

Consumption, Health, and Disposability in *SpongeBob SquarePants*

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Abstract

In recent years, food scholarship has extended its preoccupation with consumption to interrogating the relationship between eating, culture and waste, and their effects on the environment. Simultaneously, food-related concerns have also become a recurrent part of popular culture, where examples from children's television provide fertile ground for discussion. This article analyses the multiple representations of food, consumption, and waste in Stephen Hillenburg's animated series *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Focusing on the specific food-related pedagogical philosophies that seem recurrent in the series, and following in Henry Giroux's footsteps by seeing a link between popular culture and educational structures, my discussion unravels the show's engagement with the over-consumption of fast food, the acculturation of the burger as the American meal par excellence, and environmental issues of 'over-production'. I aim to show how, ultimately, *SpongeBob SquarePants* offers an evaluation of the connection between consumption, health, and disposability in contemporary Western societies.

In recent years, food scholarship has been entangled with issues surrounding health, culinary education and lifestyle. Important examples such as Caplan's *Food, Health and Identity* (1997), Nestle's *Food Politics: How the Fast Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002) and, famously, Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2002) have drawn attention to the relationship between food habits, culture and commerce, and exposed the inner workings of the fast food industry from a sociological perspective. In an age of globalisation, in which the Western world has access to a variety of consumables that often exceed biological needs for nourishment, the attention to food and consumption also brings into focus the necessity to rethink the relationship between production and consumption, sustainability, disposability, and health concerns. With what is known as the 'obesity crisis' plaguing most Western countries in the 21st century, food has also become an educational priority. The emphasis on what Sumner (2013) calls 'the pedagogy of food' has gained significance in a number of contexts, both in and out of the classroom (p. 44).

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Simultaneously, food and food-related concerns have also become a recurrent part of the media and popular culture. These spheres are rich in examples where pedagogical concerns over food — as well as environmental issues concerning culinary waste and pollution — and the pursuit of entertainment collide. One need only think here of successful television programs such as *Jamie's School Dinners* (Oliver & Gilbert, 2005), where contentious celebrity chef Jamie Oliver took responsibility for removing all junk food from the kitchen of a school in Greenwich, England, in the hope of providing nutritious and 'healthy' meals for the children, while educating them, as well as the viewing public, on the dangers of eating 'harmful' foods. Jamie's television efforts are indicative of a widespread preoccupation with food, especially where children are concerned, that is visible and identifiable in Western countries at both macro (as far as governments are concerned) and micro (school and family) levels. The emphasis placed on popular culture as a medium involved in the educational strategies of food is evocative of Giroux's (2004) contention that, as far as systems of representations are concerned, 'the political becomes pedagogical', particularly in relation to how seemingly private issues — such as food and eating — 'are connected to larger social conditions and collective forces' (p. 62).

As far as children, as well as youths, are concerned, the 21st century has shaped the term 'popular culture' to include a number of both reflexive and participatory activities, which include but are not limited to 'music, television, movies, video games, sport, internet, text messaging, style, and language practices' (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p. 313). These activities, as popular and seemingly unregulated as they may be, need to be conceived of as a 'socio-politically charged space', because they have 'an increasing influence on the cultural sensibilities' of the next generation (p. 314). In similar vein, Weiner (2001) contends that popular culture — television in particular — holds a 'pedagogical capacity' to 'normalise representations so that they appear correct and consistent with our common sense' (p. 435). Taking eating's popularised status as a point of departure, this article analyses the multiple representations of food, culinary habits and culture, as well as their connections to health and environmental concerns, in the popular children's show *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Focusing on the specific food-related preoccupations that are recurrent in the series, my article analyses how *SpongeBob SquarePants* offers parodied critiques of late 20th and 21st century commercial and cultural trends, while providing a ground for communicating a message to children about food, health and the environment that holds distinctive pedagogical potential. On the one hand, my analysis unravels the presentation of iconic foods such as burger patties in terms of national identity, belonging and cultural notions of 'Americanness'; on the other, I pursue the identification of the fast food industry as connected to disposability, pollution and waste, and the impact this has on the environment. The two aspects of food politics in *SpongeBob SquarePants* are uncovered not only in relation to contemporary social and political structures in the United States, but also in relation to the pedagogical philosophies that are inherent in the show as a cultural narrative. This critical approach to the series derives from the knowledge that animation, as a cultural form, is able to 'question and challenge' the 'received knowledges which govern' the 'normative sociocultural orthodoxies of the real world' (Wells, 2002, p. 5).

