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### A More Porous Postmodernity: Absurdity, Politics, Consumerism and the Cultural Authority of Spongebob Squarepants

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**A More Porous Postmodernity:**

**Absurdity, Politics, Consumerism and the Cultural Authority of  
*Spongebob Squarepants***

By Annie Gaus

After completing the longest and most challenging academic project I have ever attempted, I feel an immense sense of gratitude towards the following people that I would like to briefly acknowledge:

Firstly, each and every one of my wonderful English professors, but especially my great advisor Sandy Zagarell, as well as Anne Trubek for allowing me to use her son, Simon, as a sort of lab rat.

Secondly, my generous and caring parents William and Therese, and my crazy brothers: Joe, Arthur, Eddie Paul and young Bimmer.

Thirdly and most importantly, the big guy in the sky for micromanaging affairs from time to time.

In the wake of the recent election, there's been some talk of healing, but until today no single figure has emerged with the capacity to repair the deep fissures in the body politic. We are so hung up on blue states and red states that our only hope may lie in the primary color that has been left off the map. We need something—or someone—yellow, and also absorbent and porous enough to soak up the ill will and scrub away the lingering bad feelings...Now more than ever, the country needs Spongebob Squarepants.”<sup>1</sup>

In his *New York Times* film review of The Spongebob Squarepants Movie, A.O. Scott delivers this message with a touch of humor, ascribing a messiah-like authority to the unwitting cartoon hero Spongebob Squarepants who, at face value, bears no relation to the political atmosphere of the fall of 2004. Yet Mr. Scott's words now (a short few months later) resonate with a new irony in the wake of Rev. James Dobson's so-called “gay warning,” which targeted Spongebob as promoting homosexuality for his appearance in a video about diversity and respect that included sexual identity as a characteristic deserving of tolerance. In the tradition of Tinky Winky, the Teletubby accused of being gay for his preference for purses, Spongebob's alleged sexual identity has become fodder for humorists as well as participants in debates on gender politics. While Rev. Dobson's words do not seem to have generated the alarm he presumably would have liked—conversely, they have been met with more disbelief and even ridicule in mainstream media than defense—underlying his “warning” is the seemingly improbable cultural authority of Spongebob Squarepants, the star of the #1 children's show on television. Even for those disconnected from the world of children's entertainment, it would be difficult not to notice the ubiquity of the wide-eyed, gap-toothed, ever-cheerful yellow sponge in America today. Spongebob, a Nickelodeon franchise, has been an unprecedented creative and capitalist success, attracting over 50

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, A.O. “Frivolity Plus Absorbency: A Blend the World Needs,” The New York Times, 19 November 2004, late ed: E1

million viewers monthly, an estimated 20 million of whom are adults.<sup>2</sup> Considering the widespread appeal of this franchise, it is not surprising that Dobson would detect a threat in Spongebob's alliance with what he calls "pro-homosexual" values, or the radical notion that respect should be extended even to persons whose personal lives are distasteful to Christian right-wingers.

The hysteria with which the Christian Right (the politically dominant ideology in our country as of 2005, we assume) calls for protection against anything that smacks of homosexuality in the popular media also points to a current social construction of childhood that hinges on innocence of this and other types of "illicit" sexuality. This homosexual witch-hunt in children's media reflects no "truth" about the needs or rights of children but rather the status of childhood as a culturally determined condition that evolves alongside the movement of history. Childhood is ascribed "symbolic demands"<sup>3</sup> by adults that reflect their deepest anxieties; as defined by Lynn Spiegel, it is "historically an unstable category, one that has to be regulated and controlled constantly...as a moment of purity and innocence (that) exists only so long as the young are protected from certain types of knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

Popular notions of "childhood" have seen gradual but striking transformations over the course of American History: In Puritan America, for example, children were categorized as depraved pre-adults whose lack of self-restraint--interpreted then as inborn evil--had to be suppressed via biblical indoctrination and harsh discipline before they could be considered fully human. During the early twentieth century, children were

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<sup>2</sup> Zeller, Tom. "How to Succeed without Attitude." The New York Times 21 July 2002, late ed.: 5

<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, Henry. Introduction. The Children's Culture Reader. Ed. Henry Jenkins. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Spiegel, Lynn. "Seducing the Innocent: Childhood and Television in Postwar America." Children's Culture Reader ed. Henry Jenkins. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 122.

construed as not evil but merely stupid, which was accompanied by an emphasis on more secular, scholastic education. Current popular wisdom dictates that around the age of seven, children arrive at the “Age of Reason,” after which they become responsible for their own actions; this rather arbitrarily determined landmark in human development is assumed to be the first step towards adulthood: the moment at which children first are able to perceive and comprehend the difference between right and wrong and to behave accordingly. Across the centuries, the cultural construction of childhood has been reflected in the various literatures and entertainments designed for children by adults: During the Puritan times, books for children consisted of harsh biblical indoctrination by way of scare tactics. Alongside the gradual diversification of America and the growth of the literate middle class, children’s literature evolved to reflect more secular but still conservative forms of didacticism that emphasized manners, morals and hygiene. During the mid-twentieth century, as “lowbrow” forms of entertainment such as comic books gained popularity, the popular author Dr. Seuss satisfied what was regarded as a pressing need for quality literature that was both educational and appealing to children: that is, non-condescending. Seuss’s works, particularly his later “message” books, represent a clear reversal of the notion that children are morally perverse and/or unintelligent; the vast (and enduring) popularity of Seuss indicate a large-scale child empowerment that privileges young people as possessing an innate moral intellect.<sup>5</sup>

The shifts in popular entertainments for children reveal American childhood as a culturally constructed category that signifies, firstly, the emphasis that our society places on certain traits of personhood: ability to communicate coherently; ability to exhibit

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<sup>5</sup> Gaus, Annie. “Politics as Values, Genre as Politics and the Development of a Children’s Icon,” Oberlin College, 2004, 7

“correct” morals; economic self-sufficiency. Underlying these various cultural constructs of childhood, however, is a fundamental barrier between childhood and adulthood which dictates that they occupy two strictly discrete realms: An adult cannot regress back to childhood and vice versa. As evidenced by the “Age of Reason” hypothesis that exists in our society, for example, the capacity to ascertain right and wrong continues to represent a significant juncture in the progress towards adulthood, as it has been since Puritan times; but without a homogenous set of moral standards (i.e. the pretense of a secular state), the moral logic to which a child is meant to adhere using his or her developing capacity to reason is indefinite and, no doubt, very confusing. Thus it becomes the duty of the adult world to shelter children from harmful types of knowledge—violence and sex are the two most obvious—and yet with the current dominance of television as a cultural medium, children are allowed unrestricted access to adult themes: “with the mass, commercial dissemination of ideas, the parent is, so to speak, left out of the mediation loop, and the child becomes the direct addressee of the message.”<sup>6</sup> This breakdown of the historically adult-imposed barrier between the child and adult realms is the definitive feature of what various authors have defined as the “postmodern childhood,” characterized by Juliet B. Schor as a departure from “modern socialization processes of discipline...and suppression of physical energies,”<sup>7</sup> leading to the child’s improved societal status as empowered by means of cultural influence. This shift into postmodern childhood leads Spiegel to characterize the advent of television as opening the “Gates of

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<sup>6</sup> Meyrowitz, Joshua. No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 114.

<sup>7</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 202.

Knowledge,”<sup>8</sup> a biblically charged moniker that is none too dramatic given the staggering extent to which television has broadened children’s access to unfiltered information.

