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<center>*South Park*: Wannabes, Victims and The Death Camp of Tolerance</center>

Most people realize that popular culture is, mostly, a massive seething coil of competing trends. Of course, trends themselves are mass movements of people copying whatever they've been told is the latest, hippest thing. Some media presences manage to capitalize on this by showing up all the sheep-like imitation for what it is. In order to do this they have to pick apart whatever the latest movement is and discover what drives it. *South Park* is one such presence. With its solid thirteen season run of intense (as well as obscene and absurdist) critique, *South Park* has spent a dogged career ripping-on any fad that manages to weasel its way into the limelight. Inevitably, the cultural force most mocked by this Comedy Central cartoon is imitation.

South Park is not the first to notice the importance of imitation. Before South Park creators, Tray Parker and Matt Stone, were born, French critic René Girard was subverting the trend-obsessed realm of academia. His mimetic theory made a simple initial statement: we all desire according to the desire of another. This means we always imitate or mimic the other. However, imitation can be complex, and Dr. Girard has spent his career enumerating and illuminating its complex structures. As we will see, *South Park* too, has considered some of these structures, including, negative imitation, the surrogate victim mechanism and the modern concern for victims in just three of its many mimesis-conscious episodes.

In season twelve's *The Ungroundable*, *South Park* takes René Girard's mimetic theory for granted in its show down between classic Goth Kids and up and coming *Twilight*-vampire-wannabes. In Girard's theory, we only ever want what other people seem to have. Most often this is some way of "being". For example, the dangerous, cool vibe that *Twilight* star, Rob Pattinson, projects so well. In *The*

Ungroundable, this is what sweet little Butters attempts to duplicate (figure 1). However, his efforts simply copy those of the kids at school, who copy *Twilight*. Observe the chain of imitations—pure mimesis.

Figure 1: Butters in *Twilight* gear.

What Matt Parker does in this episode, is show how imitation (mimesis) can get even more complicated. Goths clearly resent "the vamp kids" encroachment on their trademark style. When the Goth Kids confront the Vamps, mimetic rivalry is underway. This just means that the two groups will compete to keep their version of the dark, disinterested style identified by their unique titles: Vamp or Goth. In this game, identities are at risk and, with the exploding *Twilight* fad ramping up, the passé Goths are losing. One of the Goth kids grasps their situation, saying, "Let's just face it. They bogarted our style. Everyone's going to think we're trying to be butt-hole vampires now. We might as well go to the frikin Gap and buy normal clothes". At this point, the episode is really getting into the complicating dynamics of mimesis, which is not necessarily simple imitation. In the next scene, we see the Goth kids wearing Gap clothes and cursing their narrow escape from one homogenized fate into another. In order to attempt to distinguish themselves and have an identity, they have resorted to what Girard calls "negative

imitation". Girard explains: "[m]odern society is no longer anything but a *negative imitation* and the effort to leave the beaten paths forces everyone inevitably into the same ditch." The Goth turned Gap kids have only shown that, despite their claims of originality they still imitate others. Like always, they have to do the opposite of the prevailing trend. As seen in *The Ungroundable*, mimetic rivalry usually escalates. In the real world, this can often lead to violence.

In season four's, *The Wacky Molestation Adventure*, Parker and Stone splice together a variety of apocalyptic pop-culture episodes to depict a clear image of the violent surrogate victim mechanism, which Girard says, manages mimetic rivalry when it starts to get out of control. This episode has a lot in common with humanity's real stories about how culture came to be the way it is, as explained by Girard in his book, *Violence and the Sacred*. In brief, Girard argues that, since the time of our hominid ancestors, hyper-imitative behaviour has brought humans into conflicts over food or sexual objects, which threaten to upset the relative peace and safety human beings need to reproduce. (Babies need a lot of things that aren't present if fighting and killing are constant.) Girard hypothesizes that, during a brawl generated by mimetic behaviour turned violent, our early hominid ancestors adapted by arbitrarily singling out one of their hyper-imitative friends to collectively destroy. Since everybody turned on this person at once— seeing him or her as the problem—when he or she was killed peace returned to the group. This shocked the protohumans out of their hazy animal state. They saw the body of their dead companion as sacred. Instead of being seen as a problem, the victim is thought of as a deity who brings peace. The peace only lasts a while and then the whole process is repeated. The stories that come out of this process are myth. The rules that are made up to avoid renewed violence are call prohibitions and the deliberate repetition of the process is called ritual. These three elements make up what we think of as religion and culture. Myth, prohibition and ritual are all present in *The Wacky Molestation Adventure*. In this episode, everything starts with a rivalry between parents and kids. When Kyle's parents won't let him go to a out of town show, he accuses them of molesting him and they go to prison. After the rest of the kids see the freedom

Kyle has, all out war is declared on parental authority. Eventually, all the parents are accused of molestation, imprisoned, and the town is left for the kids to fight over. South Park is transformed into a post-apocalyptic landscape, where primitive myths, rituals and prohibitions are instituted to retain a bare minimum of social stability. A tribal leader, Stan uses cave paintings to tell "outlander"-captive-adults the town's new myth of origin, or as he puts it "The Story of the Before Time". It runs,

