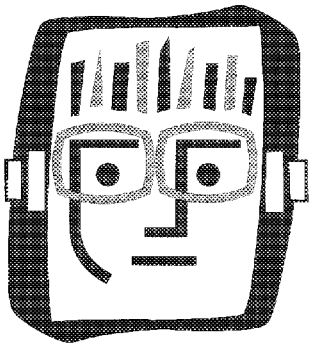

MEDIA & POP CULTURE

Adults watching children watch *South Park*

Helen Nixon

Like the British television series *Teletubbies*, discussed in this column by David Buckingham (Dec/Jan 1998–99), it is clear that the U.S. series *South Park* now has the same kind of "popularity—and a notoriety—that goes well beyond its target audience" (p. 292). Although it was designed as a satirical cartoon for adults, *South Park* has clearly established a strong following with much younger viewers than its original audience of mainly 18- to 39-year-old males. As has been the case with *The Simpsons*, the language and other semiotic codes associated with *South Park* have entered the everyday lives of young people the world over.

In Australia, my school teacher colleagues report that their students can be overheard using such common *South Park* expressions as "holy crap, dude!" and "kick ***!" (albeit with ironic overtones and in fake American accents). I would want to argue that precisely because of its level of popularity with its child audience, and the degree of censure this has aroused in parents and teachers, *South Park* too requires serious consideration for the significant questions it raises about the relations between childhood and adulthood.

"Let's go down to South Park and have ourselves a time!"

South Park is an animated series set in the small village of South Park, Colorado. Unlike its popular counterpart *The Simpsons*, whose storylines are built around the lives of the Simpson family, *South Park* is not a variation on that United States television staple, the sitcom. Rather, the series focuses on the seasonal lives of an isolated rural community, with a particular focus on four 8-year-old boys. These characters, described by *Time* magazine as having grating voices and feeble minds, are the fat and self-centred Eric Cartman, the wussy Stan Marsh, the Jewish Kyle Broslofski, and the poverty-stricken Kenny McCormick. As these descriptions suggest, the characters are in many ways stereotypical, a fact that is emphasised by the naive, two-dimensional style of *South Park*'s animation.

Other regular characters in the *South Park* cartoon include key members of the South Park Elementary School community: the children's strange teacher, Mr. Garrison; the school's grouchy bus driver, Mrs. Crabtree; and the town's only African American, the lovable school chef known simply as Chef. Some of the more unusual characters in the series include Mr. Hankey, the Christmas poo; Mr. Garrison's talking glove puppet, Mr. Hat (replaced in several episodes by Mr. Twig); Sparky, the gay dog; and Jesus, the host of the public access cable program *Jesus and Pals*. The names of these characters, the recurring storylines of Kenny's weekly and often violent death, and Mr. Garrison's possible mental instability and homosexuality together point to some of the sources of controversy surrounding what has been called *South Park*'s political incorrectness.

Reportedly made for about US$300,000 an episode, a third of the cost of *The Simpsons*, *South Park* was created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, young Americans then in their mid-20s. *Newsweek* reported that Parker and Stone turned

down development deals by major studios such as New Line, Warner Brothers, and Dreamworks before signing over the screening rights to cable channel Comedy Central, which guaranteed them creative control of the series. Still heavily involved in production, Parker voices the characters of Cartman, Stan, and Mr. Garrison; Stone voices the characters of Kyle, Kenny, Jesus, and Jimbo.

In one of the most outrageous but amusing twists in the series, musician and record producer Isaac Hayes provides the voice of the Chef, a character who regularly bursts into sexually suggestive blues tunes while cooking such specialties as Chef's Chocolate Salty Balls and advising the children of South Park about life, love, and growing up. It is Chef who often educates the children about such realities as "Life isn't fair, children. Get used to it."

Who in the world watches *South Park*?

Considered by its reviewers as "too hot for mainstream television," *South Park* first aired in the U.S. in August 1997 on cable TV's Comedy Central channel in a late night time slot. There it has been an outstanding ratings success, regularly producing viewing figures of up to triple the previous records set by such programs as *Absolutely Fabulous* (from Britain). In Australia, Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) began screening *South Park* in December 1997. SBS is a usually low-rated, free-to-air, minority public television channel. There, with screening in an established cult cartoon slot at 8:00 p.m. on Saturday nights, the size of the audience soon doubled and had reached more than half a million for the final episode of the first series.

