tool to promote critical thinking of alternative media discourse.

The serious play that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* participate in has numerous implications for media. My primary goal was to provide evidence against the promotion of cynicism and political apathy that other scholars have levied against the three programs. Through the collective framework of serious play, it becomes evident that these television series are not cynical and apathetic. In fact, they promote a civil religion. Serious play also demonstrates that the destruction of the binary between entertainment and information is not as corrosive to society as many scholars have found. While discussing *The Daily Show*, Geoffrey Baym notes that "it is possible to be entertaining in the sense of both amusement and serious thought, and that each one may have the ability to enhance the other."<sup>1</sup> Serious play is an extension of this belief. The playful manner that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* interrogate serious topics with enhances the critical of the programs. Furthermore, serious play also provides additional evidence that television programs should be studied in relation with surrounding content as well as individually. If scholars take Newcomb and Hirsch's concept of television as a cultural forum to heart, it becomes apparent that programs can interact and create

dialogue. The discourse between programs must be analyzed under new and evolving frameworks and terminology.

The framework of serious play has helped expose the ways that discourse is produced by *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park*. The concept of a legal system that functions within a comedic courthouse is an apt visualization for the ways that these three programs interact. However, the relationship changes when one of the programs is taken out of consideration. Further research could be conducted regarding the textual messages and effects when analyzing two of the three programs. Although these three programs no longer air in sequence, it would be interesting to see how the programs that intersect these three fit into the legal analogy established in this paper. In 2010, a new satirical animated program, *Ugly Americans*, aired directly after new episodes of *South Park* and before *The Daily Show*. This new program may also function within the legal system established in this paper. Further analysis of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* paired in contrast with other late night talk show programs like *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, or *Conan* may provide insight into the comedic processes and critical discourse provided by these programs. Since *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* developed in the tradition of late night talk shows, it would prove interesting to see if there are previous examples of serious play in late-night television from previous eras. For instance, does the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* interact dynamically with other late programming of its era? Do the tabloids of yellow journalism function dynamically with other earlier media? The relationship between Stewart and other news networks was touched on during this thesis, but more investigation needs to examine the relationship between them in order to establish the true nature of their relationship. Does Stewart play while his opponent wallows in seriousness? Other animated television shows may

also provide useful targets for analysis under serious play. Fox's Sunday night line-up consists of the animated programs: *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *The Cleveland Show*. Serious play may aid in the analysis of these programs, providing useful information about the nature of prime-time animated comedy in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Serious play is not the only framework used to construct discourse among contemporary television programs. Further research must be done to fully understand how television programs construct dialogue in regards to other television programs. The relationship between news programs would prove particularly beneficial in understanding how contemporary journalists and news anchors construct the information that is absorbed by the culture. New frameworks must also be utilized to understand the ways that new media products interact with each other. Serious play may prove useful in analyzing the dialogue constructed between websites with similar content, like *The Onion* and *Collegehumor*. However, it would first need to be adapted for the new medium.

I have constructed the framework of serious play so that the relationships between *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* may be better understood. Their common comedic relationships proved to be the base of their cultural criticisms of media, politics and religion could be examined collectively. I illustrated the relationship between the critical faculties of the three programs through the visualization of a courthouse of comedy where the three programs acted as a legal system while interrogating cultural phenomena. The complexity of the legal system constructed by Stewart, Colbert, Stone and Parker proved useful when debating the relevance of cynicism and political apathy in these programs. When examined as a whole, through serious play, it becomes apparent that *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are not cynical and apathetic. Rather, they act as comedic arbiters of information.

They encourage a common civil religion through which citizens can better understand their government and promote political action in their audience. *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* all relate because they play seriously, as evidenced through their shared comedic and critical techniques.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication* 22 (2005), 274. Accessed April 14, 2011. doi: 10.1080/10584600591006492.

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