My analysis stems from the foundation that popular culture is able to 'teach' children through its entertainment value. The idea that popular culture can, and does, function as a pedagogical tool is well established — if perhaps controversially — within education studies. Giroux (1994, 1999, 2004), together with others (Dimitriadis, 2001; Schwoch, White, & Reilly, 1992), has argued that children 'learn' from the media and popular culture; simultaneously, as Dolby re-elaborates, popular culture acts as a site for 'personal and cultural identity formation' (Dolby, 2001, p. 743). The pedagogical value of children's popular media and culture, therefore, can often be implicit, but this does not

mean that the representations that lie within the medium are meaningless. One of Giroux's principal contentions is that examples from popular culture, such as film and television, are pedagogically effective 'because they entertain' (Weiner, 2001, p. 434). Pedagogy, for Giroux (2004), is not constrained to the language of formal schooling and teaching, but is instead indicated by the structure and normalisation of the social order. Children's television, at least in the mainstream, is then both subjected and complicit in creating that order, and is therefore intrinsically connected to teaching ways of life and approaches to its viewers in our 'hybridised, post-industrial world' (p. 299).

SpongeBob SquarePants is an American television series created by animator Stephen Hillenburg, and has children as its intended demographic. The series pivots around the adventures of a number of anthropomorphic marine characters living in the underwater town of Bikini Bottom. The pilot episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants* first aired in the United States on Nickelodeon, on May 1, 1999. By the end of its second season in 2000, the show had reached great popularity, and the creators continued to produce the show in the following years. In 2015, the series is now in its 10th season, and its popularity has helped its identification as a 'proven staple' of 'American popular culture' (Foy, 2011, p. xiii). Central to the show is the eponymous character of SpongeBob, a yellow sea sponge who actually resembles a commercially distributed artificial rectangular sponge. SpongeBob is accompanied in his life occurrences by his friends: dim-witted Patrick (a pink starfish) and Sandy Cheeks (a scientist squirrel from Texas); his pet sea-snail Gary, and his ill-tempered and long suffering neighbour Squidward Tentacles (unsurprisingly, a squid). SpongeBob works as a fry cook at the Krusty Krab, a popular fast food joint owned and operated by the money-pinching, profit-obsessed Mr Krabs, a red crab whose pirate speech makes him a distinctive comedic presence in the show. The Krusty Krab provides the backdrop for the majority of storylines in the series, as most of SpongeBob's worries and desires revolve around his place of work. The choice of the Krusty Krab as a contextual location for the narrative already draws attention to the importance of food as a cultural everyday presence that impacts greatly on the lives of characters and how they relate, not only to each other, but also to the world in our late 20th- and 21st-century contexts. The creator's treatment of the Krusty Krab as an important narrative space validates Jacoby's (2004) contention that, in an 'era of globalisation', 'identity politics' become entangled with everyday consumption through contemporary cultural forms (p. 5).

Central to seeing popular culture — including *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a prime example — as part of non-formal educational structures is the point that culture itself, as Duncum (2009) puts it, is not 'just a process of consumption', whether critical or passive, but is also a process of 'production, of individual and collective interpretation' (p. 314), one that generates meaning through representation and style. This complex relation between cultural consumption and production is what exposes the potential of popular culture as a 'pedagogical tool' (p. 314). The impact of television programs such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* on the absorption of 'messages' and socio-political instructions on the conduct and practice of children can therefore not be overlooked, and should be evaluated in view of its pedagogical abilities. This function becomes even more unavoidable when important constructive matters such as cultural identities, food philosophies and the safeguard of the environment are concerned. These are important contextual aspects of Western life in the still nascent 21st century, with its organic interaction of inanity, entertainment and resistance. *SpongeBob SquarePants* provides a fertile arena for the discussion of important food-related matters, acting both as a pedagogical and entertainment tool. Giroux's understanding of popular culture as an inherently pedagogical tool suggests that children are 'schooled' in the logic of dominant formations through a 'subtle and not so subtle barrage of cultural stimuli' (Weiner, 2001, p. 435).

While cultural studies and critical pedagogy are often at odds because of their fundamental conceptual differences, my analysis follows in Giroux's footsteps by bringing together the two, and including ideological issues such as cultural formation and identity into the circuit of education and pedagogy. My article holds Giroux's (1999) idea that popular culture is a 'teaching machine' as a grounding philosophy. In this light, my analysis of the text is sited in the approach that an example of children's popular culture such as *SpongeBob* uncovers the link that culture itself holds to transformative praxis and, in turn, how 'teaching', in the broadest sense, can never be separated from practices of cultural consumption. Concentrating on the pedagogical aspects of popular culture, while not denying the cultural, social and political aspects of pedagogy, allows us to identify the pedagogical value of children's television, while developing teaching strategies that 'encourage social engagement and fuse the affective and intellectual dimension of learning' (Weiner, 2001, p. 435).