In particular, there are two aspects inherent in television media that render it as potent as Spiegel’s “Gates of Knowledge” characterization suggests: First, television requires no training to master in that its effect is produced by images and sound—far more so than print media--whose influence on the unconscious mind can be less comprehensible and, for that reason, more compelling. Whereas the print medium is able to shield children from “adult” topics using advanced and complex language, television, according to sociologist Joshua Meyrowitz,

has no complex access code to exclude young viewers or to divide its audience into different age groups. Adult programs may present children with information they do not fully understand, and children’s programs may contain childish content, but the basic code in which all programs are presented is the same: pictures and sounds. Unlike print, television’s symbolic form represents the things it represents. Television pictures—like all pictures—look like real objects and people; television speaks in a human voice.<sup>9</sup>

Inherent in the notion—the illusion—that television pictures represent the “real world” are all the problems that television has been said to cause over the course of its existence: desensitization to violence resulting in delinquency; sensationalization of sexuality leading to a host of related ills; and more recently, inflated expectations of affluence in viewers due to disproportionately extravagant depictions of supposedly “middle class” life.<sup>10</sup> Suffice to say, it has become self-evident that the fictional world of television influences ours as much as ours influences it; secondly, television is an

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<sup>8</sup> Spiegel, Lynn. “Seducing the Innocent: Childhood and Television in Postwar America.” The Children’s Culture Reader. Ed. Henry Jenkins. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Meyrowitz, Joshua. No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 156.

<sup>10</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 46.

inherently competitive commercial medium whose original purpose was not to entertain but to sell: a show's capacity to promote products through the dissemination of advertising dictates its existence; admits children's television pioneer Cy Schneider, "it is a business that makes money by selling products. Television's first mission isn't to inform, educate or enlighten. It isn't even to entertain. Its first mission is to entice viewers to watch the commercials."<sup>11</sup> The effectiveness of a television franchise towards the objective of selling products is, of course, determined by ratings, which are in turn determined by the viewing public's interest in and commitment to the show. Inevitable flaws in the ratings system aside, television is nonetheless the most directly democratic popular medium that exists.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, in the case of children's television shows such as *Spongebob Squarepants*, children viewers possess tremendous agency in this democratic process; in other words, this is a democracy in which a child's vote counts *at least* as much as an adult's. In his essay "The New Childhood: Home Alone as a Way of Life," Joe L. Kincheloe notes the rapidly growing influence of animate visual media on children's lives: "since the late 1960s, the amount of time parents spend with their children has dropped from an average of thirty hours per week to seventeen. Increasingly left to fend for themselves, contemporary children have turned to TV and video games to help pass

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<sup>11</sup> Schneider, Cy. Children's Television: The Art, the Business and How it Works. Chicago: NTC Business Books, 1987, 5

<sup>12</sup> The Nielsen ratings system is flawed but does effectively approximate viewing trends among Americans for purposes of advertising. It is interesting to note, however, that the Nielsen system is currently in the process of being replaced by a far more accurate system called Arbitron, the nuances of which are too many to name here. However, the upshot of this change is that television media is evolving towards a more perfect democracy, and the implications of this on America's culture business, and especially the cultural habits of children, are yet to be seen. Gertner, Jon. "Our Ratings, Ourselves." New York Times Magazine, 10 April 2005: 34-67

their time alone.”<sup>13</sup> Where once television was praised for its abilities to unite the family around a shared home entertainment medium, it is now blamed for—or, at least, heavily implicated in—the splintering of family and the displacement of parental authority by the influences of mass media. It has become commonplace that the average hours children spend in front of a screen has increased exponentially since the advent of television; the repercussion of this trend of children’s unsupervised television habits is that children themselves, not parents, drive ratings and control what they consume, also rendering them proxy producers of culture. It follows that children have become an extremely powerful consumer market. In Born to Buy, Schor argues that the massive agency of what she calls the “commercialized child” is the definitive feature of today’s consumer culture: children and teens are the epicenter, influencing market trends far more so than adults because they constitute the future of the business.

This is a firmly contemporary trend. A summary of the child psyche as defined by marketers over the latter half of the twentieth century follows this course of development:

In the 1930s, the characterization of children was as growth machines who needed to be educated. In the 1950s, kids were seen as novelty seekers. In the 1970s and 1980s, the field took up the idea that kids were molded by their parents in a consumer socialization process. By the 1990s, child consumers were described as autonomous and savvy<sup>14</sup>

Schor also supports the hypothesis of sociologist Daniel Cook, who postulates that the developmental assumptions of the earlier years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which skewed more towards “secular”, scholastic education than ever before, gave marketers a

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<sup>13</sup> Kincheloe, Joe L. “The New Childhood: Home Alone as a Way of Life.” The Children’s Culture Reader. Ed. Henry Jenkins. New York: New York University Press, 1998. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 43.

“template of sorts upon which to organize the child’s experience, abilities and “needs” and a justification to target young children in a modified form of “education” (Cook 494).<sup>15</sup> In other words, television marketing has also overtaken children’s development to the extent that it represents a standard of “education” that is now organized around cultural and social maturity rather than scholastic. The notion of children’s ethical empowerment consummated by the work of Dr. Seuss—which envisioned the child as morally intuitive and innately democratic—has given way to a new kind of empowerment: one characterized instead by cultural and social savvy, which encompasses not only the ability to drive cultural trends but a striking *self-awareness* among children of this newly gained agency. Certain proponents of television have postulated that it provides a “rich spectrum of novel stimuli and ‘social experience,’” thereby aiding in the development of social and cognitive fluency, a claim that is corroborated by the fact that preschool children are believed to be “smarter” than they were fifty years ago according to standardized measurements of intelligence.<sup>16</sup> While such proposed intellectual benefits of children’ television exposure are obviously debatable, it is safe to assume that viewing habits will produce a greatly heightened consciousness of social logic as represented on television. Children’s awareness of the workings of the adult world—significantly, the failures and weaknesses of adults—results in a suspicion among children of entertainment designed exclusively for them, that such contains false or misleading information about the world. Thus, television programs and advertisements aimed at children increasingly must acknowledge their “media

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<sup>15</sup> Cook, Daniel Thomas. “The Rise of ‘the Toddler’ as Subject and as Merchandising Category in the 1930s.” New Forms of Consumption: Consumers, Culture and Commodification. Ed. Mark Gottdiener. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. 494

<sup>16</sup> Meyrowitz, Joshua. No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 241.

literacy”—meaning their awareness of the medium’s innate unreliability—and increasingly attempt to “ally themselves with skepticism by lampooning advertising, admonishing kids not to trust celebrity endorsers, or imparting a gritty realism to spots.”<sup>17</sup> This awareness among children of the fundamental mechanics of consumer culture—not only that they are being overtly and covertly coerced into buying products, but also that consumer practices are necessary to the process of identity construction—is exemplary of the postmodern childhood. Thus it becomes clear that children appreciate and respond to adult themes in their entertainment. According to Myerowitz, “Television provides children with the satisfaction of ‘being in the know, of going behind the scenes and of learning about the world and about people’—in the manner of adults, or projections of their own future selves. This concept of television bringing the world to children, and of their eagerness to absorb relatively unsanitized presentations of the world, leads Meyrowitz to postulate that there is in fact “no such thing as children’s television.”<sup>18</sup> Scholars such as Neil Postman have adopted an even more stark viewpoint, arguing that the replacement of print media with television in its postmodern form has resulted in the absolute “disappearance of childhood.”<sup>19</sup>

The notion of dissolved boundaries between childhood and adulthood, while apt in noting children’s manner of media consumption (unrestricted more often than not, making available a world of adult themes), nonetheless does not explain the tremendous popularity of many discrete children’s realms in television, particularly Nickelodeon, which surges far above its competition in ratings. Nickelodeon’s continuing success is

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<sup>17</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 67

<sup>18</sup> Meyrowitz, Joshua. No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 238.

