

Humour and Intertextuality: the Use of Inter-Referentiality in *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*

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Abstract: The paper analyses how three iconic American TV shows have used humour to individualize their respective identities and intertextuality to differentiate from each other. *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy* occupy special places in American popular culture and they are chosen in this paper not only for their unique identities, but also because of the rivalry that exists between them in the media, in their content and between their fans. This rivalry puts a particular spin on the way the shows approach intertextuality in that inter-referentiality took on a prominent role in defining their identity and in conveying not only the messages and meanings behind various episodes, but also the philosophy behind each show.

Keywords: popular culture; media studies; intertextuality; humour; *The Simpsons*; *South Park*; *Family Guy*.

Cuvinte-cheie: popular culture; studii media; intertextualitate; umor; *Familia Simpson*; *South Park*; *Family Guy*; *Familia mea dementă*.

Introduction

This paper analyses three animated shows holding a special place in American popular culture; their appearance marked key moments in the development of their genre and had a strong influence on the animated series that followed them. We are talking about *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*. Each show has its own very distinct identity and a series of characteristics that differentiates it from the other two, marking a turning point in the history of American animated sitcoms at the time of their appearance.

The paper explores two dimensions: The first is related to the dominant characteristic of the humour in each show, and how it is used to set the series apart. The second dimension addresses intertextuality and, more

specifically, inter-referentiality: how each animated series is present and referenced in the other two, thus creating niches within the already niched genre.

The humour of not being humoured

The Simpsons, *South Park* and *Family Guy* are, broadly speaking, cartoons. This television genre has been traditionally reserved for children, but it progressively attracted teens and adults. Therefore, the most creative TV shows for children are appealing to the parents as well, each age bracket projecting a different interpretation and set of meanings on the shows. Television channels identified this niche and explored it, rapidly reaching a level where parents don't trust

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shows for children if they cannot decipher in them a second level of interpretation, often represented by satire or parody, in addition to the level intended for the kids. The type of humour is thus viral, even subversive, but in order to pass undetected by the cultural immune system – society and, particularly, parents – it has to wear the mask of kids' entertainment: cartoons (Rushkoff, 1994, 100-101, 106).

Mikhail Bakhtin identified three distinct manifestations of the culture of folk humour (Bakhtin, 1984 [1965], 5-18):

1. Ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace;
2. Comic verbal compositions: parodies both oral and written (the parody is at the core of many *South Park* Episodes);
3. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons (these are the result of shouting and proffering amusing profanities, which used to populate the public space and marketplaces where people made jokes and carried discussions using colloquial language).

These three forms of popular culture are present practically in every episode of *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*, but updated according to contemporary sensitivities and representations in order to maintain their relevance.

The Simpsons

The show uses catchphrases, expressions that in time become core part of the characters that deliver them, even defining their identity; they can enter popular culture particularly when they are adopted by fans or used on merchandise. There is, however, the case in which a character starts using an expression after it became a catchphrase (Bart's 'Don't have a cow, man!' and 'Eat

my shorts!'). Most of the main characters and some of the secondary ones use one or more of these catchphrases. Homer's famous *D'oh* is already a reference point in popular culture, so much so that the *Simpsons and Philosophy* book is subtitled *The D'oh of Homer* (Irwin et al., 2001), but the use of catchphrases has become less frequent in later seasons, episodes like *Bart gets famous* making fun of their excessive use. Bart becomes famous in the *Krusty the Clown* show by saying: 'I didn't do it!'.

The humour of the show is created also by the use of cultural references that cover a wide social spectrum, so that many generations and social classes can enjoy watching the show. When possible, various visual jokes are introduced in the background of the episode through funny texts or in road signs, newspapers, billboards etc. The same technique is also used by *Family Guy* (for example, in an episode, one morning, at breakfast, there is a cereal box on the table and it is named *Generic Cereals*), but more frequently, turning it into an essential part in the process of building characters and action. Sometimes, because of the show's fast pace and non sequitur approach to humour, *Family Guy* jokes are visible at the second or third viewing or even only after pausing the episode.

Humour in *The Simpsons* is achieved 'by using a rich inventory of cultural references, intentionally dissociated descriptions and a considerable level of self-reflexivity in relation to television, its conventions and the status of the programme as a TV show.' (King, 2002)

Even though *The Simpsons*' humour initially attracted criticism even from former USA presidents (George Bush Sr.), nowadays it is considered almost demure, and family-friendly, particularly when compared to harsher shows, including *South Park* and *Family Guy*. This was acknowledged even by the creator of the show, Matt Groening, in an interview: 'When we started back in

the very end of 1989 as a series, there was nothing else like the show on TV at the time. Since then, there's been an explosion of satirical, wild animation, which has left us in a situation of being not the wildest show out there. I mean, *South Park* outdoes us every step of the way. *Family Guy* obviously has gone completely wild with outrageous humour. Then, on the other side, there's *King Of The Hill*, which has a muted tone and is very emotionally resonant. So how we fit into the changing pop culture and the stuff around us is increasingly difficult.' (Ryan, 2009)

South Park

South Park takes on topics long considered taboo in television. The humour it uses is satirical or toilet humour, depending on the perspective and position the audience occupies. Toilet humour defines a type of humour that 'does not contribute to the development of the mind' (Mr. Garrison, a *South Park* character), because it is focused on the inferior functions of the human body. Using scatological humour in order to attract attention on the problems of society is not a recent invention. In the 16th century, François Rabelais wrote *Gargantua and Pantagruel* using scatological humour, gratuitous violence and insults that lacked any subtlety in order to bring a powerful critique to his own society. Two centuries later, Jonathan Swift brought his own brand of satire in "*Gulliver's Travels*", underlining behaviours and attitudes, which he considered negative, or worthy of ridicule by mixing fantasy and humorous critique of European societies, particularly the British with references to bodily functions (censored in the first edition and only reinserted in the text a decade after the initial publication). History repeats itself in the 21st century adaptation of this approach: the aim of the cultural product

is to determine people to think by pushing politically correct boundaries and it does so by using one of the oldest techniques: satire.

