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The Innocence of Children: Effects of Vulgarity in South Park

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Emily Ravenwood, "The Innocence of Children: Effects of Vulgarity in *South Park*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss2/5>

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Abstract: Emily Ravenwood's article, "The Innocence of Children: Effects of Vulgarity in *South Park*," examines the way in which the appropriation of low culture into high art can operate to simultaneously raise and lower the cultural capital of the art in question. Usually, in definitions of high and low art vulgarity is understood as a negative representation. This dismissal is rooted in the linguistic and political relationship between vulgarity and perceived "lower class" realities. In the context of artistic representation, however, vulgarity can be a powerful weapon to enforce attention and awareness of foreign realities in a middle class audience. Authors of works deemed high art, such as Rabelais and Swift, freely use it so. A current example, which is in transition, or perhaps in suspension between high and low, is the television cartoon series *South Park*. The series provides for an excellent opportunity to examine the particular workings of vulgarity and to re-examine definitions of high and low art. The connection between the two categories and forms of artistic expression lies in the desire of those who define popularity to partake of the unpopular. *South Park* takes advantage of this connection. In the final analysis, however, *South Park* may have defeated its own aspirations to high art by appealing too much to the source of its vulgar and popular images, namely children.

Emily RAVENWOOD

The Innocence of Children: Effects of Vulgarity in *South Park*

One of the most interesting terms deployed in conjunction with art as a cultural phenomenon is "vulgar." Why, for instance is J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* labeled vulgar and banned on the one hand, while being lauded and taught as a classic on the other (see Speer, <http://www.fortunecity.com/victorian/abbey/448/censorship.html>)? Why does William Frost, defending the poetry of Jonathan Swift, feel called upon to specifically address the "judgments [of Samuel Johnson], for example that the pastoral mode is 'easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting,' judgments which may partake of what our age is likely to label 'the affective fallacy'" (684), when Frost's article deals with the criticisms of F.R. Leavis, not Johnson? Why does this term crop up at all in such instances: when we start to delineate what is high art, worthy of acclaim, and what is low art, worthy of dismissal? Robert Mapplethorpe, for example, is labeled as vulgar by those who wish to exclude his subject matter from the realm of "real" art. His defenders, on the other hand, reject the term vulgar and insist that he is, rather, brutally honest and clear-sighted. A review of Ronald Collins and David Skover's *The Death of Discourse* points up such a disagreement. "Collins and Skover argue that a steady diet of degrading, trivial, vulgar, demeaning, ugly, stupid, and vile speech tends to inscribe the very same qualities in viewers and listeners. ... One response to Collins and Skover is to argue that junk speech is not as vile, stupid, or trivial as they contend. Cass Sunstein comes close to taking this position when he asserts that 'Mapplethorpe's work is part of democratic deliberation'" (Schlag <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0017-811X(199605)109%3A7%3C1801%3ATCBYCJ%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6 >). In the following article, I will examine why defenders of certain artists and art forms reject the term vulgar so consistently, and whether they are wise to do so.

Any comparison of the categories "high" and "low" reveals a great confusion of boundaries. How shall we define these terms? Does high equal rarefied? Does low equal popular? If so, then we must consign the likes of Shakespeare, Dickens, or the Brontë sisters to the realm of low art. But if popularity has no bearing on the high/low distinction, where have we come by the myth of the misunderstood genius that has raised Melville to such great heights in the canon? Clearly there is some artistic cachet attached to unpopularity. So, on the one hand we have art which is high because of its popularity, that is, its cogency to the concerns of its day, and on the other hand art which is also high because the audience of its day apparently failed to find it cogent. What, then, is the thing called popularity? I wish to argue that *vulgarity* defines this curiously contradictory element of the relation between high and low. For the sake of argument, let us employ the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of vulgar as "of or associated with the great masses of people as distinguished from the educated or cultivated classes; common ... Spoken by, or expressed in language spoken by, the common people; vernacular ... Deficient in taste, delicacy, or refinement ... Ill-bred; boorish; crude ... Obscene or indecent; offensive; coarse or bawdy" (1438). At first sight, the definition itself explains why artists and their defenders wish to avoid this term. Art, to many, is cultivated and refined by nature, and therefore separate from the great masses. As Stuart Hall says, of the above mentioned and related term, popular, "the term 'popular' has very complex relations to the term 'class.' We know this, but are often at pains to forget it. We speak of particular forms of working-class culture; but we use the more inclusive term 'popular culture' to refer to the general field of inquiry" (1994, 465). Vulgarity too has distinct class overtones. Even those who acknowledge the use of shock-value in bringing an audience to appreciate a new thought or emotion, probably would not wish to align themselves with the great masses of the common people who are not cultivated, refined and upper-class. In the US, for example, in the 1950s to most recent times, artists who did such have often been accused of being "commie-pinko" propagandists. Leaving aside, once again, the question of political views in the US and the place of academics and artists in capitalist versus socialist agendas, I will focus on the implications of vulgarity for those artists who do seek to make use of the indecent and offensive part of its definition.