<sup>19</sup> Postman, Neil. The Disappearance of Childhood. New York: Vintage, 1994.

spearheaded by *Spongebob Squarepants*, which has spawned a vast merchandising industry and, doubtless, future imitators. The endurance of children's networks such as Nickelodeon (and of children's entertainment as a genre) reflects an enduring expectation that children occupy a discrete realm meriting security from the destructive influences of the adult world, characterized by violence, sex and other instances of depravity. As exemplified by Dobson's objections to *Spongebob's* supposed perversion, scrutiny is applied to children's entertainment despite the expectation that characters such as *Spongebob* are innocently benign. Examples of the standards of security applied to children's entertainment, which delineate the conditions of its existence, can be found on such websites as [commonsensemedia.org](http://commonsensemedia.org), one of several (purportedly) apolitical organizations dedicated to providing "family-friendly" reviews of television and movies aimed at both parents and children. Commonsensemedia.org provides a set of categories that rate acceptability in children's entertainment: Sexual Content, Violence, Language and Message, which encompasses Social Behavior, Commercialism and Drug/Alcohol/Tobacco use.<sup>20</sup>

These categories intimate two distinct expectations of what is appropriate in children's entertainment: the protective (defense against inappropriate adult content) and the prescriptive (instruction by example of prosocial behavior). Prosocial behavior is defined as behavior that encourages positive and agreeable social interaction, discouraging in particular conflict resolution by means of "physicality" and/or "name-calling." In addition, there is also strong evidence in many forums that certain modes of social commentary are deemed unfit for consumption by children. For example, the

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<sup>20</sup> [www.commonsensemedia.org](http://www.commonsensemedia.org). Common Sense Media, Inc., 2005  
[http://www.commonsensemedia.org/reviews/our\\_ratings.php](http://www.commonsensemedia.org/reviews/our_ratings.php)

Parents Television Council (another supposedly nonpartisan source) objects to the popular and long-running cartoon *The Simpsons* not for its occasional sexual content and violence, but instead because it “ridicules entrepreneurs, religion, educators and law enforcement officials...and sends a mixed message on parenthood.”<sup>21</sup> That is, the popular show’s confrontation of the status quo is perceived as dangerous for children. The recent controversy surrounding Spongebob’s sexuality is a somewhat more diluted example of the wariness that irony and irreverence can evoke among more conservative viewers: the lack of a moral or message that supports the organization of American social system is tantamount to youth rebellion. Because of the success of the show, and because of his omnipresence as a cultural icon due to the exhaustive marketing that is now a central component of children’s advertising, Spongebob has provoked alarm. In consequence, the iconic Spongebob has emerged as a singular example of the tense intersection of consumerism, politics and childhood today, an intersection that is only made possible by subsuming these themes in an aesthetic device this essay will designate as “absurdity.”

The ultimate goal of this essay is not to malign the consumerism that has overrun children’s entertainment, nor is it to ally my claims with either critics or proponents of “inappropriate” content in all of television, nor is it to identify *Spongebob Squarepants* as plainly reflecting popular social practices of children. Rather, I hope to present the television franchise *Spongebob Squarepants* as both a capitalist success and as a highly unusual and unprecedented example of the radically shifting role of cultural constructs of childhood in American culture. My primary assumption, in fact, is that *Spongebob*—unequivocally the most popular show on the most dominant children’s network,

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<sup>21</sup> [www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org). Parents Television Council, 2005  
<http://www.parentstv.org/ptc/shows/main.asp?shwid=1317>

Nickelodeon—continually resists interpretation by defying historical expectations in adult culture of children’s entertainment: namely, that it should be *interpretable*, thus containing some message or prescriptive model of healthy prosocial behavior. Whereas Dr. Seuss’s work was characterized by abstract characters that encounter concrete ethical problems, ultimately leading readers to a clear moral resolution, *Spongebob Squarepants*, as well as certain of its peer shows such as *Ren & Stimpy*, is far less grounded in reality (meaning themes applicable to real-world situations) and thereby does not commit itself to any formula of explicit moral, scholastic or even prosocial instruction. Conservative criticisms of *Spongebob* (such as that he is a sexual deviant) are motivated by the show’s absurdity: Because absurdity evades interpretation, it can be perceived as threatening because it allows for subversive distortions of the American status quo. Nonetheless, the show’s popularity—i.e. its dominance in the television democracy, among not only children but adults—has not been at all defrayed by the charges of conservative pundits. Thus, the show can be taken as a model of what succeeds *in spite of* conservative efforts towards control of other forms of media (which are otherwise far more effective at this time in 2005, in the news for example), and moreover, what *transcends* the genre in spite of its historical role as a discrete realm meant only for children.

Absurdity, or the lack of easily discernible logic or meaning in children’s television, is a double-edged sword: Because of its resistance to interpretation, viewers will ascribe meaning to it that reflects their anxieties and assumptions regarding what arcane, possibly inappropriate, meaning the absurd images may be trying to impart. Here I will define absurdity as a literary device, adapted from an advertising theory which holds that absurd images are effective marketing tactics because of the arresting effect on

the consumer of “incongruously juxtaposing pictorial images, words and/or sounds that viewers perceive as bizarre, irrational, illogical or disordered.”<sup>22</sup> A classic instance of a wildly popular (and equally notorious for its appeal to children and teenagers) absurdist advertisement is Joe Camel, who has since become undoubtedly one of the best-recognized marketing icons ever. Joe Camel is an anthropomorphic symbol in which the characteristics of coolness, attitude and edge are embodied by a cigarette-smoking, leather-clad dromedary. Loosely defined, absurdity is the depiction of situations that are impossible in the real world and whose allegorical meaning is not obvious; it is a general term under which more specific literary descriptors fall, including a variety of “illogical relationships that result from the use of surrealism, anthropomorphism, allegory, humor and hyperbole.”<sup>23</sup> According to advertising theory, surrealism (noted as a subcategory of absurdism), in keeping with its historical roots, “is the basis for the subtlest form of deception because it disrupts conventional notions about meaning by questioning its very existence.”<sup>24</sup> In children’s literature, this “deception” has taken the form of Seussian indoctrination of democratic ethics in readers; by abstracting situations to which certain constrictive social norms are popularly applied, Seuss’s works challenged such conventions by recasting them as problems that can only be resolved by what he saw as the intrinsic moral sensibilities of children, not by the corrupted social logic of adults in the “real” world. According to Seuss, the social logic of children was instinctively

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<sup>22</sup> Arias-Bolzmann, Leopoldo, Chakraborty, Goutam, and Mowen, John C., “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses.” *Journal of Advertising*. Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (2000). 35.

<sup>23</sup> Arias-Bolzmann, Leopoldo, Chakraborty, Goutam, and Mowen, John C., “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses.” *Journal of Advertising*. Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (2000). 36.

