

Semiotic Analysis of *South Park* Cartoon Comedy Season I

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ABSTRAK

Skripsi ini adalah sebuah analisis semiotika dari acara komedi kartun terkenal Amerika, *South Park*. Dengan fokus kepada musim pertama penayangan, penelitian ini membahas tiga belas episode dari serial tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mejabarkan tanda-tanda dalam serial ini dan menjelaskan koda di mana tanda-tanda tersebut diatur. Metode pengumpulan data didasarkan pada konsep *important sign* (tanda penting) oleh Berger dan dianalisis menggunakan metode analisis semiotika Chandler, termasuk di dalamnya model tiga bagian koda. Penelitian ini menemukan 21 tanda penting berikut dengan makna yang dikandungnya. Pada tahap analisis data, tanda-tanda yang telah terkumpul dianalisis dengan memberikan penjelasan ringkas dari teks sebagaimana yang dijelaskan Chandler. Tanda-tanda tersebut dijabarkan dengan menggunakan tingkatan penandaan dari Hjemslev sebagai penjelasan terhadap pesan dan nilai dalam dua tingkatan makna, denotasi dan konotasi. Setelah isu-isu utama dalam pesan dan nilai dari tanda-tanda berhasil dikumpulkan, analisis terhadap koda dilakukan dengan didasarkan pada isu-isu utama tersebut. Hasil penelitian berupa sub-koda yang dibagi ke dalam tiga koda utama. Koda Sosial sebagai dimensi sosial-budaya dari tanda mencakup kritik sosial, hak asasi manusia, serta toleransi ras dan etnik. Karakterisasi dan humor sarkastis termasuk ke dalam koda tekstual, media tekstual dalam menyampaikan pesan dan nilai. Kemunafikan sosial sebagai koda inepretatif mengungkap perspektif umum dalam menginterpretasi tanda.

Kata Kunci: *semiotika, tanda, koda, South Park*

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a semiotic analysis of a popular American cartoon comedy, *South Park*. Focusing on the first season of its airing, the study elaborates thirteen episodes of the series. The study is aimed to analyze the signs in the show and to describe the codes in which those signs are organized. The method in collecting the data is based on Berger's concept of important sign and is analyzed with Chandler's method of semiotic analysis, including the three-part model of codes. The study finds 21 important signs along with their meanings. In analyzing the data, the collected signs are analyzed by giving a brief explanation of the text as proposed by Chandler. Those sign is elaborated within Hjemslev's order of signification to describe the message and value in two levels of meaning, denotation and connotation. After the main issues in the signs' messages and values are collected, the analysis of codes is conducted by referring to those main issues. The study results in some sub-codes divided into three main codes. Social codes as the socio-cultural dimension of sign include social critique, human rights, as well as race and ethnic tolerance. Characterization and sarcastic humor are classified as textual codes, the textual medium in delivering messages and values. Social hypocrisy as the interpretative code reveals the general perspective in interpreting sign.

Keywords: *semiotics, sign, codes, South Park*

1. Introduction

The use of language spreads widely from language in daily use to the wider context of communication, such as political discussion, academic purpose, and mass media. Mostly, the use of language in this wider context is different from its original function. Language is not only used as a mean of communication but also to express feeling, or even to imply perspectives on certain subjects. The way language is used in television, for instance, needs more than just a mere interpretation to be understood properly. Any content in television is served in numerous forms of performance and often makes people attracted to watch. These various ways are what likely attract researchers to study the phenomenon of language use in mass media, as I attracted to analyse an American cartoon comedy entitled South Park.

The series of South Park has aroused many controversies since the first time it was aired in August 1997. Due to the way the show serves comedy, many critiques come from various groups of society including religious groups and legal social institutions. One of them is from the conservative advocacy group, Parents Television Council (PTC) that criticized South Park for "over-the-top vulgar content" and "tastelessness", condemning the show as a "curdled, malodorous black hole of Comedy Central vomit" that "shouldn't have been made" (Bozell, 1998). The show somehow survived after many critiques and trial regarding vulgarity, racism, lampoons of religion, government and so on. This set of controversies is what actually attracts me to analyse the show. I would like to find out how this television show generates meaning and what it is trying to imply. In order to do so, this study applies semiotics analysis to examine the show.