One implication that immediately leaps to mind is that those artists -- although they may not wish to align themselves with the class interests of the masses -- nevertheless make use of the conventions

of the common people. In many cases, they do so with the avowed purpose of mocking or undermining what they see as pretensions to respectability. Consider, for instance, the more offensive, coarse, and bawdy variety of rap music. Rap musicians wish to point out, one way or another, a facet of reality which many middle-class people, both Black and White, do not wish to acknowledge. Mikhail Bakhtin, similar to the approach of Hall later, is well aware of class and its implications for and in art, states the assumption underlying this activity succinctly: "The unity, or more precisely this single-imaged quality, of ennobled language is not sufficient unto itself: it is polemical and abstract. At its heart lies a certain *pose* of respectability, which it consistently assumes in all situations, vis-à-vis low reality. But this respectable pose, for all its unity and self-consistency, is purchased at the price of polemical abstraction and is therefore inert and moribund" (385). Bakhtin defines ennobled language in contrast to "vulgar, nonliterary discourse" which deals far more concretely with specific, practical contexts. Vulgarity, then, in today's art, may often seek to remind the audience of a concrete, contentious reality that high art must, necessarily, make abstract in order to achieve striking artistic unity. And today, a postmodern view of reality as a multiple, contingent, and ambiguous category is probably a useful thing to keep in mind. The reality that vulgarity seeks to reinforce will still constantly slip beyond the scope of the artist in question. Here, I would like to focus on that action.

Some artists, of course, take this function further than others. Clearly, Bakhtin focuses on Rabelais, for instance, precisely because Rabelais's work employs vulgar parody. Bakhtin contends that parody functions to draw the audience beyond the obvious by its very structure: "there is a continual passing beyond the boundaries of the given, sealed off verbal whole (one cannot understand parody without reference to the parodied material, that is, without exceeding the boundaries of the given context)" (237). Necessarily, then, parody puts the reader/audience in the position of contemplating more than the appearance that is immediately present and available. The reader/audience does not even need to be consciously aware of this structural function for it to have such an effect. Theoretically, then, parody is the form truest to the post-modern view of reality. In the case of Rabelais, by combining parody with vulgarity, Rabelais achieves an even more in-depth critique of the abstractions implicit in the ennobled word. In fact, in any word at all, as Bakhtin suggests: "In Rabelais ... parodic attitude toward almost all forms of ideological discourse -- philosophical, moral, scholarly, rhetorical, poetic and in particular the pathos-charged forms of discourse (in Rabelais, pathos almost always is equivalent to lie) -- was intensified to the point where it became a parody of the very act of conceptualizing anything in language" (309). Eventually, even the necessary abstractions of basic linguistic forms come under attack. Post-structuralist critics would, no doubt, approve of such parody. To achieve the desired effect, Rabelais employs some extremely crude imagery; one passage in particular leaps to mind, involving one of his characters urinating on some priests as they expound. Rabelais, in Bakhtin's estimation, succeeds in using parodic vulgarity to point out realities that are in some degree disguised even by attempts at communication: "Truth is restored by reducing the lie to an absurdity, but truth itself does not seek words; she is afraid to entangle herself in the word, to soil herself in verbal pathos" (309).