The recognition and vindication of popular culture as a pedagogical tool 'outside of the classroom' also bears important weight for what concerns teacher-pupil interaction and, above all, curriculum design. This approach to examples of youth and children's popular culture, which is naturally charted to include television programs such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, follows one of the model pedagogical practices outlined by Grossberg (1997). Grossberg describes a model of educational practices that not only recognises popular culture as part of a pedagogical structure, but also articulates its use in the confines of classroom interaction. The pedagogy of 'articulation and risk', as Grossberg labels it, 'neither starts with nor works within a set of texts, but rather deals with the formations of the popular' in which the pupils 'are located' (p. 18). Following the structures outlined by Grossberg's pedagogical model, the importance of dissecting a well-known and successful example of children's television such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* opens the possibility of not only identifying a transformative medium outside of the classroom, and what representational messages that transformative nature entails, but also sets the building blocks for its potential usage in the classroom as a 'pre-eminent' site of practice (Hall, 1993).

While other animated films and series have received considerable scholarly attention — including examples ranging from Warner Brothers and Walt Disney animations, to other network-based productions such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *The Flintstones* and *Futurama* (Stabile & Harrison, 2003) — *SpongeBob* has not gathered substantial attention over the years. The publication of Foy's *SpongeBob and Philosophy* (2011) marked a rare attempt to include the animated show in the framework of academic research. And while the text has alerted readers to important pedagogically based concerns such as artistic genius, scientific research and even naturalism, it has failed to pick up on the intrinsically cultural connection between food, identity, habit and industry that is subtly put forward by the creators of the show. This article addresses this gap. As part of popular culture, *SpongeBob SquarePants* cannot be thought of as simply 'imitative' and 'reflective', but as an active, 'teaching' presence in constructing both hegemonic and subversive views of the world (Giroux, 1999).

In view of this, my discussion centres particularly on unravelling the show's engagement with the over-consumption of fast food, the acculturation of the burger as 'the American meal', and environmental issues of 'over-production' and food waste. I aim to show that, while hinting at connections to popular history, *SpongeBob SquarePants* pluralises critical discourses of food ethics, national trends and culinary habits, and offers, in a non-traditional, but truly active pedagogical context, a perspective on the role taken by popular culture forms in framing dialogues between culture and identity. Like Giroux, I am interested in reading *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a form of 'public pedagogy' that offers an opportunity for understanding 'its politics of representation'

as part of a broader commentary on the intersection of national identity, food-related health concerns, consumerism and environmental strategies (Giroux, 2001, p. 6).

The All-American Patty

In his discussion of popular culture as part of wider educational systems, Duncum (2009) specifically identifies *SpongeBob SquarePants* as being an apt example for the recognition of children's television as being simultaneously, and perhaps paradoxically so, transgressive, de-rationalising, and transformative. Duncum suggests that the identification of *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a pedagogical structure allows us to transcend the rationality of traditional school-based education, in favour of what he calls a 'playful pedagogy' (p. 241): the position that we can 'teach not only about popular culture, but through it' (p. 241). This focus on a 'playful approach' to teaching uncovers the importance of food representation in *SpongeBob SquarePants* as part of a pedagogical system, where attitudes to consumption, health and the environment collide, and the message transmitted lies at the intersection between hegemony and subversion, passivity and activity, acceptance and refusal.

The best-known food sold at the Krusty Krab is the Krabby Patty, a much-loved source of nourishment for the inhabitants of Bikini Bottom, and SpongeBob's favourite food. The Patty looks like a burger in its entirety: it is comprised of a seeded bun, a brown patty, tomatoes, lettuce and garnishing sauce. Although it is never referred to as a 'burger', and none of the characters ever states what the patty is actually made of, the similarities between the two make it safe to think of the Krabby Patty as a hamburger. This is not only in reference to the way the Patty looks, but also to the way in which it is served, accompanied by a soda drink, served in a red 'cup and straw' combination, and a portion of 'sea fries'. The way in which the Patty is presented is reminiscent of a number of fast food restaurants in the United States and the world, with McDonald's here functioning as the most unavoidable example. The prominence of the colour red on the soda cup also builds a metaphorical connection to McDonald's, as red is a prominent part of the restaurant's famous golden arches logo. The recognisable nature of the Krabby Patty and its visual connections to products of the McDonald's corporation already points us in the directions of what Ritzer (2008) calls 'McDonaldism', the homogenisation of products that make them recognisable in 'many global markets' (p. 44). The similarities between the Krusty Krab and famous American fast food chains such as McDonald's is also reinforced by the series' predilection for showing seasonal and occasional variations on the original Krabby Patty. Examples here include the Jelly Patty, the Spongy Patty and the Krabby Double Deluxe; all of these variations bear a resemblance to the recurrent seasonal burgers offered at fast food restaurants. The word 'deluxe', in particular, carries a direct connection to McDonald's restaurants, which launched a line of special 'deluxe burgers' in the mid-1990s. The presentation of the original Krabby Patty as always reliable and timeless in its taste experience also constructs a conceptual connection to real-life examples such as the Big Mac, the ever-present item on McDonalds' restaurant menus which, while seasonal burger creations come and go, is never retired.

