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TO MY SISTERS, SARA-YVONNE AND GEORGINA,
WHO INTRODUCED ME
TO THE WISDOM AND THE KNOWLEDGE
OF SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS

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I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually 'alternative' ones for me and they don't often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly a part of mass culture (Doty 1993, xxi).

Patrick: "What happened to you?" SpongeBob: "Oh, I got normal." Patrick: "Whatever that means." (*Not Normal*)

SpongeBob: "Quick, Patrick, without thinking: If you could have anything right now, what would it be?" Patrick: "Um... more time for thinking." (*Chocolate With Nuts*)

INTRODUCTION

In 2005 the *We Are Family Foundation* (WAFF) sent an animated video to American elementary schools, which featured more than 100 popular TV-figures (including the eponymous main character from the TV-series *SpongeBob SquarePants*) with the aim of teaching children the value of tolerance and diversity (see: Johnson 269-270; Kirkpatrick, n.p.). Right wing Christian organizations attacked the WAFF and their video, because their homepage included the category of sexual identity in its "tolerance pledge" and furthermore, links to LGBTQ¹-organizations could be found on it. The video was, inter alia, called "[...] an insidious means by which the organization is manipulating and potentially brainwashing kids." (Batura, qutd. in Kirkpatrick, n.p.). The issue received media-attention after James Dobson (the founder of *Focus on the Family*) had given a speech in which he had warned against alleged homosexual contents of the – so-called “pro-homosexual” (Dobson, qutd. in Johnson 270) video and had specifically focussed on *SpongeBob* in his critique (see: Kirkpatrick, n.p.).

Strikingly, the debate soon shifted from a discussion of the video to a discussion of the television series *SpongeBob SquarePants*² and its main character’s alleged “sexual identity”. Three days after Dobson’s speech, the article *Conservatives Pick Soft Target: A Cartoon Sponge* was published in the *New York Times* (see: Kirkpatrick, n.p.) and from that point on other media have picked up issues circling around *SpongeBob* and (homo)sexuality, particularly focussing on the questions whether *SpongeBob* (1) is gay and/or (2) “promotes” homosexuality - predominantly whether it could “make” boys gay (see: Bräuer, 2008)³. The controversy surrounding

¹ Short for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer”

² *SpongeBob SquarePants* is an American television-series, which was designed by Stephen Hillenburg, first aired on Nickelodeon in 1999 and to this day encompasses ten seasons with over 400 episodes as well as the 2004 feature film *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (see: IMDB, n.p.). The series has become the television cartoon most watched by adults and children alike (see: Pillar 73; Brownlee 40). For further demographic details, see: Rice (2009).

³ Unfortunately this idea is also reproduced by Bräuer: large parts of his thesis deal with the question, whether *SpongeBob SquarePants* would trigger effeminate behaviour in boys and make them "sissy boys". Bräuer perpetuates the idea that sex, gender identity and sexuality have to form a legible union. He unreflectedly derives non-normative sexual orientations from non-normative gender performances and identifications, therefore following a common heterosexist misconception (see: Edelman 2003) and furthermore reproduces the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality and, as its logical basis, a dichotomous two-sex-model. Additionally he approaches the topic from a

SpongeBob SquarePants is an example of what Doty calls “[...] homosexual panic [...]” (Doty 2012, 611). Such paranoid attempts to “unmask” homosexuality or the “promotion” of it by television programmes aimed at premature audiences is a frequent strategy of attack against cartoon series (see: Griffin, 2004)⁴. Besides those attacks from ultraconservative organizations, *SpongeBob SquarePants*’s sexual politics has also been controversially discussed in fan-forums and on video-platforms ever since. One of the corollaries of this controversy, however, was that *SpongeBob SquarePants* was able to extend its fan base and now has a large LGBTQ-following (see: Brownlee, 2011; Musto, 2005; Halberstam, 2005) and even been “[h]ailed as a gay icon” (Johnson 251).

Although the WAFF-video included more than 100 cartoon-figures, *SpongeBob* was the only character, “suspected” of being “homosexual” or of “promoting” homosexuality by conservatives. It is striking that the subject of controversy developed from a video that originally had nothing to do with sexuality whatsoever into a debate surrounding a cartoon character’s sexual “identity”. This suggests that either the series or the figure itself contains elements, which firstly do not apply to the other cartoon characters featured in the video and secondly challenge conservative ideas about sexuality. Apparently, *SpongeBob SquarePants* implicitly raises issues of identity, gender and sexuality and furthermore is - by a number of its viewers and

heteronormative and heterosexist perspective by asking the question, how homosexuality comes into being but accepting heterosexuality as a “natural” norm, that (literally, because he does not talk about it at all) goes without saying (see: Bräuer, 2008).

⁴ It would be worthwhile taking a closer look at the terminology used in the above debate, because the fear implicit in those discussions was not that the series would “make” children gay, but precisely that it could make *boys* gay. Thus male homosexuality was constructed as dangerous, threatening and destabilizing, reproducing the common cultural anxiety and moral panic male homosexuality is so often attacked with. It is a recurring phenomenon that male homosexuality is met with stronger phobia, more outright hostility and/or prohibitive legislation than female homosexuality (which was/is often marginalized and not even noticed or mentioned as such). Butler (2003) points out, that lesbianism is not “prohibited” in the way that male homosexuality is, because it is not “named”. Rather, female homosexuality is eradicated from discourse – lesbians are “unviable (un)subjects – abjects [...] – who are neither named nor prohibited” (Butler 2003, 377). She furthermore argues that the oppression of lesbians, different from the oppression of gay men often does not work through direct prohibition or force but rather “through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability. Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part, because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable.” (Butler 2003, 377). The reactionary discussion about *SpongeBob*’s sexuality reproduced precisely that phenomenon: (1) it ignored the existence of female (homo)sexuality by writing about male homosexuality as homosexuality per se and (2) it reproduced the idea of male homosexuality being a direct threat to the stability and order of our society, while (3) eradicating female (homo)sexuality from discourse entirely.

critics - perceived as a series containing potentially subversive content. This subversive content is either celebrated by fans or, from a homophobic perspective, perceived as potentially dangerous by its opponents. Obviously, suspected “queerness” of texts is often seen as a threat to the heteronormative order conservatives want to preserve. Furthermore, the frequent discussions surrounding cartoon characters’ alleged non-heterosexual “orientations” is a hint to how easily and commonly queerness is read into animation films and cartoon series (see: Griffin 2004, 105), since even those arguing against LGBTQ-rights often read queer, or at least “homosexual”, content into those texts, albeit from a homophobic and heteronormative perspective.⁵

In addition to being the topic of controversial discussions in popular media, *SpongeBob SquarePants* has also received attention from academics for its treatment of gender/s and sexuality. Halberstam (2011), Pillar (2011), Johnson (2010), Dennis (2003a; 2003b) and Brownlee (2011) discuss *SpongeBob* not only as a text, which depicts queerness, but as a *queer* text, arguing, that the „[...] ambiguous cartoon character [...]“ (Johnson 2010: 270) confronts its audience with a non-heteronormative masculinity that frequently transgresses the borders of binary oppositions such as masculinity/femininity or heterosexuality/homosexuality. However, those readings either do not focus on the series specifically but talk about animation and cartoon generally (Dennis 2003a, 2003b; Johnson 2010) or focus on aspects of queer theory and only treat the text as one of many examples of those articulations (Halberstam 2005, 2011) or focus on aspects of masculinity exclusively (Brownlee, 2011; Pillar, 2011).⁶ Therefore, complementing those academic readings and countering the aforementioned homophobic interpretations, my thesis will be an in-depth analysis of the text from a *queer* perspective.

In the episode *Missing Identity*, SpongeBob loses his name tag and the loss of this item is equated with the loss of his identity. The episode revolves around SpongeBob’s attempts to find the name tag and therefore win his “identity” back. The episode illustrates a notion of identity that is typical for the series. Obviously, “identity” in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is not treated as an essence or a core; rather, it

⁵ Paradoxically, as Bloodsworth-Lugo points out, critics who “accuse” cartoons for queer content and, out of a paranoia surrounding male homosexuality, trace queerness or homosexuality in those texts “could be viewed as employing central tenets of queer theory/methodology” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 89).

⁶ Additionally, none of the existing readings combines both episodes from the series *and* the movie.

is something that can be “put on”, something that is imposed on individuals (it is located in an item that SpongeBob *has to* put on for working). It is furthermore something that *can* be lost and therefore depicted as a vulnerable and instable construct. Moreover, this (potential) loss is experienced as threatening and dangerous, since SpongeBob desperately tries to find the lost item. The episode therefore does not only depict identity in strikingly non-essentializing ways, but it also thematizes the compulsory norm of identificatory and subjectional practices. SpongeBob articulates that he *needs* an identity (which does not only imply that he needs one, but also that he needs *one*), that it is something he “[...] could not live without” (*Missing Identity*) and that he therefore is compelled to find it again. In her theoretical work, Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) discusses identity as a norm that individuals are compelled to act out rather than an a priori state-of-being, pointing out the importance that gender has in its compulsory formation. She uses the term “heterosexual matrix” to refer to the heteronormative, heterocentric and heterosexist framework in which *persons* become *subjects* - a societal and cultural network of norms, whose identificatory logics they are *subjected to* in order to be(come) not only acceptable members of society but subjects in the first place. Therefore, other than the existing academic readings mentioned above, I will apply Butler’s theoretical concepts for my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In my thesis, I act upon the assumption that the series *SpongeBob SquarePants* and the corresponding movie challenge or even subvert what Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix” by making processes of identity construction visible. The aim is to ascertain, whether *SpongeBob SquarePants* departs from and subverts normative notions about sex/gender/sexuality/identity and to detect the possible strategies of subversion used in the series and the corresponding movie⁷.

The academic realm of theorizations Judith Butler is usually subsumed is queer theory - a strand of academic theories and practices particularly concerned with issues of sex, gender and sexuality and corresponding normative frameworks and regimes of truth. I will read *SpongeBob SquarePants* against the background of queer theory

⁷ I deliberately decided to analyse the film *and* selected episodes, due to the fact that the movie relies on and is embedded in the series. The characters, the humour and the plot-lines in the movie are interconnected with the series. Thus, I argue, those two media should not be separated in an analysis focusing on representations of gender/sex /sexuality, since the depictions of those aspects of the text are already established in the series and then referred to in the film. For a more comprehensive understanding of how the texts treat those elements, it is thus useful to examine representations in both the series and the feature film. Therefore, I treat the film as an – extended – episode, rather than a different text.

specifically applying Butlerian theory, analysing depictions of gender identity and sexuality arguing, that in *SpongeBob SquarePants* identity generally and gender/sexual identity specifically is not depicted as an essential core of the Self but as intrinsically performative, unstable, shifting and fluid and that the resulting incongruities, breaks and fault-lines of those representations open up space for a queer subtext, undermining the text’s embedment in heteronormative discourse. To illustrate how the texts subvert a normative understanding of identity generally, as well as heteronormative and binaric constructions of *gender* and *sexual* identity more specifically, my queer reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants* will apply Butler’s performativity-theory and her notions of “coherence” and “subversion” as analytical tools. I argue that in *SpongeBob SquarePants* it is, amongst other aspects, the performative nature of the gender/sexual identities of its protagonists that makes the text “subversive” in a Butlerian sense: it challenges and subverts the heterosexual matrix. *SpongeBob* presents “queer” figures as its main characters, thus I will particularly focus on the non-heteronormative and multifaceted masculinities, which SpongeBob and Patrick embody.