Not all artists, of course, carry this endeavor to the same extent as Rabelais, nor in the same fashion. Bakhtin asserts that "the extraordinary force of laughter in Rabelais, its radicalism, is explained predominantly by its deep-rooted folkloric base, by its link with the elements of the ancient complex -- with death, the birth of new life, fertility and growth" (237). I suspect that Bakhtin would consider today many of our current artists out of balance. Many deal with death and fertility, but few with growth. Birth is more commonly dealt with in terms of unwanted pregnancy, and sexuality is frequently divorced from reproduction altogether. Not all these developments are unilaterally negative; to the contrary, many are quite necessary if the art in question is to depict any of the reality we have created today. But we must acknowledge that the laughter invoked by current artists of vulgarity draws its power from slightly different sources than Bakhtin attributes to Rabelais. In addition, there are other aspects of the "link" with folk tradition which critics must examine. The dynamic of cultural traditions abstracted from their contexts takes part, as Hall notes, in "the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes

without even a murmur. It is rooted in popular experience and available for expropriation at one and the same time" (1993, 26). The double exchange of that rooting and expropriation can provide some rather curious art. Televised media, especially, have strong connections to power and capital; ratings drive the appearance and continued airing of one show over another. The functions of this particular facet of popularity contribute to an interesting juncture between artistic and commercial agendas. By combining Hall's and Bakhtin's critical standpoints we can acquire good leverage to examine this juncture.

One current artistic creation that makes extensive use of vulgar parody somewhat similar to Rabelais', and has, apparently by that token, won record-breaking ratings for its network is the television show *South Park*. This show targets, in both senses of the word, the young, privileged, white male audience. It abounds in parody; the four children who are focal characters swear constantly and inventively, in parody of the way any eight-year-old will take delight in using "forbidden" words. My own favorite is "You vas deferens." Their school teacher is an excellent parody of the ineffectual teacher, a failure who teaches because he would be unable to perform in another profession. The cook at their school parodies the "earthy" Black man, and the mayor parodies the "career woman" who has succeeded more by manipulation than by skill. Less general, more arcane parodies in the show refer largely to popular figures in the entertainment industry and specific movies, TV shows, and popular songs. So much so that some articles about the show, such as Dave Wild's piece in *Rolling Stone* 780, have resorted to offering guides to these referents. All of these parodies are extreme, sufficiently so that they amount to parodies of stereotypes. They are also remarkably vulgar. One of the children, for instance, Stan, vomits as a display of affection (No. 111, "Tom's Rhinoplasty"). Cook is obsessed with "making sweet love" to *something* nearly every episode. On one memorable occasion, he helps the children induce a pig to mate with an elephant in order to breed pet-sized elephants. His comment, upon witnessing their success, is: "Now I know how all those white women felt" (No. 105, "A Pig Makes Love to an Elephant"). Mr. Garrison, the teacher, comes under fire in the same episode, as well: when the pig gives birth, the progeny bore a remarkable resemblance to him.

Early articles about the show, published just before its release, make explicit notice of the gross-me-out factor. Joanne Ostrow, for instance, characterizes the show as an "offensive ... preposterous ... crude ... raucous ... raunchy" show that "happens to be very funny" (E01). Rick Marin gave a somewhat less cheery advance notice of the show in which terms like "edgy," "demented," "twisted," and "dark" were prominent (69). He, too, noted the crudity and raunchy humor of the show. Later articles, with more material to draw on, point out that the transgressive humor in the show constitutes its attraction, and add that this transgressiveness carries a political message of opposition to bigotry and hypocrisy (Stenz <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/01.22.98/southpark-9803.html>). Both Ostrow and Marin, though, pointed out the fact that the network intended the show as adult-only viewing, Marin emphasizing the late time-slot intended to put the show after bedtime for minors. Comedy Central has stuck by this claim, even to the point of refusing to contract *South Park* toys (see Baddenhoop). The "not for kids" argument is an ironically entertaining parallel of the view that high art is something with a limited appeal, something that is for mature tastes. Certainly, part of the laughter *South Park* invokes is mixed with disgust. Interestingly, critics of the show do not generally go beyond this. But, like Rabelais' wildly overblown tales of digestion, defecation, and copulation, the very vulgarity critics point to in order to denounce the show, especially in relation to young viewers, serves a purpose. Because it is so overwhelming, those few characters who are not parodies stand out in high relief. The issues those characters represent are assured of the audience's sympathies because there is, literally, nowhere else for those sympathies to alight. Some examples of this dynamic can be found in the characters of Big Gay Al and Ms. Owens.