By mid-1998, *South Park* became the station's second most watched program after the World Cup Soccer finals. When several episodes from the second series were classified M (suitable for audiences over 15), SBS was forced to move the program to a later time slot where its ratings continued to soar.

It is a measure of *South Park*'s success in Australia that all three commercial, free-to-air television stations vied with SBS for rights to broadcast the third and fourth series. Recent research for SBS by market researcher A.C. Nielsen shows that *South Park* has attracted more than a million viewers, the channel's largest audience since SBS was established in 1980. Of these viewers, 60% are teens (13–17) and young adults (18–24), and 30% have never previously tuned in to the minority multicultural and multilingual broadcaster.

By early 1999, repeat first- and second-series episodes of *South Park* screened on SBS as well as on Foxtel pay TV's The Comedy Channel. Similarly, in the U.K. *South Park* is broadcast in a late night time slot on satellite pay TV, as well as on Channel 4, a minority television channel.

Across the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, therefore, *South Park* is clearly marked out in its programming as something other than child or family viewing. This means the series cannot easily be compared with such mainstream counterparts as *The Simpsons*. Clearly *South Park* is very differently positioned, both by the nature of its broadcast outlets and by the timing of its programming. Although it is not so well placed to attract the large advertising investments that come with mainstream success, *South Park* nonetheless appeals to a large viewing population that appreciates its absurd humour and originality. In the U.S., Canada, and Australia this audience includes a significant number of children as young as 8 years old, as well as teenagers and young adults. Not surprisingly this information has made the series attractive to advertisers who support popular cultural forms other than television.

The cult appeal of *South Park*

At the time of writing, Australian *South Park* viewers eagerly anticipate the screening of the third TV series and are beginning to read press reports of the release in the U.S. of trailers of *South Park: The Movie*. As the show's popularity grows, *South Park* viewers and non-viewers alike have been increasingly exposed to intertextual references to the series and other information about it. In February of 1999 alone, the character Chef was featured in a *Who Weekly* cover story about TV's most fascinating faces, cover stories about the real South Park (Fairfield, Colorado) were featured in the style magazine *The Face* and the youth music magazine *Juice*, and *South Park* stickers and posters were featured in the teen magazines *big hit* and *TV Hits*.

Meanwhile, the Australian Yahoo! Web guide reported that *South Park* ranked fourth in the list of most frequently searched terms and topics on the World Wide Web, and a South Park Does Mardi Gras float—complete with Kenny deaths—was featured in the 1999 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras; a fact that warranted national attention in the Australian press.

March 1999 saw the release of a *South Park* computer game designed for the Nintendo 64 and PCs using Windows 95/98, surely an indication of investor faith that *South Park* merchandise remains potentially lucrative in what is a mainly male youth market. At the same time, SBS reported that *South Park* has sold AUS$38 million worth of merchandise in Australia, with $11 million of that spent on T-shirts alone. Further, *South Park* merchandise reportedly outsells all comparable products, including those associated with *The Simpsons*, by a ratio of 10:1. Thus

despite its language and content—which make the show more likely to be classified as an adult rather than a children's program—*South Park* was quickly established as what my local press described as the hippest, hottest TV viewing for university students, children, and older folk alike. This seemed to hold true in Britain and Canada as well.

Watching children who watch *South Park*

There is no doubt, then, that children and young people the world over are now regularly tuned in to *South Park*. However, for some adults at least, the fact that children want to watch such a satirical, adult cartoon is cause for concern. Parents whose children do watch *South Park* report delicate domestic negotiations about which family members may watch which episodes in their households. Nonetheless, despite its late night time slot, children's access to the program becomes less and less possible to monitor as the series is repeated and videotaped by family and friends. It would seem valuable, therefore, for parents and teachers to give serious consideration to the reasons why some children might enjoy watching *South Park* as much as some adults do. Watching children who watch *South Park* may provide some clues.