The focus on the Krabby Patty as a favourite food and its visual connection not only to the burger, but also to American food corporations such as McDonald's, expose the role of SpongeBob's most beloved sandwich as the American meal 'par excellence' (Oderszky, 2008, p. 1). Although contemporary global economies have made American-style fast food restaurants a common presence in almost all countries around the world, one cannot deny that the hamburger holds an inescapable representational connection to the United States. The burger has established its presence in the collective

imagination as part of the American diet; it is so emblematic in its role as a national ambassador that, as Odersky (2008) suggests, ‘nothing says America like the hamburger’ (p. 2). This contextual set-up for representation is already significant in establishing the pedagogical potential of the ‘burger image’ in terms of communicating beliefs about culture, identity and belonging. As Giroux (2004) has aptly argued, ‘pedagogy is always contextual’ (p. 66), since teaching — in all its various forms, in and out of the classroom — can never be divorced from the context in which it occurs. The acclaiming of the Krabby Patty as the perfect meal therefore suggests, pedagogically speaking, that *SpongeBob SquarePants* is engaging, directly or indirectly, with the view of the burger as an American icon. Food, it is subtly suggested, is an ideal medium for communicating the importance of the national community. Iconic and beloved, the burger also suggests a metaphorical link to the ‘beloved’ United States, forming a cultural connection through which a message of affiliation can be transmitted.

Indeed, it is precisely the cultural status of the hamburger that transforms the Krabby Patty into a potent signifier for American identity. If one thinks of the Krabby Patty as a visual representation of the all-American hamburger, then it is possible to conceive its treatment in the series in terms of its function as an icon of national and cultural belonging. Although there is no actual reference to the United States and its food habits in the series, the similarities between the Krabby Patty and the humble burger leave no doubt to its subtle and subliminal existence. The Krabby Patty represents America itself, carrying a strong semiotic power in its ‘Americanness’, with food habits at their centre. Hall (1992) has long contended that popular culture is deeply entangled with establishing socio-political structures, and that the struggle for ‘cultural hegemony’ — which includes, among other things, the seemingly commonsense dichotomisation of what is right and wrong, good and bad, appealing and disagreeable — is ‘waged’ in the popular as it is ‘anywhere else’ (p. 11). As a representation of industry within the series, the Krusty Krab also proclaims the fast food industry as the central signifier for American identity, something that is clearly understood as ‘good’ and ‘genuine’ in the narrative. As a simultaneous symbol of American identity and a catalyst for its establishment, the Krabby Patty upholds the idea of dominance that is attached to the consumer structures of the United States, and the culinary history that goes with it.

The Krabby Patty is hailed by SpongeBob as the most delicious food in the world, one that can bestow happiness upon its consumers from the very first bite. Indeed, SpongeBob is a very happy character himself (Pramik, 2011). His constant cheerfulness is openly attributed to the culinary contentment bestowed by the Krabby Patty: he loves eating the patties as much as he loves making them, as he gleefully declares in the episode ‘Truth or Square’: ‘When you are doing something that you really love, and [are] so proud of, the work is like play’. The happiness associated with the Krabby Patty here is, of course, a loaded concept: the metaphorical connections that the sandwich holds to American food corporations within the series unveil that happiness as connected to the very idea of ‘being American’. The Patty, one might venture to say, is a reinforcement of what Fieldhouse (1995) calls ‘food ideology’, the sum of the ‘attitudes and beliefs’ surrounding eating that have an impact on the identity and recognition of a given group (p. 30). As a signified, ideological embodiment of the United States, SpongeBob’s patty creation suggests fulfilment and joy to its consumers by virtue of its representational connection to a whole system of cultural affiliation. Gaining strength from the didactic framework of the cartoon in which it is placed, the Patty feeds both the customers of the restaurant and the viewers of the show with the idea that what is American, embodied in the burger, is superior and to be cherished.