Furthermore, this thesis will also extend and rework Butlerian theory by focussing on humour and performativity in its analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. While Butler points out that not all aspects of gender parody are subversive, but that some in fact perpetuate heteronormativity and a binaric conceptualization of gender by ridiculing transgressions and queerness, she does not provide readers with criteria for the assessment of the subversive content of texts necessary for the application of her theorizations for analytical purposes. Therefore, I argue, that the direction and structure of humour in a text, i.e. analysing, who is ridiculed and laughed at on the one hand and who is given the power and authority to laugh on the other, is a way of recognizing its politics; it can reveal, whether texts comply with a heteronormative logic or subvert normative notions of sex/gender/sexuality/identity.

I argue that due to its depiction of the performativity of identities, the resulting denaturalization of bodies, its usage of subversive humour and the revealing of processes of gendering, *SpongeBob SquarePants* can be read as a queer text in that it on the one hand “attempts to weaken the naturalized and normalizing binaries of sexuality (straight vs. gay) and of gender (masculine vs. feminine)” (Gerhard, 2005) as well as other supposedly “natural” binary oppositions, and on the other hand also

breaks with further implicit normative elements of traditional (heteronormative) animation movies (such as logic, chronology, reason), asking the question, how subversive humour and “stupidity” are used as seemingly insignificant ways of engaging in societal critique and how these elements are used as a means to either deconstruct or perpetuate normative elements of identity and narration in the text.

In the first chapter, I will set out queer theory as the theoretical frame, in which my thesis is embedded, starting off with a short overview of the term’s history and its contemporary usages to then outline the various meanings “queer theory” has and explain the academic practice of queer reading or queering of texts, the methodology used in this thesis. In my second chapter, I will introduce to Judith Butler’s theoretical work, whose concepts I will apply to my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The third and final chapter of my thesis is dedicated to the queer reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

1. QUEER THEORY AND QUEER READING

*“The appeal of 'queer theory' has outstripped anyone's sense of what exactly it means.”
(Warner, qut. in Jagose, n.p.)*

In order to understand the practice of queer reading or *queering* of texts, which serves as the methodological framework for my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, it is necessary to first introduce the theoretical basis for this method: queer theory. Due to the fact that both queer theory as an academic practice and the contemporary (academic) meanings of the term “queer” are rooted in queer activism, I want to give a brief overview over the emergence of the term in an activist context to then introduce to the “knowledge-practice” (Halperin 2003, 340) queer theory.

1.1. FROM QUEER ACTIVISM TO QUEER THEORY

Although it entered the academia only in the early 1990s, the term *queer* has in fact a very long and injurious history of discrimination, repudiation and devaluation.⁸ *Queer* is far from neutral, but was and continues to be used as a “term of homophobic abuse”⁹ (Jagose, n.p.) against people whose gender identifications and/or sexualities do not fit into a heteronormative economy of signs. It comprises various negative meanings and implications ranging from “strange”, “odd” and “unusual” to “abnormal” or “sick” (Halperin 2003, 339).¹⁰ Cranny-Francis et al. point out that these negative meanings serve to construct heterosexuality as positive against the negative of “queer” in a binaristic conception of sexuality; they “[...] constitute one part of the binaristic construction of heterosexuality - as normal, good, worthwhile, true, pure.” (Cranny-Francis et. al. 74-75). This history of usages necessitates a critical reflection of the term as well as a critical awareness of one’s own perspective and position when

⁸ Giving a comprehensive summary of the history of the term’s history would go beyond the scope of this thesis. For a more detailed overview see Hall (2003), Simbürger (2009) and Degele/Dries/Schirmer (2008).

⁹ Despite its pejorative connotations “queer” was also used as a “slang for homosexuals” (Jagose, n.p.) and sometimes had empowering connotations, which can be traced back to the 1920s (see: Hall 54; Glover and Kaplan 104-105).

¹⁰ For a more detailed summary of queer’s diverse negative meanings, see: Cranny-Francis et. al 74-75.

using it¹¹, since its invocation necessarily raises the question, how the reification of its discriminatory connotations can be avoided and the term instead be redeployed and resignified as a signifier of anti-homophobic resistance against precisely those injuries.¹² However, it is also its injurious and discriminatory history, which gives the reappropriation of *queer* its “radical edge” (Glover and Kaplan 106), or, as Butler puts it: “‘Queer’ derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult.” (Butler 1993, 170-172).

In the 1980's and early 1990's the homophobic slur *queer* was reclaimed and reappropriated as an affirmative and empowering term by activists for LGBT-rights in the US. The term experienced a transvaluation “that turn[ed] it from a negative into a positive term” (Glover and Kaplan 107), into “a positive marker of difference” (Hall 54)¹³. It was in those activist contexts, where *queer* received its contemporary set of meanings under the sign of resistance against heterosexism and homophobia *and* its current academic connotations as a term, which “[...] describe[s] the broad, fluid, and ever-changing expanse of human sexualities.” (Benshoff and Griffin 1). The underlying reason for this reappropriation and the resulting formation of a new movement of *queer* activists was the fear, shock and trauma caused by the emerging AIDS-crisis, which „sent waves of fear through the urban gay community, as growing numbers of previously healthy men became ill and died gruesome deaths“ (Hall: 51). Furthermore, growing homophobic sentiments among the general population, which, due to the fact that gay men were the first victims suffering and dying from AIDS, often blamed those men for the new disease¹⁴ as well as the conservative and homophobic politics of the Reagan-administration, which ignored the epidemic

¹¹ As queer theorists such as Butler (1993) have pointed out, the usage of a word with such an injurious history in an either political or academic context is not unproblematic. Butler argues against a “presentist” usage of the term – one that disregards its original embedment in heterosexist discourse. (see: Butler 1993, 169-185).

¹² For detailed critical discussions of the term see Halperin 2003; Butler 1993, 168-185; Sullivan 2003.

¹³ Reclaiming the word was a deliberate strategy of “turning the tables” - taking away the power to define from the heterosexist, heteronormative and discriminatory mainstream by rewriting the meaning of a word that has been used in very pejorative and discriminatory ways before. As a side-effect this reappropriation also drew attention to the term's violent history and “to the way, language has long been used to categorize and devalue human lives and lifestyles” (Hall 54).

¹⁴ An indication of the supposed association of gay men and AIDS is that AIDS was first named GRID (Gay Related Immunodeficiency) (see: Hall, 51)

despite its dramatic consequences for gay communities, are usually seen as the incentives of that movement.¹⁵

One further corollary of the AIDS-epidemic was the challenge that it posed to identity categories and unquestioned, naturalized assumptions about those identities; a challenge, which anticipated the anti-essentialist conception of sexualities and genders that later manifested itself in the academic realm in the form of queer theories and studies. In the course of the aforementioned anti-homophobic protests, coalitions were formed which did not only include “gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people” (Benshoff and Griffin, 5), but also people suffering from AIDS, as well as friends, families and allies of those, sex workers and others who did not conform to the norm of monogamous heterosexuality. In short, the AIDS-crisis united those who were pushed to the sexual margins by a heteronormative mainstream (see: Hall 52; Benshoff and Griffin 5; Cranny-Francis et.al. 77). Many of those activists started using the term “queer”, such as in *Queer Nation*’s most famous slogan: “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” (Glover and Kaplan 107) to refer to this new coalition, this “community of difference” (Benshoff and Griffin 5), which was not formed on the basis of identity categories, not on “some essentialist quality but on a mutual interest” (Cranny-Francis et.al. 77). One could even go a step further and argue that those coalitions were not only *not* formed on the basis of identifications with certain sexualities or genders but as a form of protest *against* such essentialist ideas of identity. Thus labelling a movement “queer” instead of “lesbian/gay” or even “LGBT” also implied a move away from identity politics (see: Pilcher and Whelehan 129; Cranny-Francis et. al. 74).¹⁶ Despite the fact, that “queer” was still in use as

¹⁵ Activist groups such as *Queer Nation* or *ACT UP* (Aids Coalition To Unleash Power) were famous for their in-your-face, provocative, confrontational and theatrical activism, such as kiss-ins, theatre performances or the occupation of straight bars in order to “challenge the limits of the straight imagination” (Glover and Kaplan 107). This political activism was at the same time a celebration and affirmation of “[...] multiple non-heterosexist identities and varied non-heterosexist experience” and political work for people suffering from HIV/AIDS” (Cranny-Francis et al. 76).

¹⁶ This is an important difference between on the one hand feminist, gay/lesbian or LGBT-movements, which were and are very identity-conscious, and the newly formed “queer” alliance on the other.

another (derogatory) word for “gay”¹⁷ it was reclaimed as a word referring to a wide range of non-conforming identifications and sexualities and a move towards inclusivity and more fluid and open understandings of sexual identity: “The term was meant to gather together multiple marginalized groups into a shared political struggle, as well as fling back at mainstream heterosexist culture an epithet that had been used to oppress people for decades.” (Benshoff and Griffin 5). AIDS furthermore necessitated responses, such as sex-education, which soon, in the face of the lived experience of human sexuality, revealed that human sexual behaviour cannot be neatly categorized and that sexual identity and sexual behaviour are not logical and coherent effects of each other (see: Cranny-Francis et.al. 77). Thus, “[...] the lived experience of AIDS and activist responses to both the epidemic and the hysteria it raised in the heterosexual community also led to an interrogation of the concept of identity.” (Cranny-Francis et.al. 77). Hall (2003) points out, that the members of queer activist groups consisted predominantly of “young, urban, college-age and college-going students”, who “provided a link between a radical activist consciousness and the radical theorizations that would come to be known as ‘queer theory’” (Hall 52). Academics in the realm of queer studies thus only made “[...] sense of an already deeply entrenched set of questionings and abrasions of normality” (Hall 54).