There is a distinct relationship between carnivalesque, scatological, *South Park* and televisual performance: "The carnival itself is a performance; it is a theatre at which people perform subversive acts. As wildly and sincerely as they are performed, the acting stops when the carnival is over and the world return to *normal*. So it is with *South Park*. The show's exuberance and scatology referencing recreate the carnivalesque for contemporary audiences" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, xv).

South Park usually deals with very serious topics, some of the greatest controversies of the modern world: euthanasia, homosexuality, political correctness, cloning, addictions etc. The issues discussed in some episodes are so problematic, that the humorous approach feels like a teaspoon of honey in a large, bitter drink. Of course, not everyone is laughing and, despite the increasingly better reception of the show, it is still considered by some to be racist, sexist, infantile, offensive and/or vulgar.

Thanks to its multiple layers, the *South Park* humour can be enjoyed at various levels of cultural decoding. In addition, genres guide readers and help them 'understand the situation in a certain one rather than another' (Fiske, 1987, 108); therefore, a scene can be considered comedy in *South Park*, but lose all comedic effect if integrated in a different show.

The scatology humour is almost permanently present in *South Park*. Except one of the four boys, Cartman, the most scatological character is Mr. Hankey, a piece of human bodily waste; this scatology trait is countered and somewhat neutralized by the fact that he represents the Spirit of Christmas. However, the most infantile and consistent toilet humour comes from the alter-egos of the creators of the show, Terrance and Phillip. They are the answer Parker and

Stone gave to the critics that said that *South Park* is just scatology. *The Terrance and Phillip Show* is no more and no less than an animated device to show that scatological humour cannot generate comedy on its own.

The US demographic explosion after the Second World War led to the baby boomers generation, one that would greatly influence not only American society, but also its popular culture. As for the humour of this generation, it was marked by cynicism, intertextual play, parody and satire. The standards for comedy were also elevated: comedy was no longer supposed just to amuse, it also had to incorporate the pieces of a cultural puzzle: 'In the post-*Simpsons* epoch, viewers expect more than clever one-liners or slapstick prat-falls'. (Johnson-Woods, 2007, 96)

Humour awaits and demands from its consumers a certain degree of cognitive involvement, essential for the success of parody and satire, the central elements of *South Park* humour. Parody creates a replica of a certain element or product of popular culture (music, painting, television, shows, movies), but changes certain aspects in order to attract attention on a particular topic or point of view. It is among the best methods to achieve intertextuality. In 1997, Gerard Genette suggested the term 'hyper-textuality' (Genette, 1997, 18) to indicate 'a text or genre that stay at the base of the process, but can also be transformed, modified, simplified (including the parody, the farce, the sequel and the translation'. An important aspect to mention is that a parody works best when the viewer is familiar with the original, a reason why watching animated shows like *The Simpsons*, *South Park* or *Family Guy* is difficult without a solid inventory of popular culture knowledge.

While parody avoids exaggeration, satire embraces it as a central development element. The distinction between parody and satire is that satire can also be tragical. It analyses critically conventions, customs, political, social and moral practice, guiding

us towards discovering what is wrong with the world in order to find a way to fix it.

Therefore, the popularity of the show is also due to the ruthless pleasure it takes in destroying cultural conventions and imagery. The humour is vulgar, scatological and offensive, but it is intelligently built and the meanings it conveys surpass the first level of empiric experience. *South Park* humour asks for thought, analysis and action.

Family Guy

Humour in *Family Guy* often relies on a literary and conversational device called *non sequitur*, combined with or presented as *flashbacks*. *Non sequiturs* (Latin for 'it does not follow') appear as random commentaries, disconnected from the narrative, or as accidental or inappropriate changes of subject, this type of frequent use making the show's humour sound absurd. The absurdity comes, of course, from the disconnection, the lack of reference to the other commentaries, thus creating confusing and often comical effects.

Although *Family Guy* keeps a somewhat coherent continuity of episodes, it often leaves aside complicated plotlines in order to focus on absurd humour. This approach is usually used for the characters, but the show is known for its use of scenes where the storyline is interrupted by a non-related sketch of a variable length (for example, Peter's fight with a giant chicken interrupts an unrelated conversation). In order to keep the comical tone of the show, most episodes contain parodies of popular TV shows, movies and slogans. In the first half of the first season, the script writers tried to introduce the words *murder* or *death* in the title of every episode in order to make them sound like old mystery radio shows (*Death Has a Shadow*, *I Never Met the Dead Man*, *Chitty Chitty Death Bang*, *Mind over Murder*).

Seth MacFarlane says they stopped doing this when they realized that they started to mix them and could not remember which title went with each episode; from the *A Hero Sits next Door* episode the titles reflected the intrigue of that particular episode.