My bemused colleagues report that their children's and students' talk now includes such terms from *South Park* (and *Beavis and Butthead* before that) as "cool," "dude," and "that sucks!" I had first-hand evidence of the extent of children's take-up of *South Park* language and mannerisms when I was recently entertained in rural South Australia by a friend's 8- and 12-year-old daughters. They performed for me improvised routines in the personae of Terrance and Phillip, the cartoon characters who star in the *South Park* children's favourite TV program. The girls' improvisations skilfully combined satirical comments about their daily school lives with the characters' two trademarks of high-pitched monotone laughter and an obsession with flatulence. Similarly, a Canadian colleague reports that the *South Park* character Kenny is frequently the subject of schoolyard chat and improvised conversations among his 14-year-old students.

"Oh my God! They killed Kenny."

Adolescents' reported fascination with the *South Park* character Kenny raises interesting questions for parents and teachers. Obviously part of that character's appeal lies in the fantasy elements of the recurring storyline with which he is associated. The predictable pattern, as well as fantasy element of the storyline, is that although Kenny is killed in nearly every episode he reappears in the following episode as if nothing had happened. Some adults understandably express concern at this supposed emphasis on killing and death, as well as the implied violence of some of the deaths.

However, I would want to argue that there might also be productive ways of thinking about the appeal of Kenny's death for children. It is possible, for example, to see this pattern as a contemporary, if somewhat bizarre, illustration of that well-known mythic pattern of the literary hero's death, rebirth, and renewal. It is also possible to understand children's enjoyment of it as an example of an age-old narrative pleasure: the delightful anticipation of something inevitable and the gradual revelation of details about when and how it will happen. While it is true that Kenny often dies in a very gruesome cartoon fashion, with lots of associated blood and gore (as well as the immediate attention of scavenging rats), his despatch can also be very low-key. One time he was killed by a falling cart of underpants. Such variations, however silly, provide an element of surprise and suspense that children enjoy and that is comfortingly familiar to them from other popular cultural forms.

Another source of pleasure when Kenny dies is the anticipation of how his death will be registered by the other three boys. More often than not, each death elicits from Stan the now predictable cry of "Oh my God! They killed Kenny. You bastards!" The occasional variations on this response, designed to match an episode's particular narrative line, provide high points of dramatic and humorous contrast with previous episodes. Hence the cry sometimes changes to "Oh my God! I found a penny," or "Oh my God! They videotaped killing Kenny!"

On the one hand, it may be disturbing for adults to see children take pleasure in predicting when and how an 8-year-old child, albeit a cartoon character, meets his untimely death. After all, the children's pleasure challenges some of the salient features of dominant social constructions of childhood, such as its supposed vulnerability and innocence.

On the other hand, surely these kinds of pleasures of prediction, as well as children's delight in rhyme and repetition, are not very far removed from the socially sanctioned pleasures experienced by adults and children alike during the reading of nursery rhymes and bedtime stories.

A second key characteristic of the Kenny character is that what he says cannot be clearly heard by the viewer. His dialogue is always muffled and only partially audible, largely because of the orange parka hood that closely circles his face. However, although viewers cannot hear Kenny's exact words, they are nonetheless able to deduce something of their meaning. Thus teenagers' reported schoolyard imitation of Kenny's mostly incompre-

hensible dialogue has pedagogic potential. It has the potential, for example, to be used to illustrate a key sociolinguistic point that meaning is made by an utterance's tone and inflection working in concert with its linguistic and social context.

For teachers, the fact that Kenny's playmates find what he says hilariously crude raises a particular dilemma associated with the use of *South Park* as a starting point for teaching. How can teachers justify opening up for discussion what it is that Kenny might *really* be saying? Can they risk asking students to repeat what *they* are saying to each other in "Kenny code" in the school yard?

Indeed, one difficulty for those wishing to think seriously or write about *South Park*—whether as a potential teaching resource or not—is that much of the show, which is funny when watched, cannot be put in print. In addition, when voiced, the content is so outrageously silly, sexist, racist, or crude that you can't easily justify repeating it. When translated literally, much of *South Park* must at best be described as nonsensical and in extremely bad taste. As one Australian newspaper put it, even mass media reviews of *South Park* simply dared not allude to most of the show's dialogue, double entendres, and sight gags. In its view, this was hysterical adults-only viewing that simply had to be seen to be believed.