As a result, the term *queer* famously entered the academia, coupled “[...] with the academic holy word ‘theory’” (Halperin 2003, 339-340) in the title of a conference held by Teresa de Lauretis at the University of California in 1990. The conference was followed by a collection of essays edited by de Lauretis and entitled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, which was published in the feminist journal *difference* in 1991(see: Hall 55).¹⁸ More importantly however, in the year 1990 two

¹⁷ Cranny-Francis et. al. point out, that the usage of the word “queer” instead of “gay” is not only more inclusive of other non-straight sexualities (despite homosexuality) but also intended as a move away from the hegemony of gay men and the invisibility of lesbians in the eyes of the heterosexual mainstream (which often considered/considers “gay” as the opposite of “straight” and does not acknowledge the diversity of sexualities or the existence of anything else but the “G” in LGBT), as well as inside LGBT-communities (see: Cranny-Francis et. al. 76)

¹⁸ In this publication, de Lauretis explains her original motivation for using the more transgressive, inclusive and open *queer theory* instead of *lesbian/gay theory* in an attempt to “to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any of these terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead both to transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them.” (de Lauretis, qutd. in Hall 55).

books were published, which are usually considered the corner stones of queer theorizing: *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler¹⁹ and *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. However, as Halperin (2003) points out, these two theorists were only categorized as queer theorists or as the “founders” of queer theory retrospectively and did not claim those labels for themselves (see: Halperin 2003, 341). Also, it has to be noted that most queer thinkers turn themselves against establishing a queer “canon”, although, still, Butler and Sedgwick are often mentioned as catalysts of a new strand of academic thinking about gender/s, sexualities and identities and the mechanisms that govern and regulate their (forcible) production. Halperin points out, that the term “queer theory” was used before its meaning was clarified. Thus, at its beginning, queer theory was “a placeholder for a hypothetical knowledge-practice not yet in existence” and although the term “theory” evoked the illusion of a “set of specific doctrines, a singular, substantive perspective on the world, a particular theorization of human experience [...] no one knew, what the theory was.” (Halperin 2003, 340). It is furthermore important to note that a clear differentiation between the usage of the term “queer” in an activist/political sense and “queer” in an academic sense is neither possible nor sensible, since many queer thinkers reject the idea of a division of theory and political practice, since such a distinction perpetuates the idea that academic theorizing takes place in an apolitical, unbiased realm, untouched by politics, media or culture more generally (see: Butler 2003, 372).²⁰ This enmeshment of queer politics/activism and queer theorizing and the resistance against attempts to distinguish those two realms can certainly also be traced back to the political/activist origin of queer theorizing – thus, one could argue, these two realms have, in fact, always been *one* realm in the first place. In the following section, I will give a brief overview over queer theory’s basic tenets to then introduce to the methodology of “queer reading”

¹⁹ Judith Butler's highly influential theories will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

²⁰ One of the theorists critical of this distinction is Judith Butler:

I do not understand the notion of ‘theory’, and am hardly interested in being cast as its defender [...] Is there a pregiven distinction between theory, politics, culture, media? How do those divisions operate to quell a certain intertextual writing that might well generate wholly different epistemic maps? [...] If the political task is to show that theory is never merely *theoria*, in the sense of disengaged contemplation, and to insist that it is fully political (phronesis or even praxis), then why not simply call this operation politics, or some necessary permutation of it? (Butler 2003, 372)

1.2. QUEER THEORY

1.2.1. *Who/What is “queer”?*

It is not only a difficult task to provide a definition of this strand of theories and academic practices but it would also be “a decidedly un-queer thing to do” (Sullivan 43). Despite the fact that by now queer studies have developed into a flourishing field of theorizations and research, queer theories/studies are, similar to what Halperin (2003, 341) describes in the context of its beginnings, still characterized by a definitional vagueness. deliberately defying categorizations and ultimate definitions is one of their most distinctive characteristics. Some critics fear that any definition of the queer in queer theory might already imply a closure (see Jagose 1996; Halperin 1997; Butler 1993). Defining the term would also give normative definitory power to a specific set of the diverse meanings of queer. Instead, queer theorists usually argue for leaving its meanings open for present and future interpretations and appropriations (see: Butler 1993; Jagose 1996).²¹ In other words, it is precisely the queer content or the “queerness” of queer which not only causes but necessitates its impreciseness, openness and changeability, thus making the attempt to pin it down not only notoriously difficult but also erroneous and contradictory to the queer academic project. Critics like Halperin (1997), Butler (1993) and Jagose (1996) stress the necessity of openness and fluidity of the term queer. Therefore, instead of attempting a clear definition, I want to give an overview over some of its most common explanations and usages. There are diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas of what queer theory comprises. However, there are also certain key elements that those understandings of queer theories usually share. Generally, as the following sections will illustrate, queer theorists challenge and deconstruct naturalizing, essentializing

²¹ Butler (1993) argues for a radical democratization and openness of the term: “[It] will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively.” (Butler 1993, 173). Jagose also argues against stabilizing queer, stating that it is “a difficult task to make sure, that the term is not stabilized or used in an essentialist way, but rather as “a way of pointing ahead without knowing for certain what to point at.” (Jagose, n.p.)

and widely unquestioned assumptions²² about identities, bodies, sexualities, desires, genders and sexes and examine the processes and strategies as well as the effects of their production and furthermore challenge the (asymmetrical and hierarchical) binaric organization of those aspects of human life, while they perceive sexuality as “a system of social control” (Seidman 10) rather than a natural or pre-discursive phenomenon.

In the context of their identity-related theorizations, queer theorists draw upon an anti-essentialist understanding of identity as constructed in and by discourse, shifting and changing, and not an intrinsic and stable core of the self (see: Barry 139), while essentialist notions of identity are rejected as a part of the regulatory heteronormative discursive power, which judges and polices individuals:

[...] queer was one response to the restrictions which attend the naturalisation of any notion of identity, whereby the identity is no longer recognised as a strategy or political practice, but is naturalised as an attribute of individuals themselves. When this happens, individuals are positioned by the discourse which supports and reinforces that identity to be judged and regulated. Queer was/is used to challenge that naturalisation or essentialising of identity (Cranny-Francis et. al. 74).

This anti-essentialist conception of identity derives from queer theory’s embedment in poststructuralist thinking, predominantly Foucault’s genealogical critique of naturalizing and essentializing discourses about and categorizations of bodies and desires (see: Foucault, 1978; Pilcher and Whelehan 129; Seidman 10). Queer theories examine the sociocultural production of those, pointing out their historicity and non-naturalness. They stress the arbitrariness, fluidity and contingency of identity categories, and often claim, that sexuality, just as gender, is something that people *do* rather than something that they *are* (see: Degele et al. 41-55). Therefore, a crucial element of queer theorizing is the rejection, deconstruction and disassembling of taken for granted notions about human sexuality, sexual identity and gender identity. As an analytical approach, “queer” implies pointing out aspects of gender/sex/desire that destabilize those normative notions. Queer theorists furthermore stress that

²² Such as– with no claim to be complete and in no particular order - the belief that everybody has a sex and gender; that everybody has *one* sex and *one* gender (not more or none); that gender coherently follows from sex; that sex is natural; that sex and gender are stable, cross-cultural and ahistorical categories; that sexual desire follows sex and gender coherently; that sexual and gender identity (again, everybody has a sexual identity and everybody has only one); is linked to some “inner truth” of identity, that it is an inner core; that we *are* our gender or sexual identity; and, certainly, that all of those categories (gender-sex-desire) are and have to be and have always been organized in binaries.

sex/gender/desire, however constructed, do not develop in a vacuum, but are embedded in certain political, societal and cultural matrices in which they are forcibly produced. They are effects of power and thus historically, culturally and socially specific rather than universal truths. In order to challenge essentialist assumptions about identities, genders, sexualities and bodies, theorists analyse the frameworks that produce them and the processes and norms that govern their (discursive and performative) production (see: Butler, 1990; 1993; 2004; Seidman 2011; Hall, 2003).²³

Queer theory is furthermore concerned with deconstructing the binary and hierarchical organization of identity into supposed opposites such as homosexual/heterosexual or male/female or feminine/masculine and discusses those supposedly “natural” and “stable” categories as constructed, as embedded in, created by and given meaning by a framework of powerful disciplinary and regulatory discourses, while thinking about the myriad and complex connections and interplays of these categories. The rejection, or rather the critical questioning, of such binaric identity categories also stems from the realization, that even non-normative identity labels such as “homosexual”, “lesbian” or “gay” are constructed in and by a heteronormative economy of meanings, which by doing so, reifies homosexuality as Other, against which it defines heterosexuality as normative and normal²⁴:

[w]hat is called into question here is the distinction between the naturally-given, normative 'self' of heterosexuality and the rejected 'Other' of homosexuality. The

²³ With recourse to Foucault (1978) and his articulations in *The History of Sexuality*, queer theorists do not only understand categories such as “homosexual”, “heterosexual”, “man” or “woman” as constructions, but also often understand the concept “sexuality” itself as a construction, since which bodily acts, desires and sensations are categorized as sexual and which are not is not prediscursively given, but rather the result of a discursively produced normative framework (see: Foucault 1978; Halperin 1997; Spargo 1999).

²⁴ At the same time, the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the term has been criticized by academics working in the realm of queer theory (see: Halperin 2003, 341-42; Cranny-Francis et al. 78; Griffin 2004, 108) for its risk of depoliticizing effect and the decentering of non-heterosexual experiences and identities while replacing those with an abstract notion of “otherness”. It is a term that can be either used “[...] progressively to deconstruct the stability of straightness or [...] to minimize specific historical group definitions [...]” (Griffin 2004, 108). Halperin (2003) furthermore critiques the institutionalization and normalization of queer theory and points out that its acceptance by the heterocentric realm of academia might lie in the fact that much of the academic work done under the heading “queer” tries to “despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting ‘queer’ and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness.” (Halperin 2003, 341). Cranny-Francis et al. note that “queer” always bears the risk of feeding into heterosexist discourses, which aim at rendering non-heterosexual identities invisible, because “[...] the troublesome, dangerously embodied terms ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ disappear in favour of the queer [...]” (Cranny-Francis et.al. 78).

'Other', in these formulations, is as much something within us as beyond us, and 'self' and 'Other' are always implicated in each other, in the root sense of this word, which means to be intertwined or folded into each other. (Barry: 139)

Queer therefore is a term that deliberately goes beyond and deconstructs the binary organization of identity categories. Besides its questioning of gender/sexual identities, queer theory is also concerned with identity in broader terms and, even more generally, also discusses other aspects which intersect with questions of sexuality or gender, such as race or class, as well as other binaric oppositions such as nature/culture, self/other, public/private, etc²⁵, because it fundamentally and radically “[...] challenges the concept of identity and the binaristic (self/other) thinking it encodes” (Canny-Francis/Waring 76). However, as Marinucci (2010) points out, the fact that any categorization is constructed, contingent and arbitrary does not mean that it does not have real implications, since, membership to a certain category, however arbitrary and constructed, might lead to social ostracization, oppression and discrimination (see: Marinucci 35). Therefore, queer theory and studies also take in a clear anti-heterosexist perspective, which implies a critique of heteronormativity and heterosexism in and outside the academia by, inter alia, the questioning of the usually unquestioned assumption of the naturalness and originality of heterosexuality and the corresponding binaric conception of gender. Therefore, queer theorists do not only challenge and deconstruct the binary organization of identity categories, but also analyse, criticize, challenge and subvert the asymmetrical and hierarchical organization of those binaries and the heteronormative thinking it implies (see: Barry 138; Pilcher and Whelehan 129-131).

Queer is not way of defining sexuality or gender as a specific, stable identity position, but a signifier for a certain political position and way of thinking about sexuality and gender. It is more a critique of identity categories and a reflection of identity categories, than a category itself. When used as a label for describing sexualities, also in the context of a textual analysis in which characters are described as “queer”, it “[...] is an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself: [It] is less an identity than a critique of identity” (Jagose, n.p.), or as Glover and Kaplan put it, “[...] a signifier of attitude, of refusal to accept conventional sexual and gendered categories, of a defiant desire beyond the regular

²⁵ The subject of my analysis, however, will be confined to issues of gender/s and sexualities.

confines of heteronormativity” (Glover and Kaplan, 107). Queer is therefore not to be understood as the opposite of “heterosexual”²⁶, or even the opposite of “normal” in a heteronormative framework, but as a fundamental critique of that framework and a questioning of normativity and processes of normalization. It implies “a thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Warner, qutd. in Hall 56) It is thus the opposite or an abrasion of “normative” or as Halperin (1997) famously put it:

Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. “Queer,” then, demarcates [...] a positionality vis-a-vis the normative (Halperin 1997, 62)

Queer theory as an anti-discipline deliberately wants to destabilize supposedly “natural” orders and unsettle instead of providing securities about subjectivity, methodology, definitions or the knowledges and truths produced (see: Degele et al. 11). By defining itself against processes of normalization and normativity, *queer* also implies a resistance to “normal business in the academy” (Warner, qutd. in Hall 56). “Queer” in the academia is characterized by a plurality of methodologies. It can be used as a noun, a verb or an adjective and it comprises a wide range of practices, theorizations, perspectives, issues and concerns:

Queer theory is not a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire. If queer theory is a school of thought, then it's one with a highly unorthodox view of discipline. The term describes a diverse range of critical practices and priorities: readings of the representation of same-sex desire in literary texts, films, music, images; analyses of the social and political power relations of sexuality; critiques of the sex-gender system; studies of transsexual and transgender identification, of sadomasochism and of transgressive desires. (Spargo 9)

Thus, by most theorists, the term queer is “[...] constructed as a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to challenge normative knowledge and identities.” (Sullivan 44) as well as destabilize hegemonic regimes of truth.