Family Guy is very self-aware of the type of humour it produces and sometimes is self-reflexive about it. In the *Fast Times at Buddy Cianci Jr. High* episode, the narrator's voice can be heard saying "In the television comedy world, the people are entertained by two separate yet equally important types of shows: traditional sitcoms that get laughs out of everyday situations, like trying to fix your own plumbing or inviting two dates to the same dance and animated shows that make jokes about farting. This is the latter". *Family Guy* has a particular view on comedy, and what is funny but 'its humour is not only in the way it makes fun of flatulence, but also in its references to the everyday. And for the very same reason, it is instructive.' (Wisniewski, 2007, 59)

***Family Guy* in the popular culture mirror**

Family Guy is an animated series built using the sitcom formula and intended for adults. Maybe its most difficult task was to define and establish its identity because, since its inception, the show was considered a distasteful replica of *The Simpsons*, celebrated as one of the top three shows of the 20th century. The fact that FOX, as the network that promoted the show, kept changing the airing day and hour slowed down the process of finding not only its identity, but also its audience. In spite of being cancelled, and then revived, *Family Guy* managed, nevertheless, to create its own style, an accomplishment acknowledged even by the creator of *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening. Furthermore, although *The Simpsons* is al-

most an institution, there are voices saying that a passing-of-the-torch took place between the two shows: '*Family Guy* has been ahead of *The Simpsons* in quality for a while now and there's no hope for reversing that trend, no matter how much purists would like to see it happen.' (Dahl, 2006)

Family Guy is an excellent example of American popular culture product in that it represents a show that stockpiles, registers and reinterprets an astounding quantity of other cultural products and elements. It exploits at its fullest the registry of products that circulate the media channels of an industrialized society, as part of mass culture (Fiske, 1989b). The show is also a mirror for popular culture, but its reflexion should be observed in a Barthesian key as it unveils myths. *Family Guy* made out of pop culture references a distinct trait and, by using and reinterpreting them, it took them off their pedestal. The show does to the American cultural myths what Barthes did in his *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1997): it deconstructs and dissects them in order to see how they were created. Unlike Barthes, *Family Guy* does not offer the viewers a way to protect themselves against the seductive nature of the myth, but rather bears the naked (and, sometimes, discourteous) truth and lets the audience choose its own meanings. The show employs popular products using an equation specific to media culture, namely the binomial of predictable - unpredictable. The initial feeling is that the way the image is reflected is correct but then, suddenly, the image is distorted and the looking glass appears to be under great pressure and heat that can either deform or break it.

One of the main characteristics of *Family Guy* is given by its propensity for over-signifying, as it often goes from simple exaggeration to full-blown fabulation in order to attract attention and to shock. The scenes are more often than not a perfect illustration of what Fiske called a *semiotic supermarket* (Fiske, 1989a); even though modern audi-

ences are atomized, *Family Guy* offers such a quantity and variety of popular culture references that it can satisfy even the most picky consumer.

Family Guy uses a series of central myths, to which new references are constantly added in such a rhythm that this narrative pattern is called *blink and you'll miss it*. The central myth is that of the father, head of his family and household, the patriarch, which will be recycled, with a political twist, in *American Dad* (an animated show produced by the same Seth MacFarlane). However, in *Family Guy*, the myth is turned on its head, as Peter is far from being a model father or having a picture perfect family. Although the Griffins live in the suburbs and are, at first glance, the embodiment of the American dream family – father, mother, 2.5 kids (two teenagers and an infant), and a dog – each episode brings forward elements that contradict the myth and outs it as false. Therefore, Peter is actually a very lazy social and financial failure working on the assembly line at a toy factory. Sometimes, he appears to not recognize or understand his children, or even to hate them (he forces Chris to continue his activity as a scout, he does not remember Stewie's name and even sprinkles paprika instead of baby powder when he changes his diaper, he constantly mocks and humiliates Meg). He can spend months unemployed, not caring about the welfare of his family. From time to time, he seems preoccupied with the feelings of his family, particularly those of his wife, and tries to correct things, but his stupidity, arrogance and lack of common sense make him fail most of the times. Therefore, the myth of the father who protects his family, and is hard working, smart and successful is reflected in the image of Peter Griffin by the deformed cultural mirror that is *Family Guy*.

Another myth is that of the American mother. She is, according to the myth, a very good housekeeper, God fearing, devoted to her house and family. Lois embodies

all the characteristics at first glance but, by constantly bringing in references to other popular culture products, the show reveals a Lois that is a nymphomaniac, former lesbian, S&M enthusiast, kleptomaniac, drug consumer and, sometimes, a mother with no maternal instincts. Nevertheless, she is in many cases the voice of reason for Peter and the balancing, responsible force in the Griffin family.

Another example of American myth refers to the fact that it is moral to seek one's own justice, outside the law, as long as the objective is noble. Moreover, the show uses multiple stereotypical images related to the American society in general, and to family in particular. This is revealed especially by the construction of the characters: the paralyzed hero cop that courageously, albeit sometimes aggressively, carries on with his life, the unmotivated brutal treatment of African-Americans and their relationship to the police, the sexual predator, the desperate search for popularity by the unpopular teenager etc. All these myths and stereotypical images represent the background against which all cultural references are made.