Big Gay Al and Ms. Owens appear in separate episodes. Big Gay Al (Fairy at Large) is the character who takes in the boy Stan's dog, Sparky, after the dog comes out and discovers that his owner is appalled at having a gay dog. Big Gay Al and Big Gay Al's Big Gay Animal Sanctuary are certainly satires; although Al does not lisp, he does lilt, and his animals make up for his lack of outward foppishness with a vengeance (No. 104, "Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride"). He is, however, the only character in that episode to display a vestige of a clue. When Stan finds Sparky happily discoing and suggests that he come home with Stan so that they can "cure" him, Al takes it upon himself to lead

Stan on an eye-opening tour of the reasons why his dog has chosen the path he has. This little riverboat tour through dioramas of homosexuality in nature, oppression by the religious right and, finally, a valley full of gay men cheerily singing about how delighted they are to be gay, is, admittedly, more than a bit nauseating in its simple-minded representations. But I would suggest that it is not homosexuality that is mocked with this passage but rather Stan's lack of perception that needs a complex world reduced to paper cut-outs and words of one syllable in order to comprehend it. Most tellingly, Big Gay Al does not remain in South Park to become a stock parody; with his purpose achieved, and his animals restored to their now-sensitive owners, he packs himself into his suitcase and vanishes over the mountains. This very restraint of deployment makes his character far more powerful than the overblown central characters.

Although it may seem an odd comparison at first glance, this pattern is reminiscent of the way both Swift and Pope position the narrators of their more scatological works. The narrator of Swift's *Travels*, in particular, gains what credibility he has through proximity to the more exaggerated parodies surrounding him. I would suggest that the writers of *South Park* participate in this particular tradition, consciously or subconsciously. The pattern itself, however, seems very deliberate, and serves to further blur the categorization of this show as low art. The same pattern occurs with Ms. Owens, the substitute teacher. She, in even greater contrast to most of the characters, is nearly a real person. She is dedicated to the profession of teaching, with only a little syrupy exaggeration, and is not too put out by the boys' adoration or the vociferous hatred of Stan's romantic interest, Wendy. When Chef bursts into the classroom to serenade her in an effort to secure a dinner date she largely ignores him, finally accepting in order to get him out and let her "get on with [her] job" (No. 11, "Tom's Rhinoplasty"). We find out one reason for this indifference, when the boys ask if Chef succeeded in making sweet love with her; he tells them that she is lesbian. Of course, the boys have no idea what he means, which leads to some entertaining efforts on their part to become lesbians themselves -- licking carpets, listening to marathon sessions of the Indigo Girls, and the like. Ms. Owens deals calmly and patiently with everything from teaching remedial spelling to explaining to Stan why she is not interested. Meanwhile, however, Wendy, who also does not understand that Ms. Owens would have no interest in Stan even if he was not in third grade, goes completely around the bend and hires some Middle-Eastern goons to grab Ms. Owens for spurious "crimes against the state," load her into a rocket and shoot her into the sun. Wendy's last line of the episode, as her eyes become large and ringed, is "I warned her. Don't f(bleep)k with Wendy Testaburger!" completely oblivious to the fact that Ms. Owens never did (No. 111, "Tom's Rhinoplasty"). The audience's sympathies are drawn firmly to the martyred and understated Ms. Owens, not the obsessive and extreme Wendy. The moral of the story? Heterosexuals are psychotic.