Reverberating the often anti-essentialist and inclusive stance of queer activism of the 1980s and early 1990s, *queer* can also be used as an umbrella term pulling

²⁶ Butler (1993) and Sullivan (2003) warn against the self-positioning as the “Other” of heterosexuality, which might reinforce a heteronormative logic in which heterosexuality can again define itself against queerness as normal, because “[m]uch of the straight world has always needed the queers it has sought to repudiate through the performative force of the term.” (Butler 1993, 167). Thus, even the term “queer”, despite its radical openness, runs the risk of reinforcing a binary logic of identity (see: Sullivan 45).

together all varieties of non-normative sexual expressions, sexual identities, non-identities, gender performances, desires, bodies and identifications. It comprises a multitude of subject-positions, which are “[...] non-straight or non-normatively straight.” (Doty 2000, 8). One of the most famous and most often cited explanations, of the term “queer” was given by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Tendencies* (1993). She on the one hand rejects the idea of homogeneity, stability and categorizability of human sexualities and instead, stresses their diversity and fluidity:

[W]hat's striking is the number and *difference* of the dimensions that 'sexual identity' is supposed to organize into a seamless and univocal whole. And if it doesn't? That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gasps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning, when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick 1993, 7-8)

1.2.2. Why “queer”?

Queer therefore is a space, which can be occupied in various ways by subjects of various identifications or non-identifications. The benefit of using queer as an analytical category is precisely that it pays “[...] little or no attention to differences”²⁷ and therefore stresses the fluidity of sexualities and “the overlapping areas between and among” or, in other words, the transgressions between those identifications (Doty 2000, 6).²⁸ As my reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants* will show, despite its problematic history of usages, the term “queer” is therefore particularly useful for the interpretation and analysis of texts, in which desire, gender and sex is not structured according to a binary logic, precisely because “queer” does not denote a singular perspective or reifies identifications, desires and performances as identities, but

²⁷ This “little or no attention to differences” is criticized by Judith Butler who argues that often “queer” is in fact a white, male, middle-class category and mode of analysis. She points out, that “queer” is on the one hand a white movement, which tends to be oblivious of its racial bias and the usage of the term furthermore often implies “a false unity of women and men” (Butler 1993, 174), which is sometimes used to gloss over the androcentric perspective dominant in that movement and raises awareness for the exclusions that the term produces.

²⁸ However, some critics of the term argue that despite its rhetoric of anti-essentialism and openness, the term “queer” is in fact often used as a new and “trendier” word for “LGBT” or even only “gay/lesbian” and often does not keep its promise of radical openness. As a result of those usages of queer as a label for identity/identities, critics argue, it is only “a new label for an old box” (Sullivan 44) and furthermore represents a false unity, veiling over the differences within that box (see: Sullivan 44). However, this critique does not necessarily imply a rejection of the term, but rather the call for its continuous reworking. It is the attempt of queer theorists to be critical and aware of the categories and modes of analysis they work with, as well as the exclusions and false preassumptions implicit in those usages.

comprises various fluctuating, changing, overlapping, sometimes even contradictory subject positions at the same time (see: Doty 2012, 611).

Furthermore, especially in the context of queer reading, *queer* also acknowledges the queerness of straightness, since it does not conceptualize the two as opposites. It is a tool for analysing moments of incoherence and ambiguity (especially with regard to the depiction of genders and sexualities) even in texts, which are predominantly embedded in heteronormative discourse. Therefore, even texts such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which are not products of and/or for queer subcultures, but primarily produced for mainstream audiences, contain elements, which, because of their defiance of stable identity-categories or their binaric organisation, cannot be sufficiently described as “male”, “female”, “homosexual”, “heterosexual” or any other identity-label, but only as *queer* (see: Doty 2012, 611). Thus, the obvious benefit of using “queer” instead of labels more closely linked to identitarian concepts of sexuality or gender is its ability of expressing precisely those moments of incoherence, transgression and ambiguity in all aspects of performances of gender/sex/sexuality without ascribing, in an essentialist way, sexual *identity* to subjects. As a knowledge-practice, queer is a set of perspectives, which even takes normative expressions into its analysis and, by pointing out the constructedness of the norms that govern those expressions as well as of the expressions themselves, breaks down the hierarchies that underlie and structure the binaries of sexual and gender identities. It is a “location of radical openness and possibility” *and* a conscious self-positioning at the same time (hooks, qutd. in Doty 2012, 611).

1.3. QUEERING TEXTS

Queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or wilful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along (Doty 2012, 618).

1.3.1. Queering Texts as resistant/subversive academic practice

One of the queer academic practices, which Sullivan (2003) refers to and which pose a “challenge [to] normative knowledge and identities” is the queer reading or *queering* of texts²⁹ (Sullivan 4). Queer readings are alternative interpretative strategies, which generally involve the laying bare and uncovering of non-heteronormative, of queer, subtexts, or, as Demčišák (2012) puts it, of “shadow texts” (“Schattentexte”) in order to challenge (hetero)normative interpretations. Queer reading, according to Demčišák, is the seeing, reading and understanding of the superficially invisible in a heteronormative economy of signs (see: Demčišák, 2012). A queer reading is therefore usually concerned with “locating queer traces in texts [...] Queer is descriptive of the textual (and extra-textual) spaces wherein normative heterosexuality is threatened, critiqued, camped up, or shown to be an unstable performative identity.” (Benshoff and Griffin 2).

One basic idea implicit in the notion of “queer reading” is the insight that reading is firstly “a *learned* activity” a secondly one, which “like many other learned interpretive strategies in our society, is inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected.” (Kolodny, qutd. in Cranny-Francis et.al. 115). In this context, Cranny- Francis et al. differentiate between “compliant” or “mainstream readings” and “resistant readings” of texts. The former are hegemonic interpretative strategies, which are “[...] expected from a literate member of the reader’s society.” Those mainstream readings, however, are the result of a culturally inflicted “common sense”. Therefore, a mainstream/compliant reading also “[.....] reinforce[s] and reproduce[s] conventional

²⁹ At this point, it is important to note that “text” in the context of queer reading, or cultural studies more generally, is deliberately conceptualized in the broadest sense possible – a text can be any cultural artefact or articulation (see: Babka and Hochreiter 12). The term “text” refers to “any combination of meaning-making signs, and those signs might be written, verbal, visual, musical, gestural, olfactory and so on – in other words, signs which are ways of appealing to our senses in systematic or systematized ways.” (Cranny-Francis et.al. 92)

patriarchal gendering practices.”(Cranny-Francis et.al. 116). Thus, hegemonic readings of texts are usually heteronormative and heterocentric readings and have contributed to the concealment and invisibility of non-normative gender identities and sexualities and additionally defined and fixed the meanings of texts, furthering the delegitimation of alternative readings and experiences (see: Babka and Hochreiter 11; Doty 4). A resistant reading, on the other hand, is one which “[...] rejects the mainstream or compliant reading, and instead performs³⁰ a reading that implicitly or explicitly challenges that reading and the meanings it generates.” (Cranny-Francis et al. 118). Queer readings challenge those dominant heterocentric interpretations of texts, which are based on an unquestioned heteronormative logic. The practice of queer reading can therefore be categorized as one variety of what Cranny-Francis et.al. call “resistant reading”. Demčišák argues that queer readings do not only uncover non-normative and/or norm-subverting content, but that the *practice* of queer reading itself is a subversive performative *act* in that it subverts dominant heteronormative readings and open texts up for alternative interpretations. The “[...] noting [of] queerness between the lines [...]” of even mainstream or canonical texts thus also implies “[...] unbalanc[ing] the everyday heteronormative frame through unveiling queerness residing within it [...]” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 89). Thus, due to this unbalancing of the heteronormative framework upon which a text is built, a queer reading always implies the subversive *queering* of the text. In this context, it is important to note, that any text or any cultural artefact can be read queerly and not just those originating from queer subcultures and/or meant for queer audiences and/or more or less “obviously” depicting queer themes, narratives or characters. In fact, the *queering* of mainstream or even canonical texts is a deliberate political strategy, which is supposed to undermine and disrupt the heteronormative and gender-binarc consensus and the heterocentric foundation of those texts by suggesting alternative meanings and interpretations. *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a television series predominantly produced for mainstream audiences. Reading such popular cultural texts against their own embedment in heteronormativity, interpreting them from a decidedly *queer* perspective, implies a challenge to their own heteronormative

³⁰ Strikingly, Cranny-Francis et.al. use the term “perform” in that context, hinting at the performative – thus implicitly meaning-*generating* - nature of reading practices. Resistant readings can therefore also be conceptualized as subversive practices in the Butlerian sense.

economy. Hall even argues that the academic practice of *queering* is a continuation of the queer political practice of forming broad alliances and coalitions:

[B]y aggressively “queering” intellectual history in this we, in fact, continue the queer project of suggesting broad alliances, as we find telling traces of the “abnormal” even among the “normal” (canonical, heterosexual) philosophers and theorists (of course, the credibility of the very concept “normality” is thereby rendered highly questionable (Hall 56).

Basically, one can differentiate between three different types of queer readings (see: Simbürger, 2009): (1) a focus on the author’s desire, (2) a focus on desire *in* texts and (3) a focus on desire *of* texts. Certainly, those approaches are not and cannot be neatly separated in practice and many queer critics and theorists use a mixture of approaches in their analyses of texts. However, for the purpose of simplification and to point out the direction I chose to take in the context of my thesis, I would like to take over Simbürger’s differentiation of those three approaches, add my critique about the first and the second approach he describes.

1.3.2. Author/ities

The first approach to reading texts queerly is one, which focusses on and analyses the author’s desire (see: Simbürger 2009, 53). This usually implies a focus on texts produced by non-heterosexual, predominantly homosexual, authors and directors. This approach often proves problematic in that it – very “*unqueerly*” – accepts authors as authorities and makers of meaning and thus does on the one hand not conceptualize viewers as agents in meaning-making-processes but on the other hand also gives hegemony to a certain authoritative interpretation of a text while delegitimizing others. An example for the “tracing” of authorial intention and/or desire is the common argument that queerness or the more or less obvious “hiding” of homosexuality in texts is often a deliberate economic strategy for reaching a LGBT-market without alienating the heterosexual majority (see: Griffin, 2000; Doty, 2000; Johnson, 2010).³¹ Queer reading, in my understanding of the practice, implies a conscious move against accepting authors as authorities as well as a refusal to privilege hegemonic interpretations (those “mainstream readings”) of texts or grant

³¹ “If heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim” (Clark, qutd. in Johnson 263).

them more validity and sovereignty of interpretation than others, since it is, among other things, this unquestioned acceptance of hegemonic interpretations as *truths* which systematically creates and naturalizes a heteronormative order. Therefore, as Giffney (2009) argues, queer readings of texts are “[...] based on the understanding that the viewer creates meaning in the text” (Giffney 366).

