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Michael Moore and Trey Parker Two Interpretations of the U.S.-Canadian Border¹

Graciela Martínez-Zalce*

Why should we use two U.S. films as an example of the representation of the U.S.-Canadian border? Well, precisely because by taking an ironic look at the representation of both sides, they subvert the traditional idea of nationalism and recycle national values to de-mystify them.

Michael Moore, today world famous thanks to his work as an anti-Bush documentary film maker, shot the film *Canadian Bacon* in the mid-1990s. A few years later Trey Parker and Matt Stone (also famous thanks to their television series) produced *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, a title which is an obvious intertext of *Canadian Bacon*.²

The border condition, accentuated by the force of the waterfall, is present from the beginning of *Canadian Bacon*. During the credits, a panoramic take of Niagara Falls, the natural border between the United States and Canada, accompanied by the ironic musical score (“God

* Researcher at CISAN.

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bless America again/ You must know the trouble that she is in”) in which the singer says that America is like a mother to him and that he cannot understand what is wrong with her, situates us in the space where the plot will unfold.

What sparks the conflict? The loss of jobs and the closing of plants thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In one of the first scenes, an unemployed worker paints graffiti on a billboard that reads, “Welcome to Niagara Falls, home of Hacker Dynamics.” (Hacker is the plant that closed.) On the photo of the plant’s owner, he paints a balloon that says, “See ya in Mexico, suckers!”

How can such an unfortunate situation be turned into a comedy? By turning the plant into an arms factory that is totally useless given the end of the Cold War. The director utilizes Americans’ fascination with weapons to underline the absurdity of the situation: the factory organizes a close-out sale where the highest bidder can take home everything from light weapons to missiles in the trunk of his car.³

South Park also starts by situating the audience in a border town (“quiet, little, redneck, podunk, white trash USA”), a quiet mountain town where the pure white snow is only a reflection of its perfect children: they all look like Jesus and are of pure, open mind. They are fragile children who can be contaminated by the corrupt, urban world.

Because it is made of cartoon characters, we immediately know that its interpretation of reality has no aspirations to mimetism. *South Park* is a parody of a musical comedy and an homage to *Canadian Bacon*.

Two opposed visions of the border are used to counterpose U.S. and Canadian identities in the movies. Both exploit the stereotype to underline their critiques of war-mongering as irrational and as the worst trait of U.S. society and government.

In the glossary of the table of values used in his survey of both U.S. and Canadian citizens, Michael Adams defines national pride as, “Defining one’s identity through national pride and believing that America should hold a strong position in the world.”⁴ This definition supports the idea of the border as a defensive line for maintaining the uniformity of the individuals who belong to a community and that, therefore, identify with each other by differentiating themselves from the others, in this case, Canadians.

The center of the conflict in *Canadian Bacon* is precisely national pride which, irrational and without basis, makes it possible to manipulate the masses. The president’s advisors (played, among others, by Alan Alda) discover that the end of the Cold War has made his popularity drop continually and fatally; they threaten him constantly with the phantom of reelection. Wars will give him an aura of power and therefore win him people’s respect. The idea,

then, is to find a dangerous enemy to defend the nation from.

The center of the conflict in *South Park* is also national pride, but in a different sense: the idea here is uniformity, that there is only one correct way to think and act, which immediately turns the other into the enemy.

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The acid humor of both comedies is based on the improbability of thinking that Canada might be a military threat to the United States. And because of this, the construction of the enemy as a figure that is simultaneously abstract and concrete is one of the most interesting points of analysis of the two films

In *Canadian Bacon*, we learn what Americans think of Canadians through the dialogue and the situations presented. All criticisms have to do with the Canadians’ good manners, which bothers the Americans. In that sense, several scenes are emblematic: the two Niagara sheriffs go to a hockey game across the border (of course, hockey, considered the Canadian national sport, is part of the construction of the stereotype of their identity) and ask themselves if that thing in the middle of the flag is a marijuana leaf and then



Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

refer to the national anthem as “that song.” The voice over the sound system tells the public that “littering and swearing are prohibited.”