Another popular culture characteristic that can be identified in *Family Guy* is the repetitive nature, based on recycling various images and products. It starts with the family structure, identical to the one in *The Simpsons* and re-used in *American Dad*. Because of the similarities and the plagiarism accusations, media and fandom both put forward images of *Family Guy* in which they visually showcase visually how one show recycled some elements of the other popular culture product, namely *The Simpsons*.

Family Guy often addresses self-referential television, one whose object of interest is itself, a television about TV, its programmes, its conventions, revealing a deeply narcissistic nature. In one episode, the family talks about the fact that the show might be cancelled; yet, in another, it is invited to a guest show about dysfunctional families and

subsequently becomes the focus of a reality show; in another episode Peter becomes the anchor of his own show, sparking the jealousy of another anchor, Tom Tucker, who tries to discredit him, all the while revealing the rivalries in the TV world.

Television is one of the central myths of the show, in a close relationship with Peter, an avid consumer of popular culture. Therefore, when the antenna of the town is broken, Peter appears incapable of dealing with the separation from TV programmes and puts a cardboard frame in front of his face, looking at the reality of his family through that made-up TV frame, narrating what he sees and thus simulating the production of his own show.

In *Family Guy*, television has a 'bardic function' (Fiske, 1987). On the one hand, it is a repository of popular culture, a keeper of cultural memory, and on the other hand, it is able to translate reality into something that the audience, the community can enjoy and/or understand, it brings experiences and characters closer to the individual, making him feel connected, engaged. In an episode TV news anchor Tom Tucker has a relationship with Peter's mother; Peter does not agree, nor does he seem to understand, and so Tom has to explain the situation to him just as he would present the news, a narrative construct that is present throughout the show.

The narrative is another popular culture trait used by *Family Guy*: in an episode, Peter starts to narrate life while living it. By narrating not only his actions, but also his thoughts, he attracts the fury of his wife when he criticizes the taste and plate setting of the food she cooked, ignoring the fact that she was present while he did that. In addition, by exploring the narrative possibility, it allows us to manipulate information, as we want: in an episode, the visit of Lois's mother is presented by announcing it and then, immediately, by the image of the family saying goodbye to her a week later.

The show was not universally well received; it was critiqued for plagiarism and lowbrow humour, as well as accused of promoting negative role models for children and young adults. Nevertheless, hedonism, a trait of popular culture that is sometimes ignored, could help explain why the type of humour used in the show was not understood or appreciated in the beginning. *Family Guy* is considered funny by its consumers because it would do anything for a laugh and because it offers pure, immediate, unjustified pleasure, amusement and gratification; it does not ask from its audiences grand efforts to understand it, but merely a good command of popular culture. *Family Guy* is funny, because it brings to the forefront of TV comedy all those cultural products the American public (and not only them) grew up with, which are recognizable and familiar, giving a sentiment of peace, control and safety. Thus, *Family Guy* offers to its public short-term gratification and the immediate pleasure of humour, something reflected in its adoption by a generation that learnt to seek exactly that: the Millennial.

In addition to over-signification, intertextuality is another main trait of the show. It is a secondary type of intertextuality, situated on Kristeva's vertical axis, and created by the connection between cultural products delivered through the same channel, television. Of course, the references are too many to be named here, but they range from Bugs Bunny to Britney Spears to sitcoms and soap operas.

Nevertheless, *South Park* is the one that excels in using intertextuality, going as far as presenting Eric Cartman and Bart Simpson going to FOX in order to demand that *Family Guy* be taken off the air. In conclusion, *Family Guy* has as dominant trait over-signification, *South Park* has intertextuality, while *The Simpsons* tries to balance the two and be the *family friendly* show.

Intertextuality in the *South Park* mirror

South Park having a stronger intertextual character than *Family Guy* is, of course, debatable. The sheer quantity of popular culture references used in the series created by Seth MacFarlane is an argument by itself, surpassing that used in Parker and Stone's; nevertheless, intertextuality is more than short jokes and *non-sequiturs* mentioning actors or movies. It represents the valid use and integration of concepts, ideas, techniques and various constructs in the final product, and *South Park* is qualitatively superior. Its intertextuality is *built*, not *patched*, as it is the way with *Family Guy*.

Julia Kristeva helped us understand intertextuality (Kristeva, 1966): 'no text stands alone, no text is an island'. No matter its nature (written, painted, sung, performed etc.), the cultural product is influenced by what happened before and around it, by its relationship with other cultural products, as well as by the relationship between creator and consumer. Therefore, reading, listening, seeing a *text* (used here as a generic term) needs to be accompanied by the knowledge of other texts we read, listened, viewed before being able to frame it and, to some degree, understand it. It becomes obvious that "television is utterly intertextual, even if in the *popular culture* understanding of intertextuality: obvious references and innuendos" (Johnson-Woods, 2007, 104).

South Park brings together texts from a great variety of sources, but is known particularly for its references to the most intrusive medium of the 1990s – the movie. The first nine seasons total 139 episodes, containing visual and verbal references to almost 100 TV programmes and over 160 movies. Moreover, the episodes adopt and adapt musical styles, trivia and cartoons as products of popular culture. For example, the episode *Child Abduction Is Not Funny* combines the

storyline of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) with lines from *Scooby-Doo* and *Scarface* (1983) while creating a parody of a contemporary cultural product and a satire of the moral panic that accompanies the idea of child abduction. *South Park* is so referential that it was accused of being a show with no content outside those respective references; this accusation was made before the appearance of *Family Guy*, a show that takes referentiality to surreal levels.