<sup>24</sup> Arias-Bolzmann, Leopoldo, Chakraborty, Goutam, and Mowen, John C., “Effects of Absurdity in Advertising: The Moderating Role of Product Category Attitude and the Mediating Role of Cognitive Responses.” *Journal of Advertising*. Vol. XXIX, No. 1 (2000). 36.

ethical, advocating inclusiveness, tolerance, and other such principles of democratic thought.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the creators of *Spongebob Squarepants* have utilized the intrinsic obscurity of deep-sea life—a world about which humans know and understand relatively little—and constructed a world in which sponges, squids, starfish, plankton and other creatures coexist basically in harmony, ignorant of their differences: This is a world predicated on inclusion. The primary relationships around which all of the plotlines are organized are as follows: Spongbob is best friend of dimwitted Patrick Starfish, employed by Mr. Krabs's Krusty Krab as a fry cook, and the foil of coworker and next-door-neighbor Squidward, a dour and boring squid who resents Spongebob's imposition on his peace and quiet. These secondary characters serve to stabilize Spongebob's character as a highly appealing icon representing what is "fun" and "cool," two amorphous but enormously influential cultural ideals that will be further discussed later in this essay. Only in a microcosm as thoroughly absurdist as Bikini Bottom (the undersea town Spongebob and his friends call home) is a character such as Spongebob possible: he is innocent, optimistic and guileless to a fault, unaware of even Squidward's contempt towards everything he does. The aesthetic makeup of the show—bright colors, giddily drawn characters and a buoyant surfer-style musical soundtrack--embodies its modus operandi: mindless fun. Spongebob himself, whose aggressively marketed image should be familiar to even those who are not familiar with the show, is the hero of this world:

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<sup>25</sup> Gaus, Annie. Politics as Values, Genre as Politics and the Development of a Children's Icon. 2004, 27



His ecstatic disposition, bright yellow color and wide eyes convey the innocence of his character, while the neat tie, belted shorts and impeccably shined shoes moderate his childishness with their suggestions of adult responsibility. Indeed, little about Spongebob's character is obviously one thing or another: he is neither human nor sponge, man nor child; and while he is gendered as male (named Bob; wears a tie), neither is he clearly masculine. According to Joyce Millman's *New York Times* review of the television show during its third season, Spongebob "joyfully dances on the fine line between childhood and adulthood, guilelessness and camp, the warped and the sweet."<sup>26</sup> The absurdity of Spongebob's world renders irrelevant distinctions of both age and gender. Spongebob's liminal status as somewhere between man and child is resonant of Peewee Herman,<sup>27</sup> the ambiguous boy/man who, in 1991, was finally outed as an adult with adult desires when he was scandalized for exposing himself in an adult movie theater. This incident (along with the disturbing situation of Michael Jackson, for

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<sup>26</sup> Millman, Joyce. "The Gentle World of a Joyful Sponge." *New York Times* 6 July 2001. Late ed. Sec. 2 p. 30

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Spongebob creator Stephen Hillenburg has noted Peewee Herman as one of his inspirations, along with others (Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy) who used naivete to derive humor by acting in contrast to more jaded, "realistic" characters and settings.

example) has cast a dark shadow on men who pose as children that equates them with perversion of the worst kind. Spongebob, on one hand, is immune to such hysteria because, obviously, he is a cartoon and therefore an entirely fixed character whose identity is stabilized by his relationships with other characters on the show. On the other hand, the liminality or ambiguity of Spongebob's character connotes deviance: a defiance of not only social norms (distinctions of age and gender) but the basic organization of reality, that is, the existence of tangible, predictable consequences of such insubordination. Says one reviewer on commonsensemedia.org:

Spongebob is enjoyed by many adults who watch it because it reminds them of Ren & Stimpy. That's why it runs late at night. The humor is dark. Characters frequently hurt themselves and others without "feeling" much, either emotionally or physically...Even though my 5-year-old LOVES it, he repeats too many bad lessons from it...I think this television should have been rated TV-14.<sup>28</sup>

What this reviewer appears to find most offensive is the lack of appropriate or realistic responses to the activity of characters, resulting in his or her child's "bad" mimicry of such behavior. By ascribing a dark quality to *Spongebob's* absurdist neglect of reality, this reviewer calls attention to the innate subversiveness of its form. The absurd situations and activities that occur in Bikini Bottom are intuitively disconcerting for this reviewer (whose sentiments are echoed by many others on this site, who use words like *odd*, *bizarre* and *weird* to describe the show) because it challenges the systems of meaning that govern our actual world, inviting children to behave in ways that some would see unfit and/or rebellious. Spongebob does not feel pain: if sliced in half, he cheerfully melds back together; if threatened, he exhibits impossible naivete; he bathes in the morning by polishing his eyeballs instead of his teeth. This viewer is disturbed by

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<sup>28</sup> [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org). Common Sense Media, 2005.  
<http://www.common sense media.org/reviews/review.php?show=adult&id=2935&type=Video/DVD>

what he/she sees as an amoral or even immoral quality of absurdity in that it permits violence or senseless activity without consequence.

The absurdity of Spongebob's world also has the effect of suffocating or rendering implausible the indoctrination of morals. In many episodes, Spongebob is faced with some sort of ethical or social problem: in one, he cheats on a driving test and confesses; in another, he transgresses social standards of appropriate behavior by taking too far a "ripped pants" gag. However, the show does not adhere to any formulaic plot structure for which a moral is obligatory, as opposed to other children's entertainments past and present; many episodes consist solely of an uncomplicated adventure, to the jellyfish fields for example, where appeal comes in the form of absurdist representations of actual pastimes (i.e. fishing) embellished with humorously hyperbolized dialogue, prolonged commotion and upbeat music. Such episodes rely on the show's basic format as a stimulating sensory experience marked by bright colors, happy music and wildly impossible activity and movement. This sense of unfeasibility is the hallmark of "fun": Fun means uninhibited activity without regard for negative consequences. Fun does not permit worry, stress or adult-like concern for the difficulties that define everyday, banal experiences.

This definition of fun is more or less constant, having existed as an essential component of children's entertainment since the relative extinction of didactic literature whose sole purpose was to teach, not entertain. As children have become empowered as a consumer market, however, the strategies that marketers employ to appeal to children reveal a newer set of standards that hinge on the construction and dissemination of one perpetually shifting characteristic: what is "cool." With the exception of products and

franchises aimed at very young children, entertainment for children must possess this quality. Entertainments for children aged 0-3, according to Schor's research, convey that this age group is concerned with giving and receiving affection: fluffy animals, rounded objects, sweet-looking dolls, etc.<sup>29</sup> As children enter school, however--their first intensive extrafamilial social environment--a new standard of self-definition emerges: coolness, which is now upheld as a universal quality or gold standard of success in kid culture. One contemporary aspect of cool is social exclusivity, which Schor argues did not exist in earlier times, when the functional aspects of products were paramount, such as the fact that a toy is fun to play with or the candy tastes good."<sup>30</sup> Now, cool has emerged as an ineffable and everchanging emblem of acceptability in kid culture that is necessary for an aesthetic, a product, or a franchise to succeed.

There are a few fundamental aspects to cool, however, around which the products and aesthetics meant to embody cool are produced. Cool is always associated with being older than one's age: Children aspire to tweenhood; tweens aspire to teenagehood; teenagers cannot wait to turn twenty-one and to be independent of their parents--until, at some indefinite but inevitable point thereafter, one's sense of the youth-defined cool wanes, rendering them no longer cool, no longer a kid and a tool of the oppressive, drab and lame adult world. Youth culture perpetually defines and re-defines itself in direct opposition to the constrictions, inhibitions and prejudices of the adult world. MTV, for example, the beacon of rebellious youth culture, enables teens to immerse themselves in an increasingly discrete culture, with its own economy of social

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<sup>29</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 46.