1.3.3. Reading between the lines of heteronormativity: the risk of reiterating heterosexual discourses

Another type of queer reading is the analysis and tracing of (“obvious”) homosexuality and moments of same-sex desire *in* texts. When done on the level of characters, this approach bears the risk of creating problematic essentializations of identities as well as reiterations of the heterosexist assumption that there are specific “codes” or “signifiers” that reveal the supposed inner sexual “truth” of a person. For some critics, the uncovering of queerness in texts implies the analysis of characters with respect to their alleged sexual “orientation” or “identity”. Johnson (2010), for example, explains that often, the sexuality of characters is coded and communicated through their gender performances (see: Johnson 254). In the context of an analysis of a text aimed at premature audiences, such as animation films or cartoon series, he argues, sexuality *can* only be communicated via non-sexual signifiers, such as gender performances, since the depiction of explicit sexuality in the form of sexual acts is avoided and sexual content merely implied via insinuations. Thus, Johnson implicitly argues, a non-heterosexual *orientation* or *identity* of a character is communicated via the stereotype of atypical gender roles or identification. Often, texts communicate “homosexuality through what is assumed to be a gender correlation” and homosexuals are depicted “as if their sexuality means they are in-between [...] female and male.” (Dyer, qtd. in Johnson 254). Johnson points out that gender non-conformity is used to codify sexual non-conformity in cartoons:

The homosexual character is [...] constructed to break with the traditional gender norm and take on characteristics more frequently displayed by the opposing gender. Gay men, therefore, adopt feminine gestures: facial signifiers such as exaggerated eyes, high-pitched voices, and a feminine-influenced wardrobe. The lesbian construction is similarly subversive: women take on masculine gestures, display a reduction in their traditional feminine signifiers such as smaller, less emphasized eyes or shortening of the hair and also a more masculine wardrobe. (Johnson 255)

Thus, according to Johnson, homosexuality or, more generally, non-heterosexual

identifications and desires are often coded as gender subversion. I, however, despite my interest of reading queerness on the level of practices, performances and non-normative codes, am critical of reading sexual *identity* into characters on the basis of those practices, performances and non-normative codes. The approach of trying to detect a character’s sexual orientation might lead to an unintentional essentialization and naturalization of sexuality, in that queer readers look for a supposed “inner truth” of the subject depicted. Furthermore, the tracing of “homosexuality” on a character-level bears the risk of perpetuating homophobic stereotypes instead of or in addition to challenging the heteronormative underpinnings of a text. This problem particularly manifests itself when taking heterosexist critique of texts such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* into account, which also follow a logic of “tracing” (in this case devalued) homosexual content in a text (see: Bloodsworth-Lugo 89). On the other hand it reifies the idea of heterosexuality being an unquestioned, “natural” or “original” state of being, which is unmarked and thus, contrary to non-straight sexualities, not recognizable. Furthermore, as Edelman (2003) points out, a heterosexist society needs homosexuals and homosexuality (or any sexuality, which is not or not exclusively heterosexual) to be recognizable in order for it to be rejected and to make it possible to differentiate itself from it (see: Edelman 389).³² He furthermore critically points out that heteronormative discursive regimes are threatened by the invisibility of sexual orientations other than heterosexual and thus – with a “paranoid insistence” (Edelman 392) have to “call into being a variety of disciplinary ‘knowledges’ through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more.” (Edelman 389). Or, as Bloodsworth-Lugo critically asks: “How often do homophobic renderings and queer ones actually look the same?” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 89). The “looking for” signs that testify for sexual identity in texts furthermore reifies sexuality *as* identity, as an essence, as an inner truth and thereby reinforces a heteronormative matrix. Edelman thus argues that it “can become [...] as dangerous to read as to fail to read homosexuality” (Edelman 392).

³² “[...] at just this point the liberationist project can easily echo, though in a different key, the homophobic insistence upon the social importance of codifying and registering sexual identities. Though pursuing radically different agendas, the gay advocate and the enforcer of homophobic norms both inflect the issue of gay legibility [...]” (Edelman 389)

1.3.4. Challenging heteronormativity

However, often, queer readings do not ask for authorial desire or for the desire in texts, but for the desire *of* texts. This variety of queer reading employs deconstruction, discourse analysis, and psychoanalysis to read texts against the grain of their embedment in a heteronormative economy of signs (see: Simbürger 54). In my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, I will predominantly apply this last approach and thus introduce its most important features in this chapter.

Instead of merely focussing on aspects of non-straight desire in texts, Griffin (2004) and Sedgwick (1991) argue for a “universalizing” queer perspective, one that does not *only* isolate certain scenes in order to detect a “gay” or “non-heterosexual” subtext but one that encompasses a broader, decidedly *queer* horizon; one which also includes normative depictions of gender and sexuality into its analysis, precisely to point out their constructedness. The aim of my analysis is not the decoding of supposed “codes”, which supposedly testify for supposed sexual “identities” of characters in a heteronormative economy of signs and the resulting reification of sexuality *as* identity, but rather a deconstructivist reading of the instability and contingency of the identities depicted. My analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants* therefore uses a queer lens in order to destabilize the “naturalness” of the norm of heterosexuality and the gender-binary by pointing out their constructedness and apply an approach, “which forces not only homosexuality to come to terms with its construction but heterosexuality as well. [...] all renditions of heterosexuality [...] are just as performative as any rendition of homosexuality.” (Griffin 2004, 107). I therefore differentiate between a type of reading, which (only) traces depictions and narratives of same-sex desire and/or “identity” and a decidedly *queer* reading – one that is particularly interested in challenging heteronormativity by pointing out the constructedness, contingency and non-originality of all performances of sex/gender/desire (and does so by not only analysing depictions of same-sex desire but rather moments of ambiguity, obscurity and contradiction in *all* depictions of sex/gender/desire). In my analysis, I therefore want to use *these* moments of queerness in *SpongeBob SquarePants* to point out how the depictions disrupt normative understandings (such as naturalness, originality, stability) of those identity categories. In my queer reading, I want to follow Jagose’s definition of the term:

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex,

gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability--which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect--queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any 'natural' sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as 'man' and 'woman'. (Jagose, n.p.)

Babka and Hochreiter (2008) similarly define queer reading as a method, which examines texts with respect to their heteronormative embedment and structures of meaning and makes room for interpretations which uncover the constructedness of binary concepts of sexuality and gender identity. It furthermore detects elements of subversion or the possibility of subversion inherent in those texts *because* of the constructedness of those categories (see: Babka and Hochreiter 12).

1.3.5. The Deconstruction of Identity – pointing out ambiguities

Doty (2000; 2012) argues that queer readings are often concerned with “non-straight things that are not clearly marked as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or transgendered, but that seem to suggest or allude to one or more of these categories, often in a vague, confusing, or incoherent manner.” (Doty 2000, 7). Queer reading, Doty suggests, is a mode of reception, which “stand[s] outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function.” (Doty 2012, 618). Thus, in addition to subverting heteronormative narratives of texts, drawing on a poststructuralist understanding of identity and identity formation, queer readings focus on the incongruences of (gendered) identities and/or sexualities and “describe those complex circumstances in texts, spectators and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative.” (Doty 2000, 7). As will be pointed out later, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a text, which contains many elements that, as Doty puts it, “resist easy categorization” and which is, from a (hetero)normative viewpoint, incoherent and incongruent in its depiction of gender, sex and sexuality. A reading of the series and the film based on queer theory renders it possible to talk about those moments of transgression without taking recourse to essentialist notions of identity. Cranny-Francis et al. point out that a queer

approach to reading texts “rejects the binarisms inherent in the gendered and sexed identities available in a heteronormative regime. Instead, queer focuses on the ambiguities in texts that can be read as sites of non-heteronormative desire.” (Cranny-Francis et al. 174). A queer reading, thus, points out breaks with hegemonic, heteronormative and gender-binarc depictions of bodies, genders and desires, while paying attention to the incongruences, breaks, fault-lines and ambiguities in those depictions. Doing so, queer readings can include different methodologies and topics:

Queer theoretical engagements with film studies include a number of different approaches: the discursive examination of the representation of sexual and gender identity categories and those who sport them across a range of films [...], as well as how gender and sexuality intersect with other forms of identification such as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, age, religion and dis/ability [.....]. There is a concerted effort to attend to heteronormativity by discussing how particular films promote, make visible, challenge and subvert – sometimes simultaneously – compulsory heterosexuality [...] These analyses treat films – either singly or in more broad-based studies – as texts and undertake close readings of, for example, characters, dialogue, particular scenes, intertextual elements as cues to latent themes and diagetic elements such as light and sound. (Giffney 366)

Furthermore, a queer reading can also extend the meaning of “queer” from an analysis of gender/s and sexualities to a broader understanding of queer “so that it connotes a moment of crossing a boundary, or blurring a set of categories.” (Barry, 143). Thus, “queerness” does not only refer to non-heteronormative or non-binarc representations of gender/s, bodies, desire and sexuality/ies on a character level but a queer reading might also analyse other non-normative aspects of texts, such as non-linear or non-chronological narratives, twisted logic, stupidity, forgetfulness, failure, silliness and nonsense. For Judith Halberstam (2011) those aspects are relevant from a queer perspective because they defy normative understandings of logic, time, progress/ion and growth while “[...] heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfilment and success(ion)” (Halberstam 2011, 94).

An important element of queer theory and therefore also of queer analysis is the exposure of the contingency and historical specificity of gendered identities, sexed bodies and sexualities, while pointing out the constructedness of the societal norms governing those aspects of human life. This certainly also implies, that queerness is historically specific too. The fact that the meanings of normative categories change over time, as a logical consequence, also renders non-normative queerness unstable. Thus, how transgressive, “queer”, characteristics of texts were and can be analysed by

audiences always depends on the discursive scheme they work with and in.³³ However socially, culturally and temporarily specific, queer readings are strategies of unmaking hegemonic meanings produced by the heteronormative mainstream and, instead, provide different understandings of texts. By pointing out the constructedness of gender/sex/desire *in* texts, they may also reveal the constructedness of gender/sex/desire *outside* those texts:

The value of the queering gaze, as of queer itself, is that it works to destabilise divisive regimes based on binaristic thinking and perception; the thinking that constructs male and female as oppositions, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. Instead it opens up the possibilities that texts can tell us what we may find difficult to acknowledge; that gender is not a natural given but performative process. [...] By reading these textual performances as ambiguous, open to interpretation, not confined within normative constraints, we challenge (the performance of) gender itself. (Cranny-Francis et.al. 175)

Therefore, a queer reading has the potentiality of challenging normative notions of identities, bodies, genders and sexualities by pointing out those elements of texts, which treat them as constructed, contingent and non-natural.

After the above explanations of the basic tenets of queer theory and the practice of queering texts, I now want to move on to the specific theoretical concepts I will apply to my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

³³ How those elements “[...]related to, enforced, or threatened hegemonic definitions of heterosexuality differed from time to time, as the conception of sexual orientation was redefined.” (Griffin 2004, 108). Griffin warns against creating “an aura of ahistoricity” in queer readings and stresses that “[q]ueerness attempts to transcend or deconstruct boundaries but in different eras and cultures what these boundaries are differs.” (Griffin 2004, 108).