Here we have, I think, at least part of the explanation for the popularity of *South Park* among school-aged children. First, like most children's cartoons, *South Park* relies heavily on spectacle. Much of the humour is conveyed in silly sounds, sight gags, and frequent pregnant pauses when the children stare blankly at the viewer, nonplussed by the silly antics of the mostly adult people around them. This is immediate, visual, and visceral entertainment that is not easily translated.

Second, *South Park* is not easily translated into a socially acceptable text. Nor is it easily summarised in terms of its themes or social comment. Hence, when the series was released, *Time* magazine (August 18, 1997) lamented what it saw as *South Park*'s inferiority to *The Simpsons*, claiming that "unlike *The Simpsons* and *Beavis and Butthead*, *South Park* is devoid of subtext—it isn't really about the emptiness of suburban life or the ugliness of youthful nihilism or the perniciousness of pop culture" (p. 74). That is, the anarchic randomness of its humour keeps the show outside the bounds of mainstream discussion and analysis. *South Park* is therefore found wanting by serious adult critics.

Of course, this is part of the program's appeal for young people. It successfully provides children's enjoyment with a transgressive edge. Just as watching *The Simpsons* did in the early 1990s, watching *South Park* operates as a sign among today's children and teens. It signifies their subscription to a particular antiauthoritarian and contemporary attitude. Like Kenny's muffled street-wise talk, familiarity with *South Park* operates as a shared code between peers that effectively marks them out against parents and other adults. Put simply, there is a very youthful and naughty pleasure in being complicit with a program that, according to reviewers, is an obnoxious and offensive cartoon that takes bad taste to jaw-dropping extremes.

All this, I suggest, points to the reason many adults feel uncomfortable about watching *South Park*. The knowledge that this often crude, shocking, and humorously offensive satire is also a cartoon being watched and enjoyed by children serves to foreground for adults both their similarity with, and yet ambivalence towards, children. As an SBS spokesperson puts it, young people enjoy the program because it is "subversive, cutting edge, and intensely realistic," while the broader audience likes it "because they know that this is what little kids can be like."

Of course, creators Parker and Stone are well able to anticipate such audience responses. Hence *South Park* has been described using publicity similar to that Parker and Stone provide for their fictional *Jesus and Pals* program: "Too hot for TV—this is stuff you can't see on TV." In one episode the title characters in the Canadian cartoon *Terrance and Phillip* sit down to watch American television; they find themselves watching *South Park*, only to dismiss it as "That's so juvenile!" Further, the silliness of the *Terrance and Phillip* cartoon stirs up as much controversy in the *South Park* fictional community as the *South Park* cartoon has stirred up in real life.

In a rebellion against *Terrance and Phillip* by South Park parents, Mrs. Broslofski leads the South Park Parent Teacher Association in a campaign against Cartoon Central for the provision of better TV for South Park's children. Mr. Garrison cautions his students that "Shows like *Terrance and Phillip* are what we call toilet humour. They don't expand your minds. You see children, these kinds of shows are senseless, vile trash." Further, he is concerned that "you all seem to enjoy the show even if it isn't based on reality."

Hilariously, of course, regular viewers of *South Park* know that showing the TV program *Barnaby Jones* is a staple of Mr. Garrison's teaching method. Moreover, when challenged by his students about how much class time is given over to this pursuit, Mr. Garrison's defence has been that they won't get very far in life unless they pay attention to the lessons learned from TV. Adults' patronising attitude towards children, as well as their blatant

hypocrisy, is yet again glaringly exposed by *South Park*'s creators, much to the delight of youthful viewers and the discomfort of some older ones.

Finally in this same episode, while their parents successfully protest to get *Terrance and Phillip* taken off air—only for it to be replaced by an adult program that is similarly crude and sexist—the South Park boys get into some serious trouble when Death comes to town. The failure of their distracted parents to heed the boys' requests for assistance leads young Stan Marsh to add some platitudes of his own: "You know, I think if parents spent less time worrying about what their kids are watching on TV, and more time worrying about what's going on in kids' lives, the world would be a better place." As on many other occasions, this adult at least has to admit that Stan does have a point.

Reader comments on this column are welcome. E-mail: Helen.Nixon@unisa.edu.au. Mail: Helen Nixon, Language and Literacy Research Center, University of South Australia, Holbrooks Road, Underdale, South Australia 5002.