<sup>30</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 47.

success dependent on fashion, language and attitude, which, over time, has trickled down to Nickelodeon's younger audience. (Not coincidentally, MTV and Nickelodeon are both owned by Viacom.) In the words of Betsy Frank, head researcher for MTV, "If something works for MTV, it will work for Nickelodeon."<sup>31</sup> Because of Nickelodeon's embrace of its sort of "kid-brother" relationship with the overtly rebellious MTV—tapping into children's desire to be older—Nickelodeon surges far above its competitors, as the most popular children's network by far, and has become an empire that extends its reach well beyond television--and the United States: its website is the most popular children's online destination, and Nickelodeon magazine has 6.3 million readers, the channel is broadcast in 158 countries.<sup>32</sup> Nickelodeon has developed an extremely potent formula for children's entertainment consummated by its core philosophy: KIDS RULE. As it turns out, antiadult biases and "edge"--that which dances on the boundary of what adults would deem acceptable--are the bases of cool. "Edge" in kid culture is a diluted, sanitized version of the "edge" found on MTV, which mainly comes in the form of sex, violence, profanity and drug use. Suggestions of these themes are so effective for youth because they disobey the standards of health that adults have defined for them, allowing young consumers to construct their own identities in contrast to what they see as the inhibitions and shortcomings of adults.

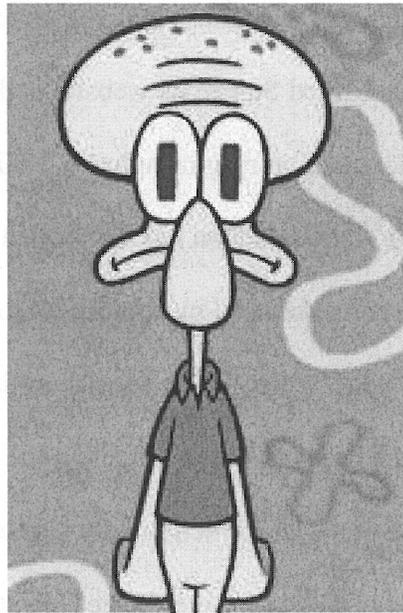
While it is clear that youth culture is rife with edge, and that edge is as compelling a device for young children as it is with older youth, the obvious importance of this marketing stratagem introduces the question: How has a cartoon sponge, a perfect

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<sup>31</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Schor, Juliet. Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture. New York: Scribner. 51.

citizen outfitted immaculately in shorts and a tie and himself a working square, achieved these elusive distinctions of “coolness” and “edge” in the minds of not only children but many teenagers and adults? As stated above, Spongebob is a stable character whose identity is defined by his interactions with the creatures that occupy his microcosmic social world. The representative of boring, regimented adulthood is his foil, Squidward, pictured below:



Squidward is gray in color, with a dour, droopy nose and forehead wrinkles that are undoubtedly caused by perpetual grouchiness and the stresses of living next door to Spongebob. Among Squidward’s favorite activities are playing the clarinet (terribly) and painting portraits of himself. Squidward’s excessive self-love in spite of his obvious uncoolness and sour attitude associates the adult world, with which Spongebob is constantly at odds, with egomania and shameless self-aggrandizement. In one episode in which Mr. Krabs (Spongebob’s boss) sponsors a talent show, Squidward orchestrates a grandiose performance starring himself as Spongebob is pushed to the margins as a

curtain boy. When the day of the show arrives, Squidward's terrible act is booed; but when the curtain accidentally reopens revealing Spongebob mopping the stage, the crowd goes wild, after which Squidward angrily snatches the mop and attempts to steal back what he believes is his rightful applause. This type of playful combat between Spongebob and Squidward, which recurs in many different forms in the show, is an ideal metaphor for the way in which Spongebob and what he represents—fun—is received both in the context of the show and in the viewing audience: He gains rousing approval and support simply for humbly going about his everyday business. He is inherently good—in a sense, a character that has internalized and made animate the Seussian values of the pre-Nickelodeon era. Moreover, for exposing the uncoolness and corruption of adult authority figures, albeit unwittingly, he is also inherently cool.

And yet Spongebob is literally and figuratively a “square”<sup>33</sup>—in fact, the phrase “hip to be square” has been used often enough in reference to the show that its coolness is identified as having been grafted onto it by audiences, who, according to Prof. Robert Thompson of Syracuse University, appreciate the show “*because there’s nothing in it that’s trying to be hip or cool or anything else.*”<sup>34</sup> In other words, its “hip” or cool appeal is an emblem attained through its naïve disregard of this category. While other, less popular children’s shows may feature characters who ride skateboards, wear trendy clothing or use various slang in an attempt to correspond with what producers believe is cool among young people, *Spongebob* has tapped into a certain mistrust of such too-literal construals of “cool.” By disregarding this category, *Spongebob* rises above it, inviting viewers—particularly adults attuned to irony—to recognize and appreciate the

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<sup>33</sup> Here, a colloquial term used in reference to uncool persons who rigidly kowtow to societal conventions.

<sup>34</sup> Zeller, Tom. “How to Succeed without Attitude.” *The New York Times* 21 July 2002, late ed.: 5

way in which the show plays on the nuances of model citizenship, which Spongebob embodies in his context. He works diligently as a fry cook at the Krusty Krab, an undersea “burger” (that is, krabby patty) joint that mimics what is a quintessentially American business: fast-food service. He is employee of the month every month-- according to the movie, 374 consecutive terms--and, in one episode, stays up all night fretting obsessively over the correct order of the items: “Bun? Then lettuce? Then pickle!?” He is a scrupulous and reliable employee to a fault, and is rewarded with paltry pay by his greedy boss, Mr. Krabs, whose eyes light up with dollar signs at the sight of a mere penny. This is Mr. Krabs’s only defining characteristic: He worships the almighty dollar to absurd extremes, embodying the systematically profit-driven structure of our capitalist society. Spongebob, being perpetually optimistic, is never bothered by the pittance he receives for his earnest efforts. He is independent because he is hardworking in a community that mimics the banality of working-class American life, and the humor of the show includes cheeky allusions to the basic economy of this quintessential American existence while still evoking a “civility that is unusual for modern cartoons,”<sup>35</sup> as compared with, for example, *The Simpsons*, whose presentation of the middle American lifestyle is far more cynical. One particularly poignant instance of this sly adult-oriented humor is Squidward’s summation in one episode of their existence: “I order the food, you cook the food. We do that for 40 years, and then we die.” In Bikini Bottom, money exists as capital; but underlying the need for money to survive is the value of hard work, which Spongebob embodies and in doing so transcends. In spite of his materially thankless work as a fry cook, he remains infinitely cheerful and optimistic. His impossibly buoyant personality is the source of the show’s appeal, but his unflinching

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<sup>35</sup> Zeller, Tom. “How to Succeed without Attitude.” *The New York Times*. 21 July 2002, late ed.: 5

optimism is also in a sense oppositional to his powerless position as a low-wage worker, a kid without a driver's license, essentially a politically powerless figure with whom many adult viewers are able to identify—in spite of, but also because of, the show's overwhelming absurdity.