Consuming, or not consuming, the same foods creates a bond between members of the Krusty Krab community, authenticating Fieldhouse’s (1995) assertion that

'individuals who observe ... food rules make a public demonstration of belonging to a group' and 'every day provide themselves with a private affirmation of that belonging' (p. 122). A clear anomaly in the Bikini Bottom community of Patty lovers is Squidward, SpongeBob's co-worker at the Krusty Krab, whose disdain for the Patty and all it represents is almost palpable. The most valuable point is that Squidward's dislike for the iconic food is to be found in his own personality and social views. Lupton (1996) argues that 'food is instrumental in marking differences between cultures, serving to strengthen group identity ... sharing the act of eating brings people into the same community' (p. 25). Squidward is portrayed as a pretentious, cynical, self-styled intellectual; his hobbies include painting, gardening and playing the clarinet. He often boasts of his cerebral superiority — especially in relation to SpongeBob and Patrick — and, seeing himself as 'high culture', despises the mass-thinking population of Bikini Bottom. His dislike for the simple folk of the town finds an apt mirroring in his refusal to consume Krabby Patties, the commercial icon of the everyday, popular culture-driven mentality.

Eating the same food here becomes symbolically important for cultural identification. For Squidward, the Patty is the representation of what he sees as a lower socio-cultural group. He labels the Patty as 'disgusting', even though he has never eaten one. The poor 'quality' of the Patty, which is non-organic and definitely unhealthy, deems the sandwich as a lower form of food, one that is only good for the masses, and inappropriate for individuals of a higher intellectual capacity, with whom Squidward identifies. The Patty is too common, too everyday, perhaps 'too American' for Squidward's highbrow palate. The pedagogical function of the Patty here is strongly connected to its role as a burger metaphor: in the series, the burger is all that is 'good' and, as a symbol of 'being American', it also communicates that 'Americanness' is good and desirable. It is not a coincidence that Squidward is an unpopular character in the series. There is no mistaking the message: to be liked, one must be proud of one's Americanness. SpongeBob's didactic philosophy in relation to the 'all-American Patty' plays testament to Giroux's (2004) suggestions that, as far as non-traditional educational systems are concerned, popular culture 'plays a central role in producing narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others' (p. 62).

Squidward's conception of the Patty as a lower-class food, both socially and economically, is enough to keep him disinterested in the famous sandwich. If it is true, as Fieldhouse (1995) argues, that 'individuals who observe codified food rules make a public demonstration of belonging to a group' (p. 122), then Squidward's refusal to consume a Krabby Patty can be interpreted as a public display of his dislike for the community-driven, seemingly mindless individuals who love the burger so much. One could even see Squidward's rejection of the Krabby Patty as detrimental to the whole of Bikini Bottom, 'un-American' in its lack of community spirit and desire to belong. Squidward's inability to fit in is mirrored and reinforced by his dislike for the Krabby Patty, the potent symbol of everyday, dream-seeking American brightness. It is worth mentioning here, in passing, that despite seeing himself as superior to eating fast food, Squidward still works as an employee of the fast food industry. The subtle critique of the discordant and conflicted nature of the perceived intellectual class, and its relationship to consumer and popular culture, is difficult to ignore.

The Self-Regulating Krab

Connected as it is to matters of national identity, food plays a vital role in commodity culture. Lupton (1996) labels food as the 'ultimate consumable commodity' (p. 22). By the act of purchasing and consuming food, Lupton argues, cultural standards are

transferred to the individual. The portrayal of the Krusty Krab as a focal point in the lives of the inhabitants of Bikini Bottom also exposes its function as an agent of community and socialised behaviour. One of the most widely known and perhaps contradictory characteristics of popular culture is that it reinforces ‘dominant social values’, while simultaneously providing the enjoyment associated with resisting the social order (Storey, 2003). Popular culture can therefore provide a site for identification for children and youth, and, at the same time, identify those hegemonic structures of thinking that can generate feelings of alienation and distinction, not only within the bounds of the ‘child’s world’, but also in relation to the sensibilities of the adult world. That is to say, popular culture, of which children’s television is an obvious example, offers resistance to ‘adult rationality’, as Duncum (2009) puts it, as well as providing a form of inanity that is in keeping with the limitations of mainstream culture (p. 235).