2. QUEER AS FOUCAULT.... JUDITH BUTLER AND QUEER THEORY

Judith Butler is usually considered one of the catalysts for the formation of queer theory and one of most important theorists in the field, or “The Queen of Queer” (Asop et al., 2002).³⁴ In her theorizations she draws upon feminist, existentialist, psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theorists. Butler's philosophical work is not confined to the analysis of gender and sexualities, but comprises a vast range of topics, stretching from the production of identities to religion, war, ethics, censorship and hate speech. For the purpose of this paper, I will confine myself to her extensive and influential theories about sexualities and genders with specific focus on her theorizations on performativity, intelligibility and coherence in the context of subject formation as well as subversion. Those theories were originally articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and refined in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Following the basic assumption, that there is no “truth” of sex/gender/desire, no inner core of the self, Butler elaborates on the construction of gender/sex/desire with poststructuralist, Marxist, existentialist, feminist, linguistic and poststructuralist theory to reveal how those aspects of identity come to be understood *as* truth. In this chapter I want to give an overview over the aspects of those articulations relevant for my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

2.1. THE MATERIALITY OF BODIES - “SEX” VS. “GENDER”

“[...]there is no being behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything” (Nietzsche , qutd. in Butler 1990, 34)

In her epoch-making work *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler moves away from the traditional feminist distinction between “sex”, conventionally conceptualized as a set of physical, innate, unchanging and natural bodily markers that can be summarized as

³⁴ Butler, however does not only and not always classify herself as a queer theorist, but also as a poststructuralist feminist and is critical of some strands of queer theory as well as some contemporary usages of the term “queer”, since she considers some theorists to be oblivious of structural inequalities and/or erroneously separating the analysis of sexualities from the analysis of gender identities (see: Bublitz 48) and/or criticizes a presentist treatment of the term and/or questions the notion of “theory” (as opposed to political practice) as such (see: Butler 2003, 372).

either “male” or “female”, and “gender”, as a set of sociocultural and political aspects, roles and identifications, which are cultural constructs and therefore on the one hand culturally and historically specific and on the other changeable. Butler claims that this distinction³⁵ is obsolete and that gender and sex are both culturally constructed; both are historically specific and non-natural. Therefore, Butler criticizes and challenges an assumption, typical and instrumental for many strands of feminist thinking: that sex pre-exists gender and that the former functions as the basis for the latter. Even more generally, Butler rejects a conceptualization of materiality as pre-existing discourse and human cognition. Instead, she claims that the very same discursive power that genders us also sexes our bodies and constructs the materiality of bodies (see: Distelhorst 22-24). Bodies are not mute objects, onto which genders are built, they are not immune to sociocultural conditioning. Quite on the contrary, we *do* our bodies. Butler’s idea of *doing* sex/gender has become well known under the heading “performativity”. According to Butler, humans never perceive material reality directly and immediately, but always through already existing discursive schemes of categorization, which make materiality “legible” and understandable. It is only through our perception, comprehension and categorization that materiality is filled with meaning. Thus, Butler does not conceptualize materiality as mute and stable facticity, but as a process. In the context of Butler’s theory it is thus most appropriate to talk about processes of *materialization* instead of referring to materiality as something static, which pre-exists human perception and can be perceived and accessed without being altered (see: Distelhorst 24-25). Furthermore, for bodies to be appropriately “read”, comprehended and classified as sexed bodies by others, they need to be stylized and “staged” with the aid of culturally ascribed markers of gender. Thus, people’s “biological” sex is communicated via culturally constructed bodily indicators. It is necessary for subjects in order to be intelligible to sex their bodies through signs which are not only legitimized as norms but even prescriptive and mandatory in a specific context. Those signs are at the same time cultural and physical. According to Butler there is no way to differentiate what

³⁵ The sex-gender distinction was introduced in 1974 by Gayle Rubin (see: Cranny-Francis et.al. 5). This distinction was instrumental to feminism as a strategy, which rendered the misogynist legitimization of inequality on the basis of biological constitution of bodies obsolete and rather directed the attention to the societal, social, political and cultural aspects of gender. Men and women were understood to be born with a “natural” and biological sex, but this sex did neither lead to nor justify structural inequalities or culturally inflicted gender roles (see: Distelhorst 22).

aspects of sexed bodies are “cultural” and which are “natural”. Whenever matter, in this context the sexed body, is perceived, interpreted and *read* it is always already gender, because it can only be rendered legible via cultural markers normatively ascribed to a certain sex and can only be interpreted and perceived through already existing knowledge about those sexes. Hence, Butler also shifted the focus of feminist debates from the question how sex and gender relate to each other to how sex is made legible and through which processes it is discursively and performatively produced (see: Distelhorst 26-27). As my analysis will show, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a text, which frequently denaturalizes sexed bodies and presents them as constructed, revealing the processes of their construction.

2.2. THE DISCURSIVE AND PERFORMATIVE PRODUCTION OF SEX/GENDER

According to Foucault, power in modern Western societies is not a repressive force, which is executed by a central institution or agent, but a network or a cycle, which permeates all aspects of life and even works with and through our bodies, thus structuring and bringing about our very subjectivity – our being in the world (see: Halperin 1997, 17). Discourses carry power – they are the medium of power, in that they are a regulatory and disciplinary force. They define how subjects are conceptualized and whether they can be conceptualized as subjects at all (see: Distelhorst 39-41).³⁶ Power is therefore not (only) a negative and repressive force but also productive, since as a regulatory discursive force it provides us with a normative order and a system of reference, through which we are made into coherent subjects

³⁶This can be best exemplified with Foucault’s (1978) elaborations on the development of the conceptual category “homosexual”. Foucault argues that the fact, that there have always been men who loved, desired or had sex with other men and women who loved, desired and had sex with other women, does not logically and necessarily mean that there have always been “homosexuals”, since the idea that there is a specific “type” of human being who is homosexual is a rather recent invention. Thus, before “homosexual” was used as an identity category, there were strictly speaking, no “homosexuals”, because a different discursive regime conceptualized acts, behaviours and desires, which were later on categorized as “homosexual”, differently. Usually, those practices which are now summarized under the term “homosexuality” and linked to a specific identity were criminalized or pathologized before (and sometimes still are), thus conceptualized as crimes or sicknesses rather than a specific intrinsic feature of specific people’s identities. This also implies that basically, all human beings were believed to be capable of committing the “crime” of what was then deprecatingly called “sodomy”. Homosexuality was not conceptualized as it now is, as an inner or even innate characteristic of a certain group of people with a specific “sexual identity”, or as Foucault famously put it: “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.” (Foucault 43). Thus, discourse constructs homosexuals and it, more generally, defines whether and how subjects and objects can appear and be understood.

and through which we can perceive and understand others as coherent subjects as well as and the world around us:

Hence, power is not intrinsically, nor is it only, negative: it is not just the power to deny, to suppress, to constrain – the power to say no, you can't. Power is also positive and productive. It produces possibilities of action, of choice – and, ultimately, it produces the conditions for the exercise of freedom (just as freedom constitutes a condition for the exercise of power). Power is therefore not opposed to freedom. And freedom, correspondingly, is not freedom *from* power – it is not a privileged zone outside power, unconstrained by power – but a potentiality internal to power, even an effect of power. Power, then, is everywhere. Resistance to power takes place from within power [...] What escapes from relations of power – and something always does escape [...] does not escape from the reach of power to a place outside power, but represents the limit of power, its reversal or rebound. The aim of an oppositional politics is therefore not liberation, but resistance. (Halperin 1997, 17-18)

Following Foucault's theories on discursive regimes, knowledge and power, Butler claims that sexed bodies are produced through and by discourses. These “regulative discourses” are internalized by individuals and then acted according to. Genders are thus results of identity discourses (see: Degele et al. 106). However, this description is too simplistic and it is erroneous to draw a simple causal connection between discourses and act, because, as Butler famously claims, there is a performative element to gendering - subjects, via stylized bodily practices, re-produce what it means to be gendered in accordance with regulatory discourses. Discursive power does not cause performative power, but power can, in the Butlerian theoretical articulation, rather be understood as a cycle, in which discourses give power, hegemony and authority to certain performative acts and performative acts give power, hegemony and authority to discursive regimes by citing and thus reifying the norms they produce (see: Distelhorst 45).

As pointed out above, for Butler, gender identity, or identity in general is not biologically determined or a prediscursive state-of-being, but can be best conceptualized as a doing, or, as Butler puts it: “[...] 'being' a sex or a gender is fundamentally impossible.” (Butler 1993, 26). It is this actional, this performative element of gendering that makes discourses productive and effective. “Performance” or “performativity” are terms to denote different concepts in different academic disciplines and Butler herself combines different approaches to the concept in her theorizations. Butler's notion of performativity comprises both bodily practices and linguistic practices as performative utterances (see: Bubnitz 21-22). In her theory of the performativity of gender, Butler enriches Foucault's theorizations on discursive

power with Austin’s concept of performative speech acts and Derrida’s *iterability*, a concept, with which she implies that performances of gender have to be repeated and, due to contextual changes, necessarily experience shifts in meaning in the course of those repetitions (see: Distelhorst 43; Bublitz 22). Against the background of the cultural order that Butler calls “heterosexual matrix”, which, for the sake of subjecthood demands specific legible ways of being gendered from individuals, certain performative utterances are given cultural hegemony and authority. These conventions, which gendering follow, are thus imperative norms. It is, however, through the repetitive performance of culturally ascribed bodily, behavioural and linguistic practices that bodies become reified as *sexed* bodies (see: Bublitz 23). Butler does not differentiate between matter and discourse, between materiality and speech. Rather, she emphasizes the intertwinement of both and therefore understands matter not as a pre-discursive facticity but as a process of *materialization*. Materiality, according to Butler, is the result of powerful regulatory and normative discourses and their continuously and repetitively stylized performance – in short, their *materialization* (see: Bublitz 23). Discourse thus, is both a linguistic utterance and material, in that it, as performative speech act, brings about material realities. Knowledge or societal “truth” about gender/sex/desire/identity is furthermore intrinsically linked to power, since it manifests itself when something becomes (literally) the “subject-matter” of knowledge and is accepted as truth. Discursively produced material realities, such as sexed bodies, are results and effects of the truths and possibilities of knowledge established by a powerful normative societal framework. Bodies are materialized according to those truths (see: Bublitz 25).

Butler takes over John L. Austin’s concept of *performativity*, which he first introduced in his lecture *How to do things with words* in 1962, and with it explains how sex/gender/desire are *done with words* (see: Bublitz 23). Austin argues that there are linguistic utterances which are not mere descriptions of an already existing status quo, but which have actional qualities and calls those utterances “performative speech acts”. Performative speech acts are utterances which produce and effect what they denominate. They call into being what they purport to merely name. Examples for such speech acts, in which naming coincides with its effect(s) are the naming of ships (‘I name this ship the “Queen Elizabeth”’) or the “I do” in a marriage ceremony, which produces a married couple (see: Distelhorst 43; Bublitz 23). Butler adds the

statements “It’s a girl” or “It’s boy” after the birth of a child to the list of examples Austin gives. She argues that the statement “It’s a girl” is therefore not descriptive but rather prescriptive. It is not a statement and a categorization of an already existing material reality, but an interpellation³⁷ constructing and materializing a female subject (see: Bublitz 23).