The crossover humor of the show explains its highly unusual multigenerational appeal. While children may delight mainly in the fun inherent in absurdity, the intensely visually stimulating aesthetic and occasional scatological humor, it seems likely (culturally aware as postmodern children are) that they are also able to sense the irony of its presentation of adult life, and respond to the suggestion of adult realities. Adults appreciate the sly references to their own modes of existence as reflected in the banal economy in which Spongebob, with his unshakable good cheer, manages to thrive. Following five years of this uniquely potent recipe for crossover success, the creators of Spongebob produced a 2005 film, blithely entitled "The Spongebob Squarepants Movie," which grossed a handsome \$32 million in its opening week. The film is rated PG "for mild crude humor," which is rather unusual for a big-screen version of a show aimed at children as young as 2. The PG rating is explained by the film's motive: to accommodate the show's large adult following without alienating anyone in the process; in other words, it seeks to retain Spongebob's crossover appeal while also including the more complicated plot and character development that are obligatory in comparatively lengthy films. In doing so, the film directly addresses Spongebob's liminal man/child character as well as the social system in which he exists, ultimately presenting an interesting commentary on the function of childhood, the value of youth culture and the meaning of manhood that, in the same way as the show, are shown to be controversial.

The opening scene depicts a shipful of (real-life; non-animated) pirates who discover a coveted ancient treasure chest that contains, not gold and riches, but tickets to the *Spongebob Squarepants* movie. The pirates raucously disembark, storm the nearest theatre, loot the concession stand for popcorn and candy and finally settle in the front rows to watch. This boisterous introductory metanarrative (of sorts) plays on *Spongebob's* appeal and the extent to which the film was anticipated: Even pirates, the fiercest, meanest people at sea, cannot wait to see the *Spongebob* movie. Once the actual movie begins, we are afforded a rare glimpse into *Spongebob's* subconscious. He dreams that he is the manager of *Krusty Krab*, a cowboy/cop badass figure who saves the day when a customer catastrophically is given the wrong order. In the midst of police cars, helicopters, media and hysterical bystanders, he is finally hoist on the shoulders of some grateful fish, at which point he awakens, declares happily to his pet snail, Gary "I had that dream again!", looks at his calendar and realizes that the day has finally arrived when Mr. Krabs will announce the new manager of the *Krusty Krab*. His calendar is decorated with a crayon scrawling of the *Krusty Krab* encircled by a childish rainbow and hearts; this is the day when his most heartfelt dream may be realized: He will finally be acknowledged for his perseverance and hard work. On his way to work, he encounters Plankton, the only truly nefarious character who has appeared on the show (as opposed to Squidward, a more benign nemesis). Plankton, the owner of the rival *Chum Bucket*, is a tiny one-eyed invertebrae with a classic Napoleon complex who is hell-bent on stealing Mr. Krabs's secret recipe for the *Krabby Patty* and eventually "ruling the world."<sup>36</sup> His

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<sup>36</sup> Some movie posters for the *Spongebob Squarepants* movie depicted the evil Plankton raising his arms in what he believes is triumph with the words BIG EVIL atop the image. The choice to use the phrase "Big Evil" to encapsulate Plankton's pursuit of world domination is a provocative one because it subtly evokes

nefarious plot is presented as totally transparent (he has a file cabinet marked “Evil Plans”), and when he rediscovers therein his infallible “Plan Z,” a soundbite of stripper-type music plays, which playfully insinuates that Plankton has a bizarre erotic obsession with world domination. He plans to obtain the recipe by stealing King Neptune’s crown and framing Mr. Krabs. Plankton is an amoral sicko and, in the parlance of one tongue-in-cheek article in *Catholic Weekly*, a “technosexual” pervert whose only close relationship is with his computer wife, who doesn’t even like him.<sup>37</sup> Plankton represents the force of corruption that Spongebob, with his innately innocent disposition, will be forced to fight.

On his way to work, Spongebob encounters Plankton and accidentally steps on him, mistaking him for gum on the bottom of his shoe. After explaining what he is up to to Spongebob and receiving bewildered blinks in return, Plankton (doubly puny next to the childlike Spongebob) walks away muttering “stupid kid,” which introduces the film’s main unifying concept: the pursuit of manhood, what makes a man and a “baby,” and the restrictions and discriminations those designated as children face in accomplishing goals. Unfazed, Spongebob continues on his way to work, repeating, “I’m ready! Promotion!”

Spongebob arrives at what resembles a sort of gala celebrating the grand opening of a second Krusty Krab franchise, “Krusty Krab 2,” located right next door. After a prolonged scene in which Spongebob giddily anticipates the announcement that he is named Manager, it turns out, the new manager is not Spongebob but the boring and cheerless but “mature” Squidward. As Mr. Krabs explains to Spongebob, he is not mature

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the way in which the word “big” has been used to describe industries--Big Business, Big Food, Big Sugar—whose profit-driven ethics have been criticized for undermining the well-being of children.

<sup>37</sup> Hans, Dennis. “Plankton’s Insidious Technosexual Agenda.” *National Catholic Reporter* 18 Feb 2005

enough to handle the responsibility of being manager. Members of the audience struggle to find the words to describe what he is:

“A dork?”

“No, no, he’s not a dork!”

“A goofball?”

”Closer...”

“A Ding-a-ling?” “A Wingnut?” “A Knucklehead McSpazzatron?”

None of these descriptions can encapsulate what Spongebob is, exactly, and why he is inadequately suited for this “mature” responsibility. Mr. Krabs finally explains, “What I’m tryin’ to say is, you’re just a kid! And to be a manager, you’ve got to be a man. Otherwise, they’d call it kid-ager! Y’understand-ager? I mean--Y’understand?”

Spongebob is utterly devastated and walks away, moaning “I’m ready...depression...” Like any quintessential hardworking citizen, to him, his lost promotion is a crushing blow. At this point, the sadness of this revelation is defused by Patrick’s arrival, nude on a handglider, to commemorate his best friend’s supposed promotion, an instance of scatology and the suggestion of sexuality that continues as an undercurrent throughout the film. Later that evening, Spongebob sits alone at the “Nut Bar” at the Goofy Goober saloon, proverbially crying in his beer, where Patrick joins him. They spend the night binging on sundaes, ordering round after round of “Triple Gooberberry Sunrises” which is followed by an extended scene during which the two of them become sloppily intoxicated. Spongebob is finally roused by the “bartender” at 8 in the morning; he has passed out on the floor and is illustrated as hung-over with bleary, baggy eyes and a five-o’clock shadow, at which point realizes he is late for work.

This scene provides an instance of the suggestive “edge” that accounts for its PG rating. While teenagers, adults and even children will delight in the spectacle of

Spongebob drunk, predictably, this scene is controversial among more conservative viewers. Even for those who would not necessarily object to Spongebob's one night of partying, it is striking to see the usually optimistic Spongebob hit rock-bottom in this manner. At the mention of Mr. Krabs's name, his face darkens, and he shows up to work to give him a piece of his mind. Spongebob bursts into the Krusty Krab as Mr. Krabs is being accused by King Neptune of having stolen his crown. "I've got something to say about Mr. Krabs!" Spongebob slurs,

"I've worked for Mr. Krabs for meh-(hiccup)-many years, and always thought he was a great boss...I now realize that he's a great, big, JERK! I deserved that manager's job! But you didn't give it to me...cause you said I'm a KID! Well, I am one hundred percent MAN! And this MAN has got something to say to you!"