Basically, semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings. Signs include words, gestures, images, sounds, and objects (Chandler, 2002: 1). Ferdinand de Saussure in *Course in General Linguistics* (1959) describes that Semiotics sees language as a sign system and the analysis involves looking at the sign and connecting it to its meaning. This study is further developed by many experts including Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, so that today it can be applied to film, theatre, music, architecture and many things that can be taken as signs. South Park can be thought of as a text and that is a system of signs, and the meaning in the series is generated from the signs and from the system that organises the signs together. This system is not obvious and somehow it has to be elaborated from the text.

2. Background of the Study

2.1. Identification of the Problem

In semiotic perspective, the series of South Park is seen as a system of signs that generates interpretation of meanings. Some interpretations may lead to controversies. Therefore, this research aims to (1) describe the signs in South Park Television Show Season I, and (2) elaborate the codes or systems in which the signs are organised.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The study of signs (Chandler, 2002: 1) is the briefest definition of semiotics and the most familiar among people. It was originally proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) in *Course in General Linguistics* (1915) with the term ‘Semiology’, a science of sign (Cobley, 2001: 3). The term ‘Semiotics’ was originated by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and became the dominant term used in the study of sign. The term ‘sign’ in semiotics is different from what we understand in everyday use.

In semiotics, sign can take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects (Chandler, 2002: 2). However, as stated by Peirce ‘Nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’ (in Chandler, 2002: 3-4). It refers to everything which ‘stands for’ something else. Saussure then proposed the model of the sign, stating that a sign consists of ‘a sound image’ and ‘a concept’ (Saussure, 1958: 66-67). He also developed new terms in defining this division that sign contains two components, ‘the signifier’ (‘sound-image’) and the signified (‘concept’). The following figure will show the relationship between signifier and signified in Saussure’s model of the sign.



Figure 1. Saussure’s model of the sign (In Chandler, 2002: 18)

Both signifier and signified must always be taken together. The combination of these two terms constructs meaning. They, as stated by Saussure, are retro-verso of a single sheet of paper and cannot be separated each other (Saussure, 1958: 67).

The study of sign is further developed by Barthes and Hjemslev that there are two different levels of meaning, connotation and denotation. The distinction between connotations and denotations applies to the signified of a sign. Denotation is generally defined as the “literal” meaning of a sign (when referring to a word); whereas the connotations are the socio-cultural or personal associations (Chandler, 2002: 141).

Connotations might become so directly related to the sign that, within a given social group, they seem to be denotations. However, there are some aspects that help differentiate them. While a sign's denotations are (generally) permanent, a sign's connotations tend to change over time.

Saussure's model of the sign focuses mostly on denotation. Barthes attempts to include the connotational dimension to understand a sign. Barthes adopts Hjelmslev's notion of different orders of signification to explain the connotation and denotation classification, as the following figure shows.



Figure 2. Orders of Signification (Hjelmslev in Chandler, 2002: 142)

In the first order of signification (or denotation), a sign consists of a signifier and a signified. In a second-order of signification (or connotation), a sign operates using the first order of signification as the signifier. In this model, connotation itself is a sign whose signifier is another sign; this allows for a chain of connotations.

In semiotics, language is seen a sign system that express ideas and is 'comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc.' (Saussure, 1958: 16). This study is further developed by many experts including Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco so that not only to any form of language usage, Semiotics can be applied to film, theatre, music, architecture and many things that can be taken as signs. Semiotics sees text or media and other forms considered as signs as being like language. It is stated by Culler that social and cultural phenomena are not 'simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning', and therefore, signs (Culler, 1976: 24). A text can be viewed as being similar to speech and as implying grammars or systems that make it meaningful.

2.3. Methodology

The study applies Sudaryanto's (1993) three-part model of research methods. Moreover in its application, the research is also supported by Chandler's model of semiotic analysis (2005), which emphasizes the process of analysing signs and codes, and some other experts' ideas in qualitative research.