It has also been the contention of a number of scholars that food is essential in guiding individuals in the social order, and that the public eating place, as a result, is an important part of the structures that guide behaviour within the cultural framework. Appadurai (1981) has aptly pointed out that food is ‘a highly condensed social fact’ and ‘an agent of collective representation’ (p. 494). As a site of exchange, in terms of both behaviour and consumption, the Krusty Krab can be viewed as a community site, one that is based on rules of engagement reliant on iconographic understandings of the food it sells. If the Patty is the all-American meal, then the restaurant in which it is served becomes an agent of group identity and behaviour, founded in cultural parameters.

The life of SpongeBob himself revolves around the Krusty Krab in several ways. As a worker, his schedule is proudly tailored around the opening hours of the restaurant. In its role as a social entity, the Krusty Krab also provides SpongeBob with the opportunity to socialise with his friends, as both Patrick and Sandy are daily customers. Finally, SpongeBob constructs his daily routine on the consumption of Krabby Patties, which he eats at regular intervals. If one considers the nature of the Krabby Patty and the Krusty Krab as agents of commercial enterprise, it becomes virtually impossible not to see the series as offering a veiled critique of consumer culture — embodied in one of its most eloquent epitomes, the fast food restaurant — as regulating the lives of the Western individual in the 21st century. Bell and Valentine (1997) argue that in the contemporary consumer world, eating is ‘periodised’ according to commercial practices, and different behaviours of consumption provide a ‘temporal measure’ for discerning time, whether connected to leisure or work (p. 4). SpongeBob’s daily routine, dictated as it is by his love of the Patty, exposes the interdependent connection between eating, social structures and consumer culture in the early 21st century, and uncovers how the fast food industry performs a percussive role in the establishment of complex orders of repetition and predictability that mark consumption as a common agent of naturalised cultural practices.

The patty-focused life of SpongeBob, however, is not the only sign of the relationship between food, consumer culture and public behaviour in the series. The inhabitants of Bikini Bottom are also seen as complying with strict rules when eating at the Krusty Krab: they respect serving times, eat in designated areas, and maintain order even when the plot of the story transforms the restaurant into a location for surreal occurrences. These events have included, over the years, the appearance of ghosts, the impromptu redecoration of the restaurant during business hours, and even the invasion of zombie-like fish creatures. The customers wait for their food patiently and consume their Krabby Patties in an orderly fashion, out of habit and routine. Appadurai (1993) has long argued that consumption, especially in a consumer-driven Western context, ‘calls for habituation’, with food ‘punctuating our lives through repetitive techniques of the body’ (p. 12). In employing this deeply Foucauldian approach to consumption, Appadurai inevitably exposes eating, particularly when carried out in a public space,

as a highly structured activity that is largely dominated by the social regulation of time that, in turn, inevitably affects behaviour.

In this context, the Krusty Krab becomes a site for regulated community action, intrinsically connected to understandings of time and place that not only shape the way in which food is consumed, but also unveil the restaurant, with its iconic foods, as a decompartmentalised setting for the following of those temporal rhythms on which social structures depend. The Krusty Krab, therefore, is the representational rendering of social tools in the making: in showing the audience appropriate consumption conduct, both in physical and commercial terms, *SpongeBob SquarePants* educates its viewers on behavioural rules that expose the fast food industry as a dense microcosmos of cause and effect, social demand and responsibility. This narrative interaction validates Giroux's (2004) contention that popular culture — children's in particular — functions as an 'educational site' where 'identities are transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic', becoming 'the sphere for imagining oppositional social change' (p. 60).

An evocative incident that uncovers the importance of self-regulated behaviour in the context of the fast food restaurant takes place when, after years of shunning and denigration, Squidward, answering SpongeBob's demands, agrees to taste a Krabby Patty. This happens in the episode entitled 'Just One Bite'. After the taste test, Squidward's opinion seems unchanged, and he deems the Patty 'the most horrible, putrid, poorly prepared, vile, unappetizing, disgusting excuse for a sandwich'. It is soon revealed, however, that Squidward does in fact love the taste of Patty; the episode then shows him — still unable to admit his newfound appreciation to SpongeBob — desperately trying to acquire Krabby Patties. When his attempts to order at the counter fail, Squidward tries to dig half-eaten patties out of the trash, but unwilling to be caught by SpongeBob, he only manages to successfully eat garbage instead. Squidward's uncontrollable desire to eat Krabby Patties, even after closing hours, culminates in him breaking into the 'Krabby Patty vault' and consuming large quantities of the food. Caught in the act by SpongeBob, Squidward is warned not to eat too many Patties, as they will just 'go to [his] thighs'. When Squidward predictably ignores the warning, he promptly swells up and explodes. The episode concludes with Squidward being taken to the hospital, to be cured from eating too much junk food.