When the frustrated American heroes (John Candy and Rhea Perlman) disembark, they know they have crossed the border because the place is clean and their first act of aggression against the country, their first act of war, is to litter by emptying bags of garbage onto a river bank. Even important buildings have no locks on the doors, and the guards are always terrified by the foreign visitors’ violence.⁵

For the characters, who have always had prejudices against their neighbors, it is very easy to react against the media onslaught. Moore reproduces news programs’ harping on an issue and the paranoia they manage to very intelligently create with that. The president’s advisor says that the American people will believe everything they are told as he watches a news clip on the nightly news program with the highest ratings. First you have to disseminate

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alarming data (Canada is the world’s second power; the Canadians can cross the border, mix in among Americans and go unnoticed.). Then, you have to come up with a report that simultaneously infuses both hatred and fear (which seems impossible given that “they are whiter than us”). Moore creates a parody of contemporary journalism:

Voice off: The Socialist majority in Canada, a country known for its cleanliness and good manners, has decided on a military build-up along the U.S. border./ Little girl: I don’t like Canada. It’s too cold./ It has more property in the United States than in any other country.

A take of an anonymous crowd walking down a crowded street states, in capital letters, that “Canadians walk among us.” And then, a photo montage

(William Shatner, Michael J. Fox, Mike Myers, Alex Trebek) and a list of names (Peter Jennings, Morley Safer, Leslie Nielsen, Lorne Green, John Kenneth Galbraith, Leonard Cohen, Mary Pickford, Paul Anka, Joni Mitchell, Rick Moranis and K.D. Lang, among others).

All this is reinforced with talk shows and round table discussions in which politicians and intellectuals develop a defensive discourse, talking about the implications of being invaded by Canada: paying homage to a maple leaf, putting mayonnaise on everything, having winter 11 months out of the year, listening all day to Anne Murray. And, since living on the border means becoming the first line of defense, citi-

zens’ initiatives immediately emerge in the form of placards (“Bomb Canada”) and yellow ribbons on the doors of homes; distributing weapons for free; destroying road signs that point to Canada; banning Molson beer; all of this in short scenes depicting people preparing for war in general, people who want to defend themselves from the fearsome Canadians, not knowing that it is all simply a simulation, because they really fear for their lives.

In *South Park*, the movies, a medium for children to learn when their parents do not have the time to take care of them, are a vehicle for perversion. Terrance and Philip, simultaneously a reflection and parody of the characters in the cartoon series the movie is based on, with filthy mouths, are un-

disputed heroes who counter the ideal of children's behavior. Here also, the influence of the movies on audiences is capable of changing behavior and leading to evil. Because it is a parody text, *South Park* turns the stereotypes around: the stereotype says that the irrepressible force of American culture will end up annihilating Canadian identity. However, here, American youth is damaged by the coarse, Canadian sense of humor: scatological and full of "bad words" due to which, according to PTA common sense, you would be fated to share Hell with Hitler, Gandhi, George Burns and Saddam Hussein (the Devil's lover, who turns out to be effeminate, a romantic solitary dreamer, exiled for



Trey Parker and Matt Stone.

Fred Prouser/Reuters

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remaining faithful to his beliefs, curious about life in the world and sexually enslaved by Saddam, who even in bed is a tyrant). Of course, the nightly news is also broadcast in Hell.

However, here it is not the government, but family authorities who begin the conflict. Adams points out that U.S. values have regressed to the degree of believing that only the traditional family model is valid.⁶ Thus, mothers become the vigilantes of community morals, defending children's innocence at the expense of the death of soldiers and citizens. "Let's kill those damned Australians." "We're killing Canadians." "Australians, Canadians....what's the difference?"

The irony resides in a paradox: the mothers who defend decency have no

qualms about torturing their children to clean up their language. Neither do they oppose the death penalty for those whose only fault is being scatological, nor the absurdity of war, as long as they can limit freedom of expression and show that they are right, that they are the bearers of the truth.

Parodying the parody, paying homage to its predecessor (the one about the other Canadian war), *South Park* makes fun of itself for the horrible, elementary animation and for basing its situations and language on scatological humor.