South Park creates a new type of TV product by adopting and adapting elements traditionally found in movies and TV. These elements are used so often that viewers forget they are filming techniques: pre-recorded laughter, the montage, use of music, etc.; their role is usually to create a parody of their actual use in other movies and TV shows. One of the aims is to simulate the mechanism of manipulation, as *South Park* is in a relationship of complicity with its public, believing it capable of resisting the spell of manipulation and making this belief obvious to the members of the audience.

Over time *South Park* spoofed numerous talk shows (*Freak Strike*, *A Million Little Fibers*), detective/crime TV series (*Lil' Crime Stoppers*), animation styles (*Korn's Groovy Pirate Mystery*, *Simpsons Already Did It*, *Make Love Not Warcraft*) or soap operas (*Cartman's Mom Is a Dirty Slut*, *Cartman's Mom Is Still a Dirty Slut*). Even the show itself is not safe. Thus, by using self-references, it deconstructs the formula of *South Park* through its own characters: "This is just startin' to look like another one of those times where it-it's gonna end up with the whole town turning out, it's a big showdown happening, and us havin' to talk about what we learned, and I say we just stop right now, and go play cards or something". (Kyle, *Butt Out* episode)

In *South Park* almost all episodes mention television, are about television or integrate TV shows, but 'it is a cannibalism the public wants and demands' (Rushkoff, 1996,

114). In addition to television, many episodes approach topics concerning ethics, the advertising industry and censorship.

South Park is different from other cartoons intended for adults in that its aim is not just humour, but satire, sometimes even almost indefensibly raw social satire. By contrast, *The Simpsons* developed a different kind of satire where humour and laughter are just as important. All the while, it shows a higher sensibility to family and children, and uses almost no foul language; *The Simpsons* was, at its release, considered just as scandalous as *South Park* and *Family Guy* are today, but now is viewed as moderate, even a family friendly show. At the other end of the spectrum is *Family Guy*, a show that seeks the laughter of the audience at any cost; it contains social satire, but only as a general guideline of the series, aiming to amuse first and then critique.

South Park and Family Guy

The attitude of the creators of each series towards the other shows is often hostile and critical, as some episodes reflect. This critical attitude leads to the creation of a special type of intertextuality, one that ranges from simple visual and textual innuendos to special episodes. In *Cartoon Wars I* and *Cartoon Wars II* one of the *South Park* characters, Cartman, tries to get *Family Guy* off the air and is helped by Bart Simpson, who also did not enjoy that particular type of humour. The presence of Bart shows not only a respectful camaraderie between *South Park* and *The Simpsons*, but also their mutual condemnation of *Family Guy*. The irony comes at the end of the two episodes, when *Family Guy* is not censored and taken off the air, therefore, thanks to another *South Park* character, Kyle.

The two *Cartoon Wars* episodes are the answer that Trey Parker and Matt Stone gave to the frequent comparisons of *South Park*

to *Family Guy*, which they considered offensive; nevertheless, their approach in *Cartoon Wars* was somewhat close to self-irony. The first episode has two storylines: one focuses on the reaction the town and the boys (the main characters) have when the news reaches them that the next *Family Guy* episode will feature an image of the Muslim prophet Mohammed (they make frequent references to the Danish cartoons). The second narrative is focused on the diversity of feelings towards *Family Guy*, particularly those of Cartman, exhibiting the creators' negative point of view. Later on in the episode, Cartman justifies his point of view while simultaneously revealing Parker and Stone's opinion about the *South Park* - *Family Guy* comparisons: "Don't you EVER, EVER, compare me to *Family Guy*! You hear me Kyle??!! Compare me to *Family Guy* again, and so help me I will kill you where you stand! [...] Do you have any idea what it's like?! Everywhere I go, «Hey Cartman, you must like *Family Guy*, right?» «Hey, your sense of humour reminds me of *Family Guy*, Cartman.» I am NOTHING like *Family Guy*! When I make jokes, they are inherent to a story! Deep, situational and emotional jokes based on what is relevant and has a POINT! Not just one interchangeable joke after another!" (Cartman, *Cartoon Wars I episode*) These statements also show how the *Family Guy* type of humour is perceived and the role that non-sequiturs have in its evaluation. This can be seen more clearly earlier in the *South Park* episode, in a scene where Peter Griffin discusses with the members of his family, his jokes having no logic while making five popular culture references in less than a minute. This insert underlines the need to understand and redefine the relationship with those around us in a media dominated world: 'Until recently, man did not need to be aware of the structure of his own behavioural systems, because, staying at home, the behaviour of most people was highly predictable. Today, however, man is

constantly interacting with strangers, because his extensions have both widened his range and caused his world to shrink. It is therefore necessary for man to transcend his own culture, and this can be done only by making explicit the rules by which it operates.' (Hall, 1989 [1976], 54-55)

In the end, Cartman finds out that the Family Guy scriptwriters are, in fact, marine mammals named manatees that take idea balls from an aquarium and release them down a tube, thus creating the combinations that lead to the Family Guy jokes. Seth MacFarlane, the show's creator, said in an interview that it would be hypocritical of him to be upset because of the two South Park episodes, stating that when he has to drop a joke from one of his own episodes, he calls it a manatee joke.