This sort of effect can also be achieved without an explicit protagonist. The 1997 Thanksgiving episode, for instance, sets forth Kenny's family as genuine characters who draw audience sympathy, despite the fact that they are far from uniformly admirable. Kenny's father is known as the town drunkard, and is clearly portrayed as a ne'er-do-well complete with scruffy clothing and shabby baseball cap. The extremes of satire in this episode appear toward the end. In the interests of riveting public attention, the tactless mayor decides that the results of the season's charitable food drive will be distributed as a public event. Her starting call to the gathered townspeople on this occasion is "OK people, lets give food to the poor!" The food has been placed in a large tumbling machine. Kenny, as the representative of the poorest family in town, is closed in with the cans of food. Whatever he manages to secure in the process of tumbling will go to his family. The message of desperation that drives this display of humiliating spectacle is reinforced by a clip of Kenny's mother, appropriately drawn, haggard and bony, calling to her son to try and grab as much food as possible. The satire comes full circle when Kenny emerges from the tumbler having secured one can of beans (No. 109, "Starvin' Marvin"). The extremity of this satire both reinforces and defuses audience reaction. On the one hand, the exaggeration does have very clear connections to the condescension and hypocrisy of many such food drives, which assuage the guilt of the better off while doing next to nothing to remedy the actual conditions of the destitute. On the other, the larger than life burlesque quality of the mockery distances that realization and allows the audience to pass it off as just a joke.

Shortly after, Kenny is killed, as usual, this time by marauding mutant killer turkeys let loose by the mad geneticist down the road. This is followed by a scene of his family's Thanksgiving dinner. His

father says grace over the solitary can of beans, thanking God for bringing them at least that much food, despite the fact that God apparently felt it necessary to remove Kenny from the family's bosom. This scene is without exaggeration, beyond that of the circumstances surrounding Kenny's death. In comparison to the burlesque of the food give-away it is starkly underplayed. Again, though, the scene ends in a counter-influence that defuses the far from comic undertones. At the end of grace, Kenny's mother asks if they have a can-opener. There is a pause while the family, and the audience, take in the fact that they do not, and the father concludes his Thanksgiving prayers to God with "God damn it" (No. 109, "Starvin' Marvin"). Again, the action retreats from the unalloyed moral, again it offers the audience distance from the genuine plight of the family's poverty. It is worth noting that the show does not play for personal sympathy on this family's behalf. No attempt is made to conceal the fact that the father's alcoholism is largely to blame. Neither is any attempt made to conceal the utter lack of help forthcoming from the rest of the town. The audience is left suspended in vague discomfort, unable to draw a black and white moral; this function contributes greatly to the effectiveness of this episode's effort to align general sympathy and identification with Kenny's family.

Even this degree of identification, however, is not necessary to the show's more subversive intent. One episode, focusing on guns, succeeds in mocking both conservative and liberal views without providing any character that the audience can clearly identify with. This episode revolves around a hunting trip that Stan and the other boys take with Stan's uncle Jimbo and his uncle's mechanically re-built veteran friend, Ned. Cartman, quite in character, professes delight over the array of firepower on the trip but cannot handle any of it with anything resembling competence. Kyle is interested but not an especially good shot. Stan, however, cannot bring himself to shoot the animals, despite Kyle and Cartman's urging and his uncle's expectations. Consequently, his uncle abandons him in favor of Kenny who is a phenomenal sharp shooter and cheerfully targets anything, including fish. Of course, Stan's uncle shoots anything that moves, including endangered and protected species; each of the latter kills is prefaced with a shout of "It's coming right for us!" so as to justify the shooting as self protection (No. 103, "Volcano"). Needless to say, none of the animals in question are charging the party. The first thing that is ridiculed, then, is the gun-toting macho that has to prove himself by killing. The contempt of Stan's uncle when Stan refuses to shoot a rabbit is sufficient exaggeration, however, to keep conservatives watching the show and waiting for the next move. After all, they would never act in such an overblown fashion (pun intended).