The climax comes with a sung declaration of war, in which the enemy is also intelligently constructed, but much more directly than in Moore's film since the words of the song express all the

stereotypes that Americans have about Canadians:

Times have changed, our kids are getting worse; they won't obey their parents, they just want to fart and curse.../Should we blame the government? Or blame society? Or should we blame the images on TV?/ No, blame Canada!/ Blame Canada and all their beady little eyes and flappin' heads so full of lies/ Blame Canada, blame Canada/ We need to form a full assault, it's Canada's fault/...Well, blame Canada, blame Canada, it seems that everything's gone wrong since Canada came along/ Blame Canada, blame Canada, they're not even a real country anyway.../ Blame Canada, blame Canada/ with all their hockey hullabaloo and that bitch Anne Murray, too/ Blame Canada, blame Canada/ the smut and trash we must bash, the laughs and fun must be undone,/ we must lament and cause a fuss, before somebody thinks of blaming us.⁷

Why invade your neighbor? The border has to be crossed to save the Canadians; save them, of course, from themselves. A country that has eliminated its national beauty contest to elect the contestant for Miss Universe is a threat. Those attitudes could be contagious.

Then, what are borders good for? According to the irony of Moore and Parker, for defending yourself from the onslaught of the leftists, of those who believe in freedom of expression, those who think differently. Political incorrectness is the vehicle for irony and making fun of the Canadian identity is the means for magnifying the defects in the idea of perfection that American society has of itself.

"The American government thinks it has the right to police the world; your government will kill two Canadians, an action condemned by the U.N.; home of the free, indeed. This is about freedom of speech, about censorship," says the Canadian ambassador before the United Nations in *South Park*.

If we take into account that these two cultural products were created and distributed before the September 11 terrorist attacks, which engendered the "axis of evil" as a central part of the U.S. presidential discourse, it is surprising that this "axis of evil" can be applied to Moore's and Parker's ironic reading of their country's national identity *vis-à-vis* that of their pacifist neighbor. "Now you're in charge of the world. Don't be a bad winner," says the Russian premier, wolfing down Kentucky fried chicken, to the president of the United States. "Where can I get an enemy?" asks the leader of the free world, whose duty it is to guide a society that apparently does not know how to live without visible enemies, a leader

who does not know how to lead a nation that only feels powerful when it has somebody to confront.

It is true: incrusting in daily life, popular culture helps understand how a nation is perceived. These two films are an excellent example that proves the rule. At the end of the credits, Moore finishes with the statement, "No Canadians were harmed during this production," but it is impossible not to ask ourselves how many Americans felt that they were. ■■■

FILM CREDITS

Canadian Bacon

(1995) Written, directed and produced by Michael Moore; Co-producer, Kathleen Glynn; Editing, Wendy Stanzler and Michael Berenbaum; Photography, Haskell Wexler, ASC; Cast: John Candy, Alan Alda, Billy Nunn, Kevin J. O'Connor, Rhea Perlman; 1 hour 35 min.; MGM DVD.

South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut

(1999) Director, Trey Parker; Producers, Scott Rudin, Trey Parker, Matt Stone; Written by Trey Parker, Matt Stone and Pam Brady; Director of animation, Eric Stough; 78 min.; Warner Brothers DVD.

NOTES

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² Synopsis of *Canadian Bacon*: Because of the U.S. president's declining popularity, his advisors decide to initiate a war with Canada. To demonstrate his patriotism, the sheriff of Nia-

gara decides to invade the neighboring country to stop the nuclear threat that, according to him, is harbored by the CN Tower. In the end, mere coincidence averts a war. Synopsis of *South Park*: At the showing of a Canadian film, children from South Park start swearing. One of their mothers starts a campaign against Canada, leading to war.

³ Americans' fascination with weapons was the fundamental theme of *Bowling for Columbine*, the documentary that made Moore world famous.

⁴ Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice. The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003), p. 163.

⁵ We should remember the sequence in *Bowling for Columbine* in which Moore goes through several Toronto neighborhoods opening doors in houses that are not locked to prove that the media has created fear among the American public, prompting the increase in gun purchases and fostering violence as a result.

⁶ Traditional family (the reverse of the flexible family), with the family defined as a married man and woman with children. See Adams, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁷ "Blame Canada" by Trey Parker and Matt Stone.

FURTHER READING

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