In South Park's evaluation of Family Guy's particular brand of humour, we can also see the distinction between generational understandings of humour: 'ironic forms in general represent one way for Generation X to handle the postmodern condition of doubt and uncertainty' (Grabau, 2008, 418). South Park is inherently a Gen X product on the one hand and a mirror of its values and approach to social, political and cultural issues on the other. It does not shy away from traditional attributes of storytelling (coherent, logical, linear), when it mimics other products of popular culture originating in music, TV, film or other mediums. However, it uses them as the stable, acceptable elements of a binome that also includes a harsh critique of contemporary issues, many times presented in a brash, unapologetically crude manner, saying 'what is not socially or morally acceptable to say. [...] Through its vulgarity, South Park verbalizes the drives and desires that we often repress' (Young, 2007, 13-14). Therefore, a Doomsday scenario, familiar from various Hollywood movies, is used as the backdrop for a critique on both climate change deniers and advocates; a natural disaster is used to criticise how media reports

and exaggerates information etc. A typical South Park scenario starts in a familiar setting dominated by non-issues (a walk in the woods with friends, the arrival of a new colleague, downloading a new app, playing detective etc.). Thereafter it continues by keeping the storyline coherent, but twisting the plot, characters, and their motivation, and objectives (forest animals are actually enablers of the birth of Satan's son, interracial/same race couples should or should not be enabled/encouraged, mobile game obsession and triviality, murder and pornography etc.), in order to address and put into perspective hot issues in a humorous, satirical, even dark way. While nothing is off-limits in terms of topics to make fun at, and coherent, complex storytelling is used by Stone and Parker to unveil their position at the end of the episode, but this position is often in the middle of the aisle, making fun of both sides; 'South Park arguably resists all forms of didacticism and dogmatism. If it does use moralistic statements, it is to highlight the inanity of the candy-coated endings of family-oriented sitcoms on American television' (Halsall, 2008, 32), a page right out of the Gen X iconoclast manual that deconstructs and reinterprets the Baby-boomer traditions, values and imagery.

Family Guy caters more to the Millennial sense of humour. While it follows in the footsteps of *The Ren and Stimpy Show* which paved the way for a particular type of animated shows directed at adults (*Beavis and Butt-Head*, for example), and is deeply rooted in the 70s and 80s popular culture, the show aims at parody rather than satire, at surreal rather than logical humour, at a Snapchat rather than at a blog user. *Family Guy* jokes have to be funny in the moment, not necessarily in relation to a certain scene and, sometimes, generate laughter precisely because they are unexpected from a logical perspective. Peter starts fighting a giant chicken in the middle of an unrelated scene or comes out of the forest dressed as a clown

while being part of a group of soldiers in a military mission. The non-sequiturs, such a central element of the show's ethos, create an ambiguity that does not force meaning on the viewers, but rather lets them create their own, in a rhythm that perfectly reflects social-media era cultural consumption. Such a segmented storyline may not be pleasing to GenX-ers, but is perfectly integrated in the Millennial's understanding of the world; their multi-meaning, fast-paced, simultaneous existence of realities perspective is perfectly reflected in newer shows, such as *Rick and Morty*, in which linear storytelling exists only to be reframed and restructured.

South Park and The Simpsons

The type of intertextuality shown in *Cartoon Wars I and II* (season 10) is hinted at in season six by the *The Simpsons Already Did It* episode. Additionally to the storyline showing the four main characters trying to build a civilisation of merpeople as they saw in a TV ad, there is a secondary storyline, in which Professor Chaos tries to bring destruction to the city (Butters, another character, in disguise exploring his alternate evil identity).

All the plans that Butters comes up with, as shown by his side-kick, General Disarray, are actions already carried out in *The Simpsons*. When Butters plans to block the sunlight so that it does not reach the town of South Park anymore, General Disarray points out that is a parallel to a plan of Mr. Burns, a character from *The Simpsons*. Not wanting to copy something they did, Butters invents new plans for destruction over and over again, only to find out that they had already been done in *The Simpsons*. While scheming to destroy South Park, Butters notices that the actions of the four other boys (the main characters of the show: Stan, Kyle, Cartman and Kenny) are a copy of the

storyline of a different *The Simpsons* episode. In the end, they reach the conclusion that *The Simpsons* already did everything and there is no sense in worrying because they too probably took ideas from other TV shows or movies.

This episode perfectly highlights how *South Park* uses intertextuality by exploring three referencing levels:

1. **Self-references:** in the beginning of the episode one of the characters does not want to put the carrot nose on the snowman for fear it will come to life and kill them all; the answer Stan gives him references the first *South Park* animation movie, *The Spirit of Christmas: 'C'mon*, when has that ever happened, except for that one time?';
2. **References to random popular culture products and topics** that entered the production process: MC Hammer and the *U Can't Touch This* song, a foetus in a formaldehyde jar labelled 'Hitler', the destruction of the Hindenburg, unsafe sex etc.;
3. ***The Simpsons* references** (focused on the plans Butters makes, hinting at various episodes from the TV show):
 - Blocking the sun – the *Who Shot Mr. Burns?* episode;
 - Cutting off the head of the town statue – the *Tell-tale Head* episode;
 - Showing the availability to build for the town a dangerous railway in order to run away later on with stolen money – the *Marge vs. the Monorail* episode;
 - Starting a website that would spread rumours about the citizens of the town - the *Computer Wore Menace Shoes* episode;
 - Placing a fake angel skeleton as an artefact – the *Lisa the Sceptic* episode;

- Bringing the World Cup in South Park so that the fans would get mad – the *The Cartridge Family* episode;
- Shaking all the beer cans so that they produce a massive explosion – the *So It's Come to This: A Simpsons Clip Show* episode;
- Giving up world domination in order to run and join the circus – the *Homerpalooza* and *Bart Carny* episodes;
- Replacing cherries in the chocolate covered cherries with two-month old mayonnaise – a fictional *The Simpsons* episode advertised during this *South Park* episode.