Although the concept of taste as a cultural entity is openly challenged in the episode, Squidward's behaviour exposes the importance of self-regulation in relation to eating, especially in a consumer-driven context. This focus on bodily regulation is reminiscent of Foucault's (1995) argument that 'the power exercised on the body is conceived not as a property, but as a strategy', and 'its effects of domination are attributed not to "appropriation", but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings' (p. 26). Foucault uncovers the role of the body as governed by politicised structures of behaviour, which are inevitably connected to systems of external control. In this sense, the body and all its activities, including eating, call for disciplines that are repetitious and provide the ideal site for social control. Squidward fails to conform to the rules of the Krusty Krab as a restaurant and, therefore, a periodising entity. He does not follow rules in ordering the Patties and he is punished by failing to actually acquire one. His decision to eat from the garbage is also non-conforming, and shows his inability to be part of the cultural group of regulated individuals who usually mingle at the Krusty Krab as a public space. Through this careful interaction, *SpongeBob SquarePants* establishes social parameters of inclusion and exclusion that are based on cultural understandings of not only the fast food restaurant as a public space, but also a system of strategic control that relies on pre-existing notions of propriety and societal techniques.

The apogee of Squidward's social, cultural and behavioural faux pas is found in his final and uncontrolled ingestion of Krabby Patties. In not respecting the spatio-temporal structures of the Krusty Krab and secretly eating Patties outside of opening hours, Squidward sets himself apart once again as non-belonging to the established social order. The warning for self-control that Squidward receives from Spongebob has a particularly social dimension attached to it, testifying to how eating functions as a cultural 'exercise in manners' (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 130). Squidward's incessant eating also represents a mirroring of the contemporary health concerns connected to the fast food industry and the ingestion of large quantities of junk food. His grotesquely enlarged body functions as a Bakhtinian warning against one's inability to exercise control in relation to both the food and the cultural structures that regulate its consumption. The pedagogical message here is sharp, as is the cultural critique that lies therein: while the 'burgers' are loved as a social and national icon, as well as a delicious-tasting meal, consumption needs to be controlled through self-regulation and judgment. The consequences of over-eating, including the large number of real-life diseases that derive from over-consumption of fast food (e.g., heart disease and obesity) are transmitted through the overly theatrical and rather entertaining image of Squidward 'exploding', a visual rendition that is effective and easy for children to understand. This representational engagement is, once again, in keeping with Weiner's (2001) contention that popular culture is one of society's most effective devices for categorising children's thinking capacities, 'teaching as it entertains and entertaining as it teaches' (p. 434).

Disposability, Pollution, and Waste

The conspicuous predicament that Squidward finds himself in — wanting to consume the delicious Krabby Patties and, as a result, not being able to exercise control and make wise, healthy choices — is not the only instance in *SpongeBob SquarePants* where fast food consumption is connected to wider concerns in 21st-century Western society. While the impact that fast food has on both the community and the individual is a pivotal part of the series, the creators do not offer a blind consideration of the industry itself. Indeed, a satirical eye is turned on the evaluation of the industry and, in particular, its environmental effects, where garbage becomes a distinctly contentious issue. Throughout the series, the Krusty Krab is seen as generating large amounts of garbage: the cups and containers in which food and drink are served quickly fill the garbage bins in the restaurant. A large industrial garbage container is located at the back entrance of the restaurant, and SpongeBob himself is often depicted carrying bags of garbage outside. One can see here, metaphorically, the series gesturing towards the understanding of Western society as a 'disposable' and 'throwaway society', a label that, as Buckingham and Turner (2008) argue, has been reinforced by the ongoing industrial disregard for waste and pollution (p. 151).

The focus on excessive garbage in the series becomes more evident in the episode 'Keep Bikini Bottom Beautiful', when piles of unwanted waste — from containers to half-eaten food — are seen taking over the little town, much to the disgust and dismay of its inhabitants. While the series never makes a direct connection between the fast food restaurants and the garbage taking over the town, the emphasis on the Krusty Krab as a high-level waste producer makes this a safe assumption. An unavoidable hint is presented in the episode when SpongeBob is found inside a full garbage bag and claims, with a discarded patty sandwich in his hand, that he wanted to study 'the complete life cycle of a Krabby Patty'. One can see here the suggestion that even if loved and famous, the Patty still ends up, half-eaten, in the trash, adding to the mounds of garbage that the fast food industry already generates. The relationship between eating,

community and fast food, therefore, ceases to be simply a cultural one, but clearly steps into the realm of the socio-environmental as well. The message of over-consumption and over-production is unavoidable here, and points us in the direction of seeing their portrayal as a didactic strategy, a construction of knowledge through which, as Giroux (2004) would put it, 'values are affirmed', and 'subjects' positions put into place and negotiated' (p. 66).