Spongebob follows this tirade with a great, big raspberry. "There. I think I've made my point," he concludes, satisfied. At this, King Neptune decides that Mr. Krabs should be punished by death and strikes him with a fireball. Suddenly realizing the severity of the situation, Spongebob snaps back into his usual squeaky-clean self and rushes to Krabs's defense, offering to rescue the crown on his behalf. The crown, however, has been sold to a buyer in "Shell City," a dangerous place from where no one has ever returned. Here, Spongebob's error is redeemed. In returning to his usual, buoyant self, he once again assumes his characteristic sense of justice. Even when other characters are aghast at his decision to journey to the forbidden Shell City, he insists: He must prove his manhood. Manhood, in this scenario, is aligned with courage and the willingness to sacrifice one's self for the benefit of a wronged person. Throughout the rest of the film, however, different interpretations of "manhood" and its role are

presented, challenging Mr. Krabs's initial proposal of what it means to be a kid and a man.

Along their journey, Spongebob and Patrick are derisively mistaken as kids by many creatures whom they encounter. They enter the "Thug Tug," a sort of tough-guy biker hangout where the key to their stolen "car" (a vehicular Krabby Patty) has been hidden. In the bathroom of the bar, the two are momentarily distracted by a soap dispenser that creates bubbles; and when the toughest fish in the bar discovers a bubble that has escaped the bathroom, he declares furiously that "Someone in here ain't a real man!" and invokes the hangout's number-one rule: "All bubble-blowin' double babies will be beaten senseless by every able-bodied patron of the bar!"

As a test, the DJ plays the theme song of the Goofy Goober, a dancing peanut that is Spongebob and Patrick's favorite entertainer. A true "double baby" would not be able to resist singing along. As the two of them turn purple resisting the urge to do so, luckily, two other Thug Tug patrons burst out singing, allowing Sponge and Patrick to escape unscathed. In this dangerous "man's world," "babies" (kids) are identified by their devotion to silly cartoon characters. Shortly thereafter, they encounter an ice-cream stand that turns out to be a trap; again, the undesirable condition of childhood is marked by love of "childish" pastimes: bubbles, ice cream, lovable dancing peanuts. After a close brush with death, Spongebob is discouraged and is ready to give up: "Face it, Patrick!" he laments, "We blow bubbles, we eat ice cream, we worship a dancing peanut for corn's sake!" (Once again, the suggestion of profanity contributes to an "edgy" sense of impropriety that appeals to children.)

This turning point in Spongebob's morale instigates one of the most suggestive moments in the film. Princess Mindy, the compassionate mermaid daughter of King Neptune, appears with the purpose of convincing them to not give up. Mindy (whose voice is provided by current Hollywood It Girl Scarlett Johansson), delivers the following message of encouragement:

"Hey—it doesn't matter if you're kids! And what's the matter with being a kid anyway? KIDS RULE! You don't need to be a man to do this. You just gotta believe in yourself!"

Mindy repeats the line "You just gotta believe!" while spiraling up in the water with her arms outstretched in an interesting moment of ironic, self-effacing humor that neutralizes the obvious clichéd-ness of this axiom. This situation is an example of the way in which the film, in keeping with the show's absurdity, continually resists a hackneyed message or lesson directed at children such as "Believe in Yourself," acknowledging that such a message would alienate not only adult viewers but children as well, who increasingly understand when they are being addressed as children, that is, condescendingly.

Following this ironic evasion of the true meaning of courage is one of the most suggestive moments in the film. Mindy, using reverse psychology, admits, "Yep, I guess you're right, a couple of kids could never survive this journey...that's why I guess I'll just have to 'turn you into men.'" Spongebob and Patrick respond with googly-eyed glee that indicates, on one hand, their eagerness to become courageous men; but it also is suggestive of the stereotypically male adolescent ambition to be deflowered. The film dwells on this innuendo just long enough that it is not patently inappropriate; shortly

thereafter, using her “mermaid magic,” she performs a bogus ritual during which they close their eyes while she affixes seaweed “moustaches” to their faces as a sort of placebo. Upon discovering their new facial hair, they are fooled into believing they are men and gain an invincible confidence that allows them to bypass the threatening monsters in their path. This takes place in a musical sequence with them singing a fight song medley:

Now that we're men, we can do anything  
Now that we're men, we are invincible  
Now that we're men, we'll go to Shell City  
Get the crown, save the town, and Mr. Krabs!  
Now that we're men, we have facial hair  
Now that we're men, I changed my underwear  
Now that we're men, we've got a manly flair  
We've got the stuff, we're tough enough to save the day

Moments later, their confidence in this definition of manhood is suddenly deflated when they encounter Dennis, a hitman working for Plankton, who tears off their moustaches and threatens to step on them. Suddenly (and this is where the film takes its most unexpectedly absurd turn) Dennis is flattened by an even bigger boot, and Spongebob and Patrick are swept onshore and find themselves under a hot lamp in a real-life sundry shop where a “Cyclops,” really a man in a diver’s suit, collects sea-creatures and makes them into dioramas, such as (the ghastly, in the eyes of Spongebob and Patrick) “Alexander Clam Bell!” They slowly dry almost to their death—at which point the screen cuts back to the pirates, who are weeping hysterically at the sight of Spongebob withering away—until a single enjoined heart-shaped tear of theirs causes a short-circuit that causes a sprinkler to pour and all the dried creatures to come back to

life. They escape Shell City with the crown, but little time is left before Mr. Krabs's scheduled execution.

Their savior turns out to be none other than David Hasselhoff. The scenes with David Hasselhoff seem intended almost solely for the kitsch-loving teenagers and adults in the audience who understand Hasselhoff's only definitive role as a swaggering lifeguard hero on "Baywatch." Hasselhoff appropriately hams it up onscreen, twisting his facial expressions into that of a mock superhero. Not allowing Hasselhoff's contribution to the hero quest to undermine Spongebob's, however, he ends up getting fried (but not seriously injured) by an explosion generated at the ocean floor after he propels Sponge and Patrick back home (by squeezing them in between his formidable pectoral muscles, in what is one of the film's strangest—and most objectionable for its homoerotic connotation—moments).

Back in Bikini Bottom, which has now been transformed into Plankton's tyrannical kingdom Planktonia, Spongebob is confronted with an army of brainwashed slaves. In the face of almost certain death, Patrick asks, "Spongebob, what happened?" to which he responds simply: "Plankton cheated." Here, Spongebob invokes a most egregious childhood offense: the simple dishonest act of cheating. Plankton laughs it off, but in the manner of a megalomaniac, is compelled to ensure that he commands the final word, laughing:

"Oh, grow up! What do you think this is, a game of kickball on the playground? You never had a chance to defeat me, FOOL! And you know why?"

"Because you cheated?"

"No! Not because I cheated. Because I'M an evil genius. And you're just a kid! (maniacal laughter)...A stupid kid!"

At this final put-down, which culminates the plot's tension between childhood and manhood, Spongebob launches into his would-be final words:

I guess you're right, Plankton. I am just a kid. And you know, I've been through a lot...and if I've learned anything during that time, it's that you are who you are. And no amount of mermaid magic, or managerial promotions, or some other third thing, can make me anything more than what I really am inside: a kid. But that's OK!

Growing more impassioned, Sponge grabs a microphone out of nowhere:

Cause I did what everyone said a kid couldn't do! I made it to shell city, and I beat the Cyclops, and I rode the Hasslehoff, and i brought the crown BACK! So yeah, I'm a kid, and I'm also a Goofball, a Wingnut, and a Knucklehead McSpazzatron! But most of all...I'm...I'm...I'm...