The episode showcases another crucial element of humour in general and of satire in particular: success (situated at the conjunction of understanding and acquisition) is determined by whether the public already knows the cultural reference and agrees with its point of view: 'satire persuades only the previously persuaded because in order to understand a satire as a satire, a person needs to see that the moral violations which are presented in a deadpan way in the satire do indeed constitute moral violations'. (Veatch, 1998, 203) Veatch's *Theory of Humor* also provides an interesting explanation of why some *South Park* fans consider *The Simpsons* passé, while some *The Simpsons* fans consider *South Park*'s satire humourless: as new generations of cultural consumers arise, so do new ways of understanding and acquiring meaning, not all available to the previous generations; while Cartman is both funny and frightening to some, he is simply a humourless exaggeration to others, in no way comparable to the prankster that is Bart Simpson. On the other hand, Cartman is seen as the embodiment of the satiric approach to the duality of modern day sensibilities and morals.

The Simpsons and Family Guy

Family Guy was frequently criticized by Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons*, and he included this critique of the show and what he considers plagiarism in some of his episodes.

A strange intertextuality is this created between the two animated series, as *Family Guy* also contains critical references about *The Simpsons*, further feeding the media rumours about their rivalry.

The Simpsons uses intertextuality only at a negative, critical level when it comes to *Family Guy*, while being rather balanced when dealing with *South Park* (after the *Cartoon Wars* episodes that referenced Mohammed, *The Simpsons* had Bart write on the blackboard 'South Park, we'd stand by you if we weren't so scared.' as a subtle sign of solidarity):

- In the *Missionary: Impossible* episode, FOX organizes a pledge drive in order to raise money for the network. When standing in front of a television set showing the *Family Guy* logo, the reporter says: 'So if you don't want to see crude, lowbrow programming disappear from the airwaves please, call now.'
- In the *Tree House of Horror XIII* episode, Homer creates an army of clones, each being progressively dumber than the real Homer; one of the clones is Peter Griffin. This is one of the most obvious references *The Simpsons* makes about *Family Guy*, conveying both a plagiarism accusation and an evaluation of the quality of the show.
- In *The Italian Bob* episode, one of Peter Griffin's photos is shown in an album containing criminals and labelled *Plagiarismo*, while the photo of Stan Smith, from *American Dad*, another Seth MacFarlane creation (considered by some critics a copy of *Family Guy*), is under

the label *Plagiarismo di Plagiarismo*. Groening uses intertextuality to criticize not just the two shows, but also the type of humour they use.

Of course, *Family Guy* does not shy away from intertextuality when referring to *The Simpsons*, acting almost as a repository of popular culture references; their use falls into the following categories:

- **Parodies of sequences made famous by *The Simpsons*** or characters like Homer and Marge showing up in *Family Guy*. For example, in the *PTV* episode, Stewie rides his bike home, just like Marge drives her car home in the opening sequence; but when he arrives in the drive way and Homer appears, the latter doesn't just get in the house, like in the original sequence, instead slams into the door and falls. Peter opens the door and says: 'Hey, Stewie! Who the hell is that?'
- **References to the role *The Simpsons* played in American popular culture** and critiques of that role. In the *Mother Tucker* episode there is a line Brian delivers, telling Stewie 'I'm more of a sell-out than you were when you did those Butterfinger commercials.' He is, of course, referencing the 1990s series of ads *The Simpsons* did for Butterfinger ('Nobody better lay a finger on my Butterfinger.')
- **References to characters or actions** from *The Simpsons* without them appearing in the scenes. In the online game Stewie has a scatological reaction when he receives orders related to *The Simpsons*.
- **Crossover:** in 2014 *Family Guy* started its 13th season by doing a crossover episode with *The Simpsons*, an endeavour facilitated by the fact that both shows were airing on the FOX network. While it received mixed reviews, *The Simpsons Guy* brought forward a different type of intertextuality than we have seen before with these three series, a collaborative one, with the mem-

bers of the voice casts working together for the episode.

Both *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* have passionate fans and critics. They have both won important awards and are a commercial success in addition to becoming reference TV shows. Nevertheless, more frequently than *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* is considered superficial, with an almost idiotic approach to humour, favouring non-sequiturs instead of coherent storylines. Those that see *Family Guy* as an envelope pushing animated series tend to consider that *The Simpsons* is sometimes boring, creatively worn-out and passé. This is often referred to as *jump the shark*, a throwback to the iconic American sitcom *Happy Days* that after gradually losing relevance aired an episode (Fox, 2010) that featured one of the main characters, Arthur *The Fonz* Fonzarelli, jumping a shark. That scene entered popular culture and the expression *jump the shark* is used any time a show starts engaging in implausible or nonspecific scenarios in order to advance the narrative, marking the beginning of the end.