The data of this research were taken by applying the referential and observational method by means of the writer was not involved directly to the source. All episodes in this research were taken from the official broadcasting website of *South Park* television show, <http://www.southparkstudios.com>. The parameter in selecting the data is Pierce's concept of sign that something is considered as a sign if it stands for anything other than itself (Pierce in Chandler, 2002: 3-4). He explains some characteristics that a sign at least has; first, the physical form of a sign which may vary from words, clause, sentence, image; and, second, it must refer to something other than itself and it has to be recognized by people as a sign (Pierce in Chandler, 2002: 4-6).

However, this parameter is so expansive that in the data collecting process, I limited the data from a social discourse perspective or as Berger would put it, semiotic analysis involves the 'Important Signifiers' (Berger, 2000: 35). As supported by Chandler (2002: 148), semiotics treats any kinds of text as signs which have meaning to the members of certain cultural group. Therefore, to conduct the analysis, the signs were collected following these criteria:

- a. It must have a physical form (it varies from words to utterance, images, gestures, scene etc.)
- b. It must refer to something other than itself
- c. It must be used and recognised by people as a sign
- d. It has meaning to the members of certain cultural group as it stands for issues in social discourse

In analyzing the data, the research applies Chandler's model of semiotic analysis. The first step in analyzing the data is identifying the text which includes the brief explanation of the text (in this research, *South Park* episodes) and the description of the important signs. As suggested by Chandler (2005), offering a clear explanation of the text may allow one to recognize it more easily and help to come up with the analysis. On the same tone, Kriyanto (2006: 45-46) proposed that a qualitative research tends to be explanatory where the researcher is the medium in interpreting the data. The description of the sign is elaborated by using Hjemslev's framework of Order of Signification (in Chandler, 2002: 142-143) to uncover what the sign represents.

The description of codes is conducted after all the data is analyzed to reveal the systems in which the signs operate (Berger, 2000: 30). In this research, the codes are conducted after all signs in the series are interpreted. Then, the results of the interpretation

are collected and categorized into some major issues. These issues are then recapitulated and reorganized into the division of codes as proposed by Chandler (2002: 149).

3. Review of Related Literature

Before presenting the analysis, I would like to review some works related to this study. The first is a study conducted by Clodagh Ni Chearbhaill (2008), a semiotic analysis to a popular drama series, *Prison Break*. The series is well known by its storyline about political hypocrisy, freedom and justice. Seeing the drama series as a mass culture, by means of it is 'mass-produced and mass-consumed' (Chearnail, 2008: 2), the author finds the significance of the analysis from how the series captivate the audience using signs and deliver messages which are mostly about freedom and justice. The analysis figures out that a drama series can have a strong referential function representing many aspects of reality. Although this article does not provide any further explanation of codes, it is supported by the description of discourse that appears in the drama series.

The second is from Jonas Henderson (2006) studying semiotic analysis of two music videos. He takes two music videos which share some interesting features, music videos for the songs *Afrika Shox* by Leftfield featuring Afrika Bambaataa and the U2 cover *Sunday Bloody Sunday* by Saul Williams. His finding is that a cultural text is a reflection on society. The black man is a metonym; his image is a symbol of black people as a whole. Metonymy, making a part of reality standing for the whole, and connotation are important ways in which signs carry meanings. The research actually uncovers the issue of racism hidden in the music videos. By applying semiotic analysis in accordance to Barthes and the order of signification by Hjemsself, the author serves an ideal research of music videos.

4. Semiotic Analysis of *South Park* Cartoon Comedy

Following the criteria explained in the previous part of this article, this study finds 21 important signs in 13 episodes of *South Park*. The collected signs are elaborated in both levels of meaning, denotation and connotation. Knowing the actual, not literal, meaning of signs helps in elaborating the codes in which those signs are organized. Chandler proposes an analysis model that, in explaining the signs in certain media, researchers need to identify the text in order to describe the actual meaning. In this article, the text includes the storyline, the character and many other aspects influenced in meaning making. *South Park* comes up with different storyline and ideas in its episodes. Therefore, the signs in the series also cover various issues. The following table describes the signification order in this study.