To see the attention placed on the fast food industry as responsible for piles of waste should not come as a surprise. Real-life events have uncovered the environmental implications of restaurants that serve food in throw-away packages, such as McDonald's. Smith (2006) reminds us that over the years, critics 'have charged fast food chains with contributing to a number of environmental problems' (p. 90). These problems have included the pollution that derives from the plastic containers the food is served in, which produce extensive waste in landfills. In the late 20th and 21st centuries, environmental campaigns have forced chains such as McDonald's to 'curtail their pollution' and 'assume responsibility for their business practices', so to 'minimise their harmful effects' (Schlosser, 2002, p. 262). Even when fast food chains have been induced, either by decree or bad publicity, to opt for biodegradable containers, the disintegration of the material still takes enough time for the garbage to accumulate and have disastrous effects on the environment. The fast food industry, one could venture to say, is therefore synonymous with garbage, and *SpongeBob SquarePants* readily provides a veiled critique of this argumentative claim.

The perils of garbage production and the effects these will have on everyday life are emphasised in 'Keep Bikini Bottom Beautiful', when the stench emanating from the garbage bags overpowers the town and goes as far as melting the statue of an outstanding local citizen. The inhabitants are overwhelmed by the stench and the unsightly nature of the garbage, and the episode ends with a community promise to control the production of waste — *SpongeBob*, of course, is the first to pledge his help, even if the viewers are left guessing whether his efforts will be well received at the Krusty Krab. The attitude towards garbage in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is topical and critical, and mirrors contemporary Western attitudes towards pollution. The series suggests that piles of garbage have always been present in Bikini Bottom, but have been contained in landfills. The outrage and shame related to waste production is generated in the inhabitants only when they are confronted with the garbage due to a logistics error, and it is clearly suggested that they will be content with waste as long as they do not have to see it. Buckingham and Turner (2008) contend that this sort of social forgetfulness is partially responsible for the working of our throwaway Western society. Landfills are usually located away from urban areas because the majority of residents 'do not want such sites near their home' (p. 151). Waste, however, remains a constant presence in modern society, and it is our social responsibility to control it, whether its source is commercial, as in the case of fast food restaurants, or domestic. The creators of *SpongeBob SquarePants* dissect the social politics of pollution in the series so that the duplicity of garbage attitudes in Western contexts is exposed. The visual rendering of pollution effects — the garbage that literally takes over an entire town — provides a politicised and highly pedagogical interpretation of the workings of contemporary consumer society, where waste and consumer practices are interlaced and interdependent upon each other.

Conclusion

Media engagement is clearly a very meaningful part of the daily lives of many children, as what they actually experience in several hours of, for instance, television watching,

may have, as Dolby (2001) claims, ‘as much of an impact on their lives and futures as what they learn in school’ (p. 744). Dolby therefore suggests that popular culture provides as much of a ‘pedagogical site’ for children as school does (p. 745). This non-formalised teaching system is present and evident in the portrayal of food, culture, health concerns and the environment put forward by *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The series perpetrates the vision of the burger as the all-American meal and, in portraying the patty as the most desirable consumable in the Westernised cultural context, it also reinforces the hold that the American way of life has on consumer culture. *SpongeBob SquarePants* transmits an instructive message that initiates its viewers, through the humorous images of the popular culture medium, into a Western philosophy of commodity exchange that ultimately aims to make its investors feel part of the same community, reinforcing a sense of belonging. The focus on commodity, food and identity, however, also acquires a critically dubious light as the environmental consequences of the fast food industry are exposed, and the series takes on a highly educational role as matters of health and pollution are brought into the foreground. Veiled under the guise of ‘fun’ and ‘entertainment’, made so by the whimsical characters, the concern over the effects of food waste on the environment is clear. It is this aspect of the series that uncovers the ‘pedagogic possibilities of television’ that Wells (2002) particularly identifies in animated series (p. 95). Through the use of both cultural and culinary stereotypes — and the emphasis on how the two merge — *SpongeBob SquarePants* exposes the meal as a symbolic structure to be deciphered, one that is tightly bound with social rules and protocols, while simultaneously being dependent, in both concept and presentation, on to the metaphysical labels of contemporary visual cultures.

Keywords: food, popular culture, pedagogy, disposability, culture, health

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