I'M A GOOFY GOOBER!

Suddenly, the onscreen activity explodes into another musical sequence that takes full advantage of the possibilities of absurdist animation: It is a music video set to an adaptation of Twisted Sister's hit "I Wanna Rock," a song, itself sort of goofy in its kitsch appeal, that celebrates the defiant nature of what was then the cutting edge youth culture: 1980s adrenaline rock. Spongebob's adapted verses apply this sense of rebellion and liberation to the children's perspective, as politically powerless and voiceless members of society who possess a different sort of power: the cultural authority afforded by the values of fun and cool. Paired with images of Spongebob first standing on top of the world, then liberating toys from a jail, then superimposed over floating ice cream sundaes, and finally passing underneath the legs of a Patrick cross-dressed in fishnet stockings and leather boots, he sings:

"Put your toys away"  
Well then I got to say when you tell me not to play  
I say NO! WAY! No no friggin' way!  
"I'm a kid" you say.  
When you say I'm a kid I say "Say it again."  
And then I say Thanks! THANKS! Thank you very much.

So if you thinking that you'd like to be like me  
Go ahead and try.  
The kid inside will set you free!

I'm a goofy goober. ROCK!  
You're a goofy goober! ROCK!  
We're all goofy goobers! ROCK! Goofy goofy goofy goober!  
YEEEEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!

In ecstatically proclaiming his pride in what he is—a Goofy Goober, in spite of its proof that he is truly “just a kid”—he also applies a universality to this liberating self-confidence: “We’re all goofy goobers!” This radical inclusiveness, along with the hyperstimulating fun and commotion of this musical sequence, deflects Plankton’s desperate efforts to reinforce the evil spell he has cast on his slaves; all the citizens of Bikini Bottom are liberated, which leads to a citywide rocking-out, complete with headbanging, mosh pits and Plankton’s computer wife gleefully crowdsurfing. These are all noisily aggressive emblems of youth rebellion treated as inevitably victorious. Spongebob wins, Plankton is trampled and then taken away to the “Institution for the Criminally Tiny,” and King Neptune frees Mr. Krabs. In the closing scene, with confetti flying, Mr. Krabs admits that Spongebob has earned his managerial position, but Spongebob cuts him off with something to say first--“I just don’t know how to put it.” In a singular moment of acceptance and solidarity, Squidward (largely absent from the rest of the plot) methodically intones: “I think I know what it is. After going on a life-changing journey, you realize that you don’t want what you thought you wanted. What you really wanted was inside you all along.”

In a final ironic twist, Spongebob cries, “Are you crazy? I was just gonna tell you that your fly is down. Manager!? This is the greatest day of my LIFE!”

Cut to credits and to the song “Ocean Man.” Once again, any suggestion of a hackneyed moral or message is shattered. Squidward’s impossibly sober summation of Spongebob’s lesson learned is a mischievous play on a trite moral—“All that matters is what’s inside”—invoked frequently enough in family-oriented media that child and adult viewers alike will undoubtedly recognize as cliché and totally out of place in Spongebob’s absurdist world, which necessitates no such lessons. All it needs is Spongebob’s unchanging essence: buoyancy, persistence and those special ingredients called fun and cool.

On the other hand, while self-consciously devoid of a traditional moral, the film is not without certain statements regarding the significance of “manhood.” It presents various stereotypical characteristics of “what it means to be a man”: In the first scene at the gala, manhood is equated with responsibility. When the crown is lost and Mr. Krabs endangered, manhood means courage in the face of great peril; then, after they have faced danger along the way to Shell City, those traits are invincibility, toughness, ample facial hair and the ability to fraternize with monsters or undersea biker fish. Conversely, to be a “real man,” one must not partake in childish activity: bubble-blowing, ice-cream eating, and the entertainments of a silly dancing peanut (also a self-referential allusion to the silliness of Spongebob himself as a children’s icon). The conclusion of the film—Spongebob’s success in spite of the revelation that he is not a “real man” according to those presuppositions—destabilizes all of the previously proposed characteristics of “real manhood,” exposing it as an arbitrary and false category. Thus, claiming to be a real man amounts to macho posturing, while Spongebob triumphs because he celebrates and utilizes his youth towards the goal of restoring the correct order to his world, a world

organized around not “political” power (personified by Plankton’s temporary dictatorship) but a vision of tolerance, happiness and fun.

The final sequence during which Spongebob defeats Plankton using the unstoppable momentum of youth culture also ascribes an added potency to the condition of childhood by combining Spongebob’s childishness (characterized by the original “Goofy Goober” theme song, which he had narrowly resisted singing at the Thug Tug) with the rebellious aggression of youth (meaning teenage, MTV demographic) culture, characterized by the kitschy power balled “I Wanna Rock.” Who would not want to belong to this cultural movement? Within youth culture lies the potential to disrupt instances of evil by rallying around the value of fun (which everyone appreciates) in opposition to the egomaniacal pursuit of power embodied by Plankton’s agenda. Moreover, the film largely suppresses the antiadult undercurrent that the presence of Squidward provides towards its goal of cross-generational inclusion. Instead, he is fighting against evil and injustice: a cause we can all get behind. Because of this unambiguous ethical imperative, the antidote to the problem of evil—the cultural power of youth—is open to everyone. In the “Goofy Goober Rock,” Spongebob reminds viewers that “The kid inside will set you free!” which encourages and reaffirms the age compression in culture of which the popularity of Spongebob has been a symptom. As estimated, nearly half of those who saw the Spongebob Squarepants movie were non-family,<sup>38</sup> which the film clearly factored into its decisions regarding humor and the use of kitsch: David Hasslehoff and Twisted Sister are the two most obvious examples. More controversial are the film’s “edgy” moments: a drunken Spongebob, a cross-dressing

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<sup>38</sup> Weekend Box Office [www.boxofficeguru.com](http://www.boxofficeguru.com), 2005  
<http://www.boxofficeguru.com/112204.htm>

Patrick, the suggestion of profanity (“No friggn’ way!”) and sexual desire towards Mindy. Nonetheless, the film’s popularity, having followed naturally from the popularity of the show, speaks for itself.

The conclusion of the film presents the boundary between childhood and adulthood as porous, literally, like Spongebob himself. Just as children desire to be older—to be taken seriously as agents in society—adults (twenty million a week, at least) are reaching retrospectively towards the condition of childhood in all that it has come to represent: cool (cultural savvy) and fun (carefree disregard for rigid social boundaries), because therein lies a sense of emancipation from the inadequacies of adult culture as they know it. The success of *The Spongebob Squarepants Movie* consummates the dominance of the show in the television democracy. The heavily commercialized image of Spongebob and unstoppable popularity of this franchise--having overwhelmed objections to its sometimes controversial content--reinforces the possibilities of absurdist children’s entertainment as a working counterpoint to the political authority of certain adults, such as Rev. Dobson and his constituencies, who believe in a childhood that conforms to their notions of correct moral activity hinging on blatant intolerance of deviance in many forms. The structures of power that define our American democracy, currently dominated by conservative mores marked by fear, in particular, of “porous” sexualities at this time, are counterbalanced by the imaginative potential of absurdity in television. Absurdity becomes an alternative democracy through which those who lack a political voice, the “small” either figuratively or literally, are able to exercise power: the power to arrest and entertain, and in doing so to inspire—under the noses of those by whom they are suppressed.

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