The next move involves a monster reputed to live on the mountain, called Scuzzlebutt. This monster, at first merely a figment of Cartman's imagination, is typically ridiculous, but turns out not only to exist but to be altruistic. When the mountain erupts and the hunting party is trapped on the wrong side of the channel dug by the townspeople to divert the lava away from South Park, Scuzzlebutt ferries the whole lot to safety in one of the baskets he has woven (No. 103, "Volcano"). His encounter with the townspeople, subsequent to saving the hunting party, is terribly stereotypical. At first everyone runs in fear, but Scuzzlebutt defuses hostility with the universal language of friendship by presenting the mayor with a flower. The mayor begins a speech about how the town must accept and value the friendship of the poor misunderstood creature who wants only to live in peace with his neighbors. In the midst of this speech, however, Stan violently interrupts by blowing Scuzzlebutt's brains out. When the mayor and his uncle remonstrate with him, he protests that he thought his uncle wanted him to kill things, that he only wanted his uncle's approval, like Kenny had. This leads to some hemming and hawing, and finally the adults tell Stan that it is all right to shoot some things and not all right to shoot others. This sounds fairly reasonable until one recalls that some of the things it was all right to kill were a rabbit and a bear, both minding their own business.

Considering this, it is hard to dispute with Stan's conclusion: "Adults are weird" (No. 103, "Volcano"). This section of the show turns its mockery on the liberal notion that while people have a right to their own opinions and own guns, we have to draw a line somewhere. Stan's confusion highlights the question of where, exactly, that line is getting drawn. His incomprehension indicates a distinct lack of consistency in the rules involved in drawing the line. In Bakhtinian terms, Stan is the fool of this episode: "opposed to greedy falsehood and hypocrisy we have the fool's unselfish simplicity and his healthy failure to understand" (162). This is not, of course, to say that Stan always occupies this role or that the audience necessarily identifies with him. As Bakhtin points out, we frequently do not. But in this instance, the audience sees the weakness of both sides of the guns-and-

violence debate through Stan's childishly literal interpretation of hypocritically contradictory behavior models. Melinda Hsu also notes this consistent trend in *South Park*, that "the slyly self-deprecating and the outrageously un-p.c. humor in South Park acknowledges but also deconstructs homophobia, class bigotry, racism, etc." (see Hsu).

Against this backdrop of vulgarity, characters who are at all genuine stand out very strongly. Although I hesitate to make the claim of artistic deliberation on the part of the writers that Bakhtin makes for Rabelais, the contrast between the brutal parodies and the genuine sympathetic portrayals is still very powerful. Clearly, the authors of the show, Trey Parker and Matt Stone have some grasp of the dynamic in question. Parker is quoted in *Rolling Stone*, pointing out that "there's this whole thing out there about how kids are so innocent and pure. That's bullshit, man. Kids are malicious little fuckers. They totally jump on any bandwagon and rip on the weak guy at any chance. They say whatever bad word they can think of" (qtd. in Wild 36). By portraying the *South Park* kids as such extremely "malicious little fuckers" while at the same time giving them a bit more in the way of awareness and observance than the adults, Parker and Stone set up the other, adult, characters for the kind of extreme parodies noted above. The children also serve as the frequent pivot point for more sympathetic portrayals. Stone is later quoted, regarding the Big Gay Al episode, noting that "if you had what we did on any other show, you would have gay groups jumping down your throat, but we did it in such a way that it also had amazing heart" (qtd. in Wild 36). We might characterize the quality in question less as "heart" then as a calculated lessening of the usually overblown stereotyping common to the core characters. Deliberately or not, the writers of *South Park* push their audience to acknowledge the false abstraction of all lesser varieties of the stereotypes they parody, as well as these extreme versions. The laughter, in this case, is something of a blind, as well as a means of deflating pretentious poses, in that while the audience laughs at the characters' naïve or disgusting antics, they may not notice the direction their sympathies are channeled in.