> Way back in the long, long ago we all lived by the Birthgiver's [parent's] laws, but the birthgivers were unfair. And so, ...[Cartman] came up with a way to make all the Birthgivers disappear, by using the magic "M" word [molestation] soon we were without power, water, fresh food, but we tried to survive under the guidance of the Provider [a memorial statue of John Elway]. [Cartman]... and us disagreed on how to worship the Provider. [Cartman]... tried to make us follow his way by making himself the school principle, so we made ourselves the superintendents of schools, then he just made himself the mayor. The town split sides and that's when the Provider got angry. So, now every night the Provider must be appeased at Carousel [A ritual where a human victim is sacrificed to the Provider]. ... We all know that one day the Provider will set us free; make everything like it was in the before time; in the long, long ago.

If this story is read form Girard's perspective, the decisive moment where order totally breaks down is when Stan and Cartman begin mimetically competing for the seat of power by each giving themselves bigger and better titles. Then the story says, "that's when the Provider got angry"— as in the wrath of God. When Girard sees this theme in ancient myths, he calls it a "non-differentiated crisis", which happens in the middle of a fight. It is a kind of vertigo, or "Carousel", where all the fighters seem identical—miming each other's movements as they exchange punch for punch. There is no leader, right, wrong, social order or culture. Girard says this is only resolved through the collective killing of a surrogate victim that restores order to the group. In Stan's story, we can guess that the competition for leadership turned into a physical fight. Some random, innocent participant was killed and this shocked everyone so badly that they felt the Provider was angry and needed to be appeased in a nightly sacrifice. (Later, we see Kenny, who in many episodes is killed for this cathartic and peace-bringing purpose, dead and chained to the altar [Figure 2].) From these events, the South Park kids get "The Story of the Before Time"; the town's splits along lines that cannot be crossed and Carousel's communal nightly killings are instituted. Order is restored, along with a new culture, complete with myth, prohibition and ritual.

Figure 2: Kenny, a frequent surrogate victim.

If *South Park* is a kind of cultural weather balloon, it is fairly evident that, on some level, we're aware of our reliance on innocent victims to sort out the competitive crisis that occur everywhere, all the time. In fact, we feel guilty about being a part of it. We call it "finding a scapegoat" and we habitually use it to end conflicts in our (geo-)political and social lives. Though violent scapegoating has declined somewhat in our society, we still find ways to use accusation and exclusion to achieve the same effects the primitive, collective killing provided. However, now that everyone is aware of scapegoating the whole process has been kicked up a level. Now we scapegoat people by accusing them of being scapegoaters, which in our contemporary world is worst thing you can be. Parker and Stone have identified this modern tendency in many episodes, but it come through clearest in *The Death Camp of Tolerance* from season six. In this episode the boys are mistakenly accused of discriminating against Mr. Garrison for being gay, when in fact they are complaining about Mr. Garrison's obscene behaviour in class. Their parents take them to the Museum of Tolerance, where they learn that propagating stereotypes and discriminating is wrong. Ironically, after the tour, the tour guide and the boy's parents chase off a hapless smoker with derisive name calling and verbal abuse. When the boy's again complain about Mr. Garrison's obscenities, harsher methods are taken to teach anti-victimization. The boys are sent to The Death Camp of Tolerance—a concentration camp animated in black and white to resemble the film

Schindler's List. Here, they are forced to produce arts and crafts that celebrate diversity. The message in both these situations is clear: Those who decry victimization—the adults—often continue to hypocritically victimize anyway. The point is taken to ridiculous lengths with The Death Camp of Tolerance, which takes up one of the most atrocious instances of scapegoating in the twentieth century to make its case. Girard has also taken note of the obsessive scapegoating of scapegoaters. He writes, "[t]he current process of... rhetorical overkill has transformed the concern for victims into a totalitarian command and a permanent inquisition. The media themselves notice this and make fun of 'victimology,' which doesn't keep them from exploiting it."

South Park has certainly taken advantage of scapegoating. Despite its insights into mimesis and victimization, *South Park*'s humour (like most humour) relies on exclusionary mockery— which is scapegoating—to achieve its comic effect. Nevertheless, *South Park* creators are relentless in uncovering the victimizing and hypocritical aspects of any ideological movement, group or individual enjoying popular attention. Chances are, a group you belong to, or a person you admire, has been (or will be) lampooned on their show. This considered, we might as well have a sense of humour—take *South Park*'s cue—and check our own hypocritical blind spots to see how we are involved in mimetic rivalry and scapegoating. In their own ways, René Girard and *South Park* both point out that everyone is somehow involved in the continued functioning of surrogate victim mechanisms. If this is the case, we all have a responsibility to be self-critical of our tendency to judge or malign those we encounter in the media and in our everyday lives.