Table 1. The Findings

No	Important Signs	Episode	Connotation	Denotation
1	“Kick the baby”	1	To kick, to hit the baby with feet	The tendency of most people nowadays to avoid the duty of taking care of their own baby
2	“I’m not fat, I’m big boned”	1	Cartman’s explanation that he is not fat	There is nothing wrong with being fat.
3	“We have experienced with all beings of earth and we have learned that you are the most intelligent and wise”	1	You (the cows) are the most intelligent and wise creature on earth	In some ways, human is not better than cows
4	“He’s a black guy, isn’t he?”	2	He (Chef) is a black guy	the African-American stereotype happened in society
5	“After I’m on television, I’m gonna be totally famous”	2	Cartman’s pride on his appearance on television	Gaining fame through television in by any means necessary
6	Weight Gain 4000	2	An advertisement about a product to gain more weight and shape up the muscle	How advertisement can be so misleading
7	“It’s coming right for us”	3	An excuse to shoot any protected animals	How people can easily make an excuse from the government and law by manipulating the policy
8	“I want you to call Inside Edition, Rescue 911, and Entertainment Tonight”	3	A Call To The Television Shows To Cover An Incident In <i>South Park</i>	The government officials care more about their fame than any other troubles happening
9	Sparky, The Homosexual dog	4	A strange happening of a dog in <i>South Park</i>	People tendency to treat homosexuals in bad stereotype forgetting humanity
10	“Why don’t you go to San Francisco with other Jews?”	5	Cartman’s anger toward Kyle, the Jew kid	The way society put a negative label on the Jews
11	“I tried to play God and I failed... Perhaps we shouldn’t toy with God’s Creation”	5	Memphesto’s regret doing a mess with genetic engineering by trying to create human	Something like human creation should be done naturally without any human intervention
12	Terrance and Phillip Show	6	A new comedy show with bad effect for children	The authors of <i>South Park</i> ’s reaction toward the protests against them
13	“You’re so obsessed about ending your life but you’re not thinking about his”	6	Stan’s grandfather should not ask his grandchild to kill him since it will result bad thing	A message for those who support euthanasia that killing somebody is always a big deal and we should not toy with that.

Table 1. The Findings (Cont.)

No	Important Signs	Episode	Connotation	Denotation
14	“It’s Adolf Hitler costume. Sieg Heil. Sieg Heil”	7	Cartman’s happiness wearing Adolf Hitler costume on Halloween	A statement that Hitler was terrifying enough to be a Halloween costume
15	“You shouldn’t dislike somebody just because they’re different”	8	Chef’s advice to the boys to not mock the new kid in school	A message about living in diversity
16	Jesus versus Satan	8	A boxing match held in <i>South Park</i>	Something evil may look so promising that makes people deceived
17	“You don’t actually get involved with a child’s life. You’re supposed to just send money, and once in a while, they write you a letter”	9	An advice that children cannot adopt another child	People’s hypocrisy towards the needy
18	“It’s hard to be a Jew on Christmas”	10	Kyle’s loneliness in Christmas	A matter that restrains the perfection of ethnic tolerance
19	“Damn this beautiful face of mine! Damn it to hell!”	11	Mr. Garrison expression to the mess that was caused by his beautiful face	A critique to people tendency to have instant solution such as plastic surgery
20	“People who want a lot of power always end up dead”	12	Kyle’s expression seeing the defeat of Barbra Streisand	A moral message that greediness leads to failure
21	Cartman’s struggle to find his father	13	Cartman’s journey seeking for his father	The importance of a harmony within a family

*Signs with punctuation marks are linguistic signs (sentence, word, phrase, etc.)