This show is not directed toward the common people, in the sense of the great masses. Both the writers and the critics know very well the value of being outsiders and of participating in the high art myth of the misunderstood genius. When Bill Carter characterizes the show as "hilarious, original and the most irreverent half-hour on television" (D11), one suspects that the last adjective in the string strongly preconditions the first two. Eric Henry, a member of Logotel, the company licensed to make *South Park* T-shirts, says bluntly, "once the T-shirts hit the Wal-Mart in Des Moines, we're finished" (qtd. in Munk, 66). *Standard Times* author(s) comment that Parker and Stone have drawn strong criticism without suffering, professionally, in the least (see Anonymous). All of these people recognize, though probably not in critical terms, the irony of the show's position. The show has drawn on common issues and lives, expropriated them in the fashion Stuart Hall traces out, to give itself the edge of the hip and cool among the privileged and moneyed members of North American culture. But if the show itself ever becomes common, returns to its roots as it were, all its outsider value will evaporate. And so will its concomitant rating value. Interestingly enough, the writers themselves seem to aim for a more artistic than monetary goal. Stone is quoted in *Rolling Stone*, stating "we would view success as finally getting to the point where we get canceled because no one gets it" (qtd. in Wild 61). He obviously understands the connection between popularity and class, the agreement between the incomprehensible, the avant-garde, and high art. And although artistic aims and commercial aims are allegedly opposed, both agendas for this show rely on the same dynamic of the popular outsider.

The progression of this phenomenon is stunningly ironic in itself. Expropriation of the common into a divorced context, especially one which violates respectable standards, gives the endeavor the outsider's glamour. This attracts would-be outsiders, largely privileged teens and young adults, in droves, making the said endeavor immensely popular and profitable. But as this popular reaction continues, the show is drawn back inside mass culture, stripping it of "artistic" merit and eventually, if the process goes on long enough, of its popularity as well, precisely because of its popularity with what would then be the stodgy grown-ups. Note that this path from high art to low revolves around the yearning of privileged persons to partake, themselves, in the lonely genius myth; those who define popularity desire strongly the glamour of unpopularity. Vulgarity, that which transgresses their own class mores, marks the object of their desire. This is what defines the contradiction of popularity in high and low art I propose in my introduction. In light of this, then, it is entertaining that the show

has *become* popular with an astoundingly broad cross-section of the common people, the great masses and children. Articles appearing in November 1997, shortly after the show debuted, note that it has achieved a strong following, not merely among the twenty-somethings it was originally directed at, but also among a far younger audience. For example, Nina Munk opens her review with the statement, "if you don't know who Kenny is, well, then you're probably over 35" (66). Carter is more precise. Although the audience is "heaviest on college campuses and ... the median age of *South Park* viewers [is] 25.... *South Park* has also growing appeal among teen-agers and pre-teens, a fact that the Comedy Central executives seem less eager to acknowledge" (D11).

Given the frequent labeling of the show as "juvenile" and "sophomoric" this should, perhaps, come as less of a surprise than it appears to have been. On the other hand, Chris Norris' article on *South Park*, appearing in *Spin*, claims bluntly that the show's main audience is "snickering white pubescents" (66). Norris criticizes the pat and cliché nature of *South Park*'s satire, feeling that both *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* "undertake a broader critique of suburbia, mass media, family life, and beer-swilling fat guys than does *South Park. South Park*'s more about puking and aliens and stuff" (68). Leaving aside whether or not one agrees with that, Norris also brings up a cogent counter-point: "the central irony is that, for all its absurdity, *South Park* is probably truer to the kid experience than any other program on TV. It has the familiar sadism, the shameless greed, and the exuberant curiosity -- in spades. Perversely, *South Park* may be one of the realest social worlds on TV" (68). And so the debate runs on, with parents and schools systems demanding that the television network withdraw the show and Comedy Central insisting that it is the parents who should monitor their children's viewing (see Wong).

Ironically, indeed, then, this show which has appropriated common experience to render as stereotype, which hopes to avoid any return to the common masses, does return quite explicitly to that most common of masses, children, who do not care in the least whether or not they can understand everything. Given that this artistic specimen is thus directed, in some way, toward the common people, as well as drawing on them as source material, it certainly merits the term vulgar. But I do not count that term as merely a contemptuous dismissal, relegating the show forever to the realm of low art. Indeed, considering what I suggested above about the function of vulgarity in creating both high and low art, such a label is anything but a dismissal. The writers admit that they draw inspiration for their artistic vulgarity directly from their own memories of childhood; as long as this is true, a viewership of children who have never heard the term avant-garde and consider the disjointed plot a good picture of their reality will continue to drive up the ratings value of this show. We might say that, in some way, its vulgarity and the sources of that vulgarity subvert even the show's and writers' own ends of achieving high art.

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