However, subjects are not autonomous in their performances, but performative speech acts must always be based on and legitimized by societal conventions and norms to be successful. The power of the performative lies in the permanent repetition of certain practices, due to the fact that a performative speech act can only succeed when referring to and citing another speech act. Butler therefore uses Derrida’s term “iterability” and expands it by adding the notion that the success of a citation always depends on an already existing and societally enforced norm. However, this also implies, that the meanings produced in those citations can never be fully anticipated, since, according to Derrida, every citation results in shifts of meanings. This opens up the possibility of changing and subverting the norm (see: Distelhorst 44-46; 105-106). In fact, according to Derrida, this shifting of meaning is an intrinsic element of language itself since it is, due to contextual changes, impossible to say the exact same thing twice, because “[t]he meaning of a word is dependent on its temporal history of usages” (Asop et al. 103). Using words is always an act of citation and repetition of terms that have already been used before and whose meaning is changed in the course of the repetition: “On that note, let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the ‘act’ by which a name authorizes or deauthorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity, a repetition.”(Butler 1993, 172). This furthermore also implies that subjects are never originators and masters or even owners of their speech, because they never have full control over it, since it is always a mere repetition and citation of previous

³⁷ Louis Althusser uses the term „interpellation“ to explain how subjects *called into being* by being addressed *as* subjects. To illustrate this concept, he gives the example of a policeperson addressing a pedestrian with “Hey, you!”. Everybody, who feels addressed will immediately turn around and wonder if they have done something wrong. Thus, the addressees have been “interpellated into the system” (Cranny- Francis et.al. 47). This also illustrates the ambivalence of subject-formation. On the one hand, in the moment the addressee turns around, s/he accepts the law as well as the police as its representative and subjects itself to it. Nevertheless, by turning around, s/he also turns into a subject in the face of the law, which also provides him/her with rights s/he can insist on. In order to be and become a subject, the pedestrian in Althusser’s example thus has no other opportunity than to turn around and acquiesce to the interpellation that at the same time subjugates and enables him/her. (see: Distelhorst 51; Cranny-Francis et.al. 47)

usages of words, with previous connotations and meanings being echoed in those repetitions. We cannot autonomously stabilize or master the meanings and effects of linguistic and bodily practices. The outcome of our speaking and performing is thus never fully predictable:

The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which undermines the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language. (Butler 1993, 176)

As becomes evident in the above quote, Butler (1990; 1993) argues that gender performance is always only an approximation of what it means to be “a man” or “a woman” in a given normative framework; it never fully succeeds, it never fully reaches its own ideal. Gender is always a citation, but there is no original that we copy from; it is rather an imitation of an imitation, without any original or prototypical performance. Heterosexual gender identities are always, as Butler puts it, “phantasmatic” and bound to fail:

[...] the naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. In this sense, the ‘reality’ of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself- *and failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect* of originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of “man” and “woman”, are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real. (Butler 2003, 378)

This conception of heterosexual gendering as an ever-approximated-never-achieved ideal is particularly interesting in context with *SpongeBob SquarePants*. The series often treats gender as an “assignment” – something which has to be carried out but is never accomplished successfully.

Similar to Foucault, who claims, that there is no outside of power, Butler argues, that sex and gender, which are effects of power, do not exist prior or outside of “regulatory practices” (Butler 1990, 23-24). She conceptualizes gendering practices as performative, that means constituted via repeated stylized acts and furthermore

stresses, that this doing, which we usually understand as a set of mere expressions of our sex - these regulatory performative practices - in fact construct our gender identities and sex our bodies. Thus, there is no such thing as identity that pre-exists discourse, there is no subject that pre-exists its performative construction, but subjects are constructed via actions, they are the effects of those actions, not their originators. However, those repetitory acts create the effect of naturalness – they produce the illusion, that sex and gender are substantial, stable, innate and coherent: ”Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (Butler 1990, 45). Performative acts do not express, but actually create and constitute both sex and gender with the assumption of a “natural” sex serving as the basis to then construct the idea of a “coherent” gender identity and sexuality (see: Butler 1990, 34). Rephrasing Nietzsche’s statement, that there is “no being behind doing” Butler argues, that there is no gendered/sexed reality, materiality or subject behind or before those repetitively stylized bodily acts. Thus Butler’s notion of performativity is also crucially different from the idea of an artistic performance, since the latter firstly envisions an already existing subject who deliberately performs certain acts. Secondly, an artistic performance always implies the idea of free will, of autonomous agency and voluntarism. Butler, however, suggests that the subject is only constructed in and through the gender performance, without pre-existing it (see: Asop et al. 99):

[...] gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. [...] gender proves to be performative that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. [...] there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results. (Butler 1990, 34)

2.3. SUBJECTIVATION IN THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX

Heterosexuality [...]is invented in discourse as that which is outside discourse. It's manufactured in a particular discourse as that which is universal. It's constructed in a historically specific discourse as that which is outside time. It was constructed quite recently as that which is very old: Heterosexuality is an invented tradition. (Katz 182)

2.3.1. *The heterosexual matrix*

As pointed out above, this thesis is particularly concerned with the question, how *SpongeBob SquarePants* subverts the hegemonic heteronormative and gender-binarc framework it is built upon as a mainstream text. For this purpose, I will apply Butler's notion of the “heterosexual matrix”, which will be introduced in the following pages. For Butler, bodies are not produced in a vacuum, but need a certain frame of reference, a cultural and societal lens through which they are rendered meaningful, legible and legitimate, a normative framework, which sexes them properly and according to which one can decide whether a person's gender identity is acceptable i.e. conforms to the norm that this framework provides us with. Butler refers to this framework as the “heterosexual matrix”. It is important to note, that Butler, following in the footsteps of feminists like Adrienne Rich³⁸, conceptualizes heterosexuality as sociocultural and political institution. She refers to feminist, psychoanalytic theorists and Foucault to argue, that compulsory heterosexuality does not derive from a gender-binarc system, but, on the contrary, that it is a heteronormative system which organizes human beings into two genders and sexes (see: Butler 1990, 30-31). The heterosexual matrix therefore functions as a “grid” into and in which subjects are moulded (see: Salih 51-52; Cranny-Francis et.al. 20). Gauntlett (2008) explains the heterosexual matrix as a discursive framework in which sex is constructed as a natural, stable and innate characteristic of human beings that divides them into two different types of persons – those who are classified as men and those who are

³⁸ In her article “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” Rich (1986) famously introduced the term “compulsory heterosexuality” to express how heterosexuality in Western culture is not simply a sexual orientation or a set of practices, but as a societal institution compulsory for its members: “I am suggesting that heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a *political institution*.” (Rubin, qutd. in Cranny-Francis et.al. 19).

classified as women (see: Gauntlett 148). The heterosexual matrix is an „epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality“ (Butler 1990, xxx), which “drives our division into male and female and [...] structures our understanding of biology“ (Asop et al. 97):

Our understanding of material, anatomical differences is mediated through our cultural frame of meaning. Rather than gender following from biology, for Butler, our gender norms are seen as structuring biology. We view biological factors as requiring a binary division into two sexes, male and female, because of a socially constructed gender to which heterosexuality is central. Heterosexuality, of course, requires a binary difference into male and female. (Asop et al. 97)

Butler also argues that, in a heterosexual matrix, gender identity is central to identity per se - subjects have to be recognizable and legible as one of two genders – as either men or women to be viable *as* subjects. She argues that subjectivity is never gender-neutral, but rather that “proper” gendering is the basis and presupposition for the forming of acceptable subjects. We need to be gendered subjects to be understandable and legible *as* subjects. Therefore, it would be wrong to conclude from her articulations of sex/gender as cultural constructs, that we can chose and "act out" our gender voluntarily. A constructivist understanding of gender/sex does not imply voluntarism, because “[t]here is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it werem which gender it will be today” (Butler 2003, 380):

The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism. (Butler, qutd. In Glover and Kaplan xxvi)

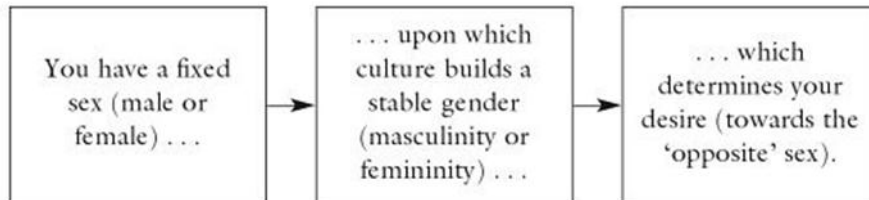
Butler stresses, that identities are formed by regulatory regimes and are therefore repressive categorizations for human beings instrumental to the current socio-political order and central to their credibility and legitimacy *as* subjects in that order. Humans depend on gendering to be able to *be* subjects. Genders are forcibly produced and non-conformity is met with serious consequences, since those not conforming risk their very status as subjects.

2.3.2. The compulsory order of sex/gender/desire

Thus, instead of gender identification being a matter of free choice, Butler argues, that there is a "compulsory order" of sex, gender, and desire. A person's supposedly

biological sex has to be complemented by its compatible gender performance and heterosexual desire, as well as a heterosexual practice, as illustrated in the following table:

Table 1 (Gauntlett 148)



Central to this idea is the concept of "coherence" - gender identities have to be legible, i.e. coded and acted out in ways which members of a given cultural context can decode as clearly belonging to one of two categories, in order to form coherent identities. Butler argues that identities are not intrinsically coherent and continuous, but that the idea of their coherence and stability is a discursive product rather than an immanent feature of identities. Coherence and continuity are, according to Butler, not descriptions of what identities are, but prescriptions of what they are supposed to be:

To what extent is 'identity' a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logic or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (Butler 1990, 23)

Butler introduces the triad sex-gender-desire as a regulatory arrangement functioning as a definitional division line between identities which are inside the norm on the one side and those which are not on the other side. Intelligible subjects thus are characterized by coherence and continuity between their supposedly biological sex, their gender, heterosexual desire and practice:

'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the 'expression' or 'effect' of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. (Butler 1990, 23)

The process of becoming a subject is, as pointed out above, on the one hand socially necessary; on the other hand it is also a process of subjection to a discursive regime. It always implies placing oneself in and binding and constraining oneself to the

current discursive order. Subjecthood therefore simultaneously enables and constrains subjects. Butler and Foucault both use the term “subjectivation” to express this ambiguity of subject formation. A subject can only act and be recognized as subject by having been subjected in the first place. Thus subjectivation implies both empowerment and subjugation. Furthermore, since “being” a subject is not a naturally given fact, but has to be established, individuals always bear the risk of being deprived of their status as subjects, when their behaviour deviates too much from what is normatively acceptable (see: Distelhorst 51). In the context of norms governing gender in a heterosexual matrix, this means that individuals are categorized as one of two possibilities: they can (or rather: have to) be either men (humans with bodies categorized as male, masculine gender identification and a sexual/romantic desire for women) *or* women (humans with bodies categorized as female, feminine gender identification and a sexual/romantic desire for men) to be acceptable and coherent subjects:

[...] compulsory heterosexuality not only constructs a view of acceptable or viable sexuality, but also uses this view as the basis of its gendering practice, constructing acceptable or viable genders on the basis of compulsory heterosexuality. So any individual who is not heterosexual is not only unacceptably or non-viably sexed, but also unacceptably or non-viably gendered. And because we relate an individual's subjectivity to their gender, then such a person is not a viable or acceptable subject. (Cranny-Francis et. al. 74)

These regulatory norms form the basis of the subject's existence in a heteronormative economy of signs. They allow him/her to exist and act in a heterosexual matrix. Following a Foucauldian understanding of power, Butler argues that power cannot be simply negated or destroyed or opposed: subjects would destroy the very basis of their subjectivity by risking their legibility in that matrix (see: Halperin 1997, 17-18). Subjects are bound to their subjection. In my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, I will point out how the series features characters, which are not legible and incoherent in a heteronormative framework. In other words, the text shows queer characters, which are often presented as defiant or non-aware of the rules and restrictions the heterosexual matrix imposes on them and therefore escape its normative force to some extent.