**Signs with no punctuation marks are non-linguistic signs (image, gesture, scene, etc.)

The Codes in *South Park* Cartoon Comedy Season I

1. Social Codes

The interpretation of signs is always influenced by the structural frameworks, called codes, in which those signs make sense. The codes are mostly social since in broader sense, a sign always appears in its relation to others within a socio-cultural dimension (Chandler, 2005; Berger, 2000: 30-31). However, it is important to make a clear division to some major issues in analyzing signs in the episodes of *South Park*. Therefore, some distinguishable points are presented here as the sub-codes of Social Codes.

a. Social Critique

As a reflection of society, *South Park* comes up with critiques toward, mostly, people's attitude and tendency. Social critique appears to be a framework organizing signs aimed to the viewers of *South Park* as parts of society. The codes of social critique actually cover some major issue in the series from common tendency like in Sign 1, the fear of being fat in Sign 2, how people are often misled by the advertisement as seen in Sign 6, to the hypocrisy toward the needy in Sign 17. The form of critique is also used in Sign 12 as 'the backlash against backlash' (Stone and Parker in Zeidner, 2000), another reaction of the authors of *South Park* against the protests aimed to them. The social critique is utilized in interpreting signs so that they can act as a reminder for the society on how it is going. Some signs in the series even contain messages such as the moral of human creation in Sign 11, and the message about living in diversity in Sign 15. The society is always dynamic and changes over time. The presence of critiques can help in its development to be better. Although the critiques in *South Park* are mostly aimed to American society, the messages are still applicable for any society in general.

b. Human Rights

Despite the controversies that the series arises, *South Park* brings along some messages concerning the human rights. The codes of human rights help us to frame the interpretation of signs to some controversial issues in society. Through signs, *South Park* underlines its viewpoint toward those issues. For instance in Sign 9, *South Park* emphasizes the minor label put on the homosexuals, and reminds that regarding their sexual divergence, we should treat them as human beings. This message appears since in reality people tend to treat those homosexuals in a bad stereotype and forget humanity. *South Park* also stresses the issue of euthanasia, the assisted suicide, in Sign 13. Here, the authors of *South Park* implicitly express their standpoint on the issue that euthanasia will leave a great burden for those who assist the suicide since ending one's life is always a big deal. Therefore, those who want to commit euthanasia should also think about the people they are leaving behind. With the framework of human rights, *South Park* expresses its standpoint in some issues that are still left as controversies and reminds its viewer about humanity.

c. Racial and Ethnic Tolerance

South Park comes out with the ideas that all human beings regarding their skin color, religious beliefs, and ethnic should be treated equally. This framework of thought helps in delivering the message of racial and ethnic tolerance through signs. The presence of

Chef for example, represents the black people as a whole. *South Park* then satirizes the way society puts on negative label to the African-American in Sign 4. However in all episodes, Chef is portrayed as a wise man and very helpful in solving any problems in *South Park*. Even the kids believe more in Chef than their teachers in school. This is a support toward the African-American that they function equally as the others in society as stated by Chef in Sign 15 that we should not dislike people just because they are different. The show even gets praised from most black communities in America due to its comedic way of conveying other races' perceptions of 'how black people must feel when hearing the word' (Jones, 2008). Another significant portrayal of ethnic tolerance in *South Park* is that of the Jews. Represented by the presence of Kyle, a Jew kid, the show displays how the minority group struggle within the exclusion that the society put them into. As seen in Sign 10 and Sign 18, *South Park* emphasizes the stereotype put on the Jews as the reflection of what happen in reality. However, the show also comes up with the message to treat people equally as seen in the tenth episode 'Mr. Hankey the Christmas poo'. Therefore, although some Jewish communities still blame *South Park* for the depiction of racism due to its vulgar and sarcastic humor, some others praised *South Park* for accurately portraying what it is like for a young Jew to bear prejudice as an ethnic minority (Bolton, 1998).

2. Textual Codes

While social codes talk about the socio cultural dimension of signs, textual codes deal with the metalingual function of signs (Chandler, 2002: 158). The form and appearance of a sign influences the way it is interpreted. However, Chandler states that textual codes do not 'determine' meanings but rather tend to 'constrain' them (Chandler, 2002: 158). It is due to its function as a framework in analyzing signs. The term to 'constrain' meaning is used since a sign already have meaning and the textual codes help to direct it to a proper interpretation.

a. Characterization

The major characters in *South Park* play the important roles in interpreting the signs. The series employ four 4th grader kids as the major characters. The usage of kids as the major characters is aimed not to serve the show for children, but rather a symbol that the series of *South Park* is presented through kid's innocence without any hypocrisy. This gives the viewers a framework interpreting so that the message and the value or even the critique that the series bring, are presented bluntly with no hypocrisy. The kid characterization also becomes a problem that causes some protests toward the show.