One of the main reasons *Family Guy* is considered relevant is that it does not try to create popular culture, but instead uses what is already formed, tested and made current by other cultural producers targeting the same 15 to 30 years old audience. It picks and chooses what the target finds funny, while always trying to keep the shock value of it humour higher than other TV shows. No one denies the fact that *Family Guy* is an unapologetic, lowbrow jokes show that makes fun of anything and anyone, uses all the cultural references a dynamic popular culture consumer can think of, all the while making a title of glory out of it. The show does not try to hide its lack of a coherent style, its attraction and originality being the fact that it tries to incorporate and engulf as many elements as possible from other popular culture products. Moreover, its humour

is cruel, absurd, does not claim to give any morality lessons and lets the audience make its own selection of signification and build its own meaning. As a product of popular culture, the show offers a series of possibilities to control and direct the audience, although it does not force it to co-participate (Fiske, 1989a) and this freedom may very well be one of the attractions of the show. *Family Guy* can be viewed as a (successful) attempt to shatter the myths of the American culture through their repeated exposure to a new perspective, indexing the products of popular culture each episode. In doing so, it has inadvertently developed an authentic and original characteristic: it can be considered a **product of products**.

Conclusions

Each of the three animated series creates an unusual universe, individualized through a particular trait: *The Simpsons* is the first to coherently tackle the issue of the dysfunctional middle class American family, *South Park* initiates a strong satire of the politically correct American society, and *Family Guy* makes fun of anything and everything in a non-sequitur, schizoid collection of popular culture references. Each show creates its own style and, thus, its own genre, but the signifiers they use create meaning only in the society that generated them or in societies familiarized with that particular cultural production. The moment we take the shows out of their popular culture environment, meaning is lost. This is best shown by the failed attempt to adapt and air *The Simpsons* in the Arab world. The reason? They ignored the *encoding/decoding model*. The encoding done by the creator and script writers of *The Simpsons* is considered one of the best done in Western popular culture; nevertheless, popular culture relies less on the encoding

done by the creator and more on the decoding done by the reader/consumer. The show could not be *read* in the Arab world because the *reader* did not possess the necessary cultural knowledge. 'The force of his own cultural stereotypes will be so strong that it will distort what he sees.' (Hall, 1989 (1976), 53)

But if they are so different, what connects these shows and what helps them become better integrated in the heterogeneous world of popular culture? Their success is not due only to the meanings and unexpected combinations generated by their creators, but also to the recognizable traits of the elements they use and to the fact that the public has the necessary knowledge to decode the messages, sometimes adding their own level of interpretation. These aspects are directly related to one of the main characteristics of the three shows, intertextuality; it is used not only to create meaning, but also to underline and showcase the central ideas behind the episodes and the series.

Of course, the issues these shows address are many and catch most of the realities of the American society, but each show has its own way of using intertextuality and humour. However, the types of intertextuality and the techniques they use are similar, so we can safely conclude that the three animated series are similar in technique (allusions, parody, plagiarism, crossover) and typology (intertextuality is often deliberate and obligatory, particularly when dealing with inter-referentiality between the shows), but different in their narrative strategy and desired comedic outcome.

Intertextuality is often used in character development, but also in the advancement of the storyline. It plays an important role in underlining character traits or in defining a situation not by *genus proximum*, but by placing it in a certain cultural area. Similarly, intertextuality can be used to define identity and to bring it to the forefront of the story (at

the end of the *Da Boom* episode in *Family Guy* it is revealed that the whole episode was a dream of Pamela Ewing from *Dallas* who, upon waking up, runs to Bobby Ewing and recounts the dream; his incredulous answer is 'What is *Family Guy*?'). It is not uncommon to find self-referentiality in *Family Guy*, as it is the show that uses it with the highest frequency by comparison to the other two.

In addition, intertextuality can be used at various degrees of complexity; it can go from simple allusions to the construction of whole episodes. *Family Guy* is a great example of the first level of complexity, where the reader is not required to invest anything else but (a rather quantitative) knowledge about the American popular culture; the decoding process is thus fairly simple, also enabled by the fact that storylines are secondary to the punch lines and jokes can often be enjoyed even if taken outside the narrative. On the other hand, even though *Family Guy* is the one to have developed a crossover episode (*The Simpsons Guy*), it is *South Park* that raised the intertextuality bar through episodes such as *Cartoon Wars I* and *II* (inter-referential), *Make Love, Not Warcraft* or *Good Times with Weapons*. Finally, *The Simpsons* uses intertextuality mainly for its parody value, investing more in the develop-

ment of its storyline and situational humour, even though it does not shy away from allusions and direct references to its competitors.

Over the years the three animated shows developed almost a love-hate relationship that is reflected in how they deal with each other's presence in the same media universe; inter-referentiality is at the core of how the shows approach intertextuality when it comes to competition and, in some cases, they go as far as explicitly integrating characters and plot lines into their own production process. Therefore, Peter Griffin appears in *The Simpsons*, Homer Simpson can be seen in *Family Guy*, while Bart Simpson and *Family Guy* appear in *South Park* in two episodes, *Cartoon Wars I* and *II*, where intertextuality reaches multiple levels: action, lines, characters and even the drawing style.

The accelerated development of the American society led to the consolidation of such a strong and dynamic popular culture that it has reached a point where it tries to disavow and even destroy its products almost as soon as it has created them. The three animated shows have become an integral part of a cultural mechanism that not only deconstructs its products, but is also cannibalising them by continuously pushing the limits of intertextuality.

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