Since many critiques and satires are presented bluntly, some people criticize *South Park* for its crude language and dark humor.

b. Sarcastic Humor

Many jokes in *South Park* can be considered as sarcastic since the way they serve comedy is often offensive for some people. Some even find they are insulting and improper to be broadcasted on television. Regarding the fact that it is offensive, this sarcastic ways of serving humor operate in emphasizing the value and the critique in the signs. This sarcastic humor appears in the series in many forms. One of them is the portrayal of taboo matter, such as the depiction of Jesus in Sign 16. For the Christian, Jesus is a holy figure that should not be portrayed with comic effect and therefore, the church take the episode as an insult to Christianity. However, the message is quite supporting since it suggests to not falling easily for the trick of evil. The sarcastic humor also appears in the form of verbal language as Cartman insulted Kyle as a Jew in Sign 10. While some Jewish Communities find it too offensive, the sign emphasizes exactly the way people treat or at least feel toward the Jews. Therefore, some other communities agree that *South Park* portrays how hard a Jew kid lives as the minority group as seen in Sign 18. Despite the fact that some sides find it is insulting, the sarcastic humor appears to be a framework in emphasizing the value and meaning through signs.

3. Interpretative Codes

Perception plays an important role in interpreting signs as proposed by Jameson that perceptual systems affect to the direct the usage language (in Chandler, 2002: 150). It influences one's mind in framing signs and capturing the message. A single sign may have different references according to the perceptual codes in which the sign is interpreted. The analysis of signs in *South Park* results in some perceptions that can be used to capture the message that the show carries. One of them is that of social hypocrisy. As a representative of reality, *South Park* always comes up with the reference to social hypocrisy. It brings forward bluntly what people in the real world tend to conceal in order to be accepted in society. As in Sign 17 the passiveness toward the needy is displayed as a critique to the society who tends to think so. Almost all signs in the series have reference to the reality and *South Park* tends to see the world as a massive amount of hypocrisy. Therefore, it continually criticizes the society through signs.

5. Conclusion

Semiotics sees any kind of text as a system of signs often utilized in delivering messages and value. Some message can be easily recognized while some others need a deeper understanding or interpretation. Therefore, the analysis of signs leads to a set of interpretations which assists in decoding the messages and values that those signs carry.

Focusing on signs which have meaning to the members of certain cultural group, this semiotic analysis elaborates the signs in *South Park* cartoon comedy season I and describes the codes in which those signs operate. According to the concept, that a sign may appear in the form of images, gestures, and words, the signs in this series appear in many forms, such as verbal language, scenes, and characters. They cover some issues mostly concern on social discourse. The issues spread widely from people's tendency and behavior, the advertisements on television, moral message about racial and ethnic tolerance to the value of having religious faith.

Those signs operate within structural frameworks called codes. Employing the tripartite model of codes by Chandler, the research elaborates some codes which organize the signs in the series. The social codes include social critique, human right, and racial tolerance. Characterization and Sarcastic humor are the division of textual codes. The interpretative codes found in *South Park* results in the perception of the hypocrisy of the world.

Through semiotic analysis, *South Park* is seen not only as an entertaining cartoon comedy but also as a text carrying signs with messages and values. Some believe that *South Park* brings bad effects for the audience due to its crude language and sarcastic humor. Regarding those negative reactions, *South Park* also receives compliments since the messages carried by the series often touch the society. Through semiotic analysis, *South Park* can be considered as an educational discourse since it often comes up with critiques and ideas building up the society. Although the language and the humor served in the show are not proper for children, the messages are quite touchy for mature audiences. This research, through Semiotic analysis, elaborates the series of *South Park* by its signs organized by codes in order to interpret the message and the value in a proper way. Therefore, Comedy Central as the official broadcaster should watch carefully the intended audiences for the show.

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