2.3.3. *"You are what you must not love" – subject formation and psychoanalysis*

Intelligible subjects are furthermore always constructed by the exclusion of what they must not be, or, as Butler puts it: "The 'am' of 'I am a man' encodes the prohibition 'I may not love a man'" (Butler 2004, 199). One of the explanations Butler provides for this prohibition implicit in gendering is embedded in psychoanalytic theory, more precisely, the Freudian concepts "mourning" and "melancholia"³⁹. When a person experiences a loss, according to Freud, the "normal" and "healthy" reaction to that loss is mourning. Melancholia develops, when a subject does not have the possibility of mourning (either because of a taboo surrounding the lost object or because s/he is not aware of the loss or of what s/he has lost). In this case, the melancholic cannot let go of the unconsciously lost object. As a consequence, the object is introjected⁴⁰ into the person's ego. Butler adds that lost objects are not only introjected, but also incorporated – they manifest themselves on the surface of the melancholic's body (see: Salih 54). Butler argues, that norms always have to simultaneously define and defend themselves against the abnormal – against what they are not, against their outside. Subjects, furthermore, have to give up what is not compatible within the economy of signs of the current sexual order – e.g. homosexual desire and love. Usually, such a loss needs to be mourned in order to be processed. However, due to the fact that the loss is forcibly produced by the norm of heterosexuality, due to the fact that it is effected by a taboo (the taboo of homosexuality), mourning is not possible, since it would imply the questioning and challenging of precisely the norm which effected the loss, as well as the abjected status of homosexuality as a taboo. Heterosexuality and the corresponding intelligible gender identities are thus results of the loss of same-sex love. In turn, the forbidden and thus lost love object is incorporated into the subject's identity and surfaces on his/her body (see: Butler 1990, 67-68). According to Butler, men become men precisely because they must not love men, as well as women become women because

³⁹ Drawing on Freud, Lacan also argues that the Oedipus complex generates identifications in which "the other" is installed within "the Self". According to Lacan, "[...] in order to become a subject, the principle of otherness must be internalised" (Cranny-Francis et.al. 63). As a result "[...] one is a man to the extent that one does not desire other men, but desires only those women who are substitutes for the mother; one is a woman to the extent that one does not desire other women and desires only those men who are substitutes for the father" (Cranny-Francis et.al. 63).

⁴⁰ Salih defines introjection as "[...] the process whereby objects from the outside world are taken into and reserved in the ego." (Salih 53-54)

they turn into their lost objects of desire that they must not and cannot grieve for (see: Butler 1990, 78-106):

If feminine and masculine dispositions are the result of the effective internalization of that taboo [of homosexuality], and if the melancholic answer to the loss of the same-sexed object is to incorporate and, indeed, to become that object through the construction of the ego ideal, then gender identity appears primarily to be the internalization of a prohibition that proves to be formative of identity. (Butler 1990, 86)

This furthermore implies that the norm of heterosexuality is very unstable, since those exclusions are never fully successful and every individual on a micro-level as well as society on a macro-level is continuously haunted by what it has rejected as its “Other”, because this Other is already implicit in the Self. The loss of homosexual love needs to be negated for heterosexuality to be possible; it remains unspeakable and ungrievable. Butler thus argues that melancholia is the collective fate of our society, because “[...] heterosexual melancholy is culturally instituted and maintained as the price of stable gender identities related through oppositional desires.” (Butler 1990, 95). In the context of textual analysis, the notion that the other in a heterosexual matrix is always a part of the self, implies that even those texts, which are usually and predominantly embedded in heteronormative discourse, necessarily contain queer elements. *SpongeBob SquarePants* features characters, who do not conform to heteronormative ideals of gendering. The existence of persons, in the case of *SpongeBob SquarePants*: the existence of its main characters, who do not conform to societal norms of subjecthood, also challenges this heterosexual matrix:

Inasmuch as “identity” is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of “the person” is called into question by the cultural emergence of those “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. [...] The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’ – that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender. [...] Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation, however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder (Butler 1990, 23).

The heterosexual matrix needs to be continuously reproduced and reified. Thus, the aforementioned exclusionary processes need to be permanently repeated. The “Other”

needs to be continuously rejected and fended off to sustain the necessary illusion of stability and coherence of “the Self” (see: Distelhorst 28-29). The existence of characters like SpongeBob, who display gender and sexual identities incoherent in the heterosexual matrix, but who are still presented as subjects, therefore opens up space for subversion of that matrix.

2.4. SUBVERSION

As pointed out above, Butler takes up Foucault’s understanding of power as both repressive and productive. Due to the fact, that power is relational and a force that permeates all aspects of life and societal organization, there is no “outside” of power, thus resistance against it is always an immanent part and a result of power (see: Sarasin 147). Everybody, according to Foucault, is implicated in power relations: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” (Foucault, qtd. in Cranny-Francis et al. 67). Foucault conceptualizes resistance as a part *of*, brought about *by*, and embedded *in* power. Butler argues that the impossibility of an outside of power also implies, that it does not only produce norm-conforming genders, sexes, desires and bodies but also those identities and physical and material realities, which are not intelligible in a binaric gender system. Even resistant, defiant and deviant subjects are thus created by powerful regulatory discourses: “For one is, as it were, in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it.” (Butler 1993, 185). At the same time, Butler argues that this does not preclude the possibility of agency per se, but necessitates a different understanding of agency – one that is not based on the idea of an oppositional, autonomous subject that can rework power from outside of it, but one that *constitutes* subjects. Butler thus locates resistant/subversive subjects in the paradox situation of being on the one hand produced by powerful discourses and on the other hand trying to resist and subvert those discourses (see: Butler 1993, xxiii). Resistance therefore is never an opposition from outside, but a reworking of power from inside its regulatory framework. Bublitz explains the Butlerian subversive subject as paradoxically subjected and – to some extent - free at the same time (see: Bublitz 110).

Butler furthermore states that precisely *because* every gender performance is always only an approximation to an ideal that can never be fully reached; every

construction of gendered identity necessarily produces errors. Furthermore, due to the fact, that the construction of gender identity depends on its constant performative repetition, every repetitory interval bears the potential of changing, shifting, expanding and subverting the meanings, truths and materialities produced in those performances:

[...] if repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose? If there is, as It were, always a compulsion to repeat, repetition never fully accomplishes identity. That there is a need for repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *deinstituted* at every interval. (Butler 2003, 381)

In this context, it is important to bear in mind that Butler conceptualizes language as performative on the basis of Austin's speech act theory. She does not separate language from materiality but stresses the materiality *of* language (see: Stoller 381). Thus, just as failure is a part of language, it is also a part of gender and sexual identity, since those identity markers are also produced by repetitory discursive and performative practices:

In different contexts and times a repetition can take on a different meaning, undermining or subverting the dominant norms. This openness of terms is central to Butler's understanding of gender and to the politics which accompanies her account [...] unlike Lacan, she allows alternatives to dominant ways of thinking to be thinkable, conceptualizable, even if socially excluded. These alternatives, such as homosexuality, can then provide a base for resistance to norms, as they do in Foucault's work. Butler, however, wants space for something further. She wants our ways of thinking to be susceptible to change, so that, for example, the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality, or masculinity and femininity, as distinct categories can be undermined. This space is given in her theory by her acceptance of the account of iterability. If we repeat performances in different contexts then different meanings can emerge which can undermine and subvert dominant ones. (Asop et al. 103-104)

Therefore, the heterosexual matrix is a very vulnerable construct precisely because it *is* a construct and depends on its permanent performative repetition. Butler argues that subjects thus have the opportunity of subverting that order by citing gender in

ways that shift norms or reveal the processes of gendering.⁴¹

Hence, the idea that sex/gender is a performative construction also implies the possibility of deconstruction via performances that reveal their contingency and constructedness: Incoherences in the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire destabilize that order by showing that a coherent, intelligible gender identity is not natural or innate but rather a repressive societal norm. In this context, linguistic as well as bodily performative acts can be subversive. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler suggests drag as a subversive bodily practice, which by exaggeration, ironically reveals the non-naturalness, constructedness, non-originality and contingency of gender performances per se, which also includes performances of gender, which, other than drag-performances, conform to binary gender norms:

If gender is performative, then it follows, that the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance. Although there are norms that govern what will and will not be real, and what will and will not be intelligible, they are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice. One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation. What this means is that through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction. The point about drag is not simply to produce a pleasurable and subversive spectacle but to allegorize the spectacular and consequential ways in which reality is both reproduced and contested. (Butler 2004, 218)

Drag as a form of gender parody dramatizes the performative processes that underlie every construction of gender/sex/sexuality and every production of coherence and intelligibility between those aspects. As another example for subversive rearticulations of heteronormative gender identities, Butler mentions butch/femme-constellations, arguing that these relationships do not necessarily have to be mere replicas of heterosexual relationships, but in fact often parodic recontextualizations

⁴¹ In this context, however, the following question arises: If reinterpretations and changings of meaning are an immanent part of performative power, why does Butler understand some of those articulations as subversive and others not? What are the criteria of assessing the subversive content of such performative acts? How can we decide, whether a rearticulation of gender is a subversive act or merely a necessary side effect and corollary of performativity? Does Butler in her articulations not paradoxically and inconsistently with her poststructuralist thinking, take recourse to a prediscursive, autonomous subject in that she only values those performative acts as subversive, which are acted out by conscious, intentional and purposeful acting subjects as originators of that subversion? What are the criteria that constitute subversion? If resistance is a necessary part of power, “[h]ow do we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?” (Butler 1993, 185).

that denaturalize the supposedly natural heterosexuality and reveal that in fact, there is no original to be copied from, but that heterosexuality is always already an imitation in itself. The lesbian identification with masculinity – female masculinity – is always dissonant and incoherent, because it is accompanied by a body that is culturally ascribed as female. A butch identity, similar to drag performances, thus implies a subversive resignification and rearticulation of masculinity (see: Butler 1990, 167-168). My analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants* will, amongst other aspects of the text, interpret instances of gender parody, cross-dressing and drag in the text and examine, whether they can be read as subversive bodily acts in the Butlerian sense.

However, not all gender parodies or non-conforming gender performances are subversive or even political at all (see: Degele et. al. 117). What is more, those performances might also perpetuate existing binaric and heteronormative gender regimes, by ridiculing or trivializing subjects, whose bodies, gender performances and/or desires are not intelligible and, in Butler’s words, *do not matter* in this matrix. Thus, gender parodies can also have offensive and violating effects for non-norm-conforming subjects. Distelhorst criticises Butler for omitting this aspect and points to the fact that often, drag performances reinforce heteronormativity by ridiculing non-conformity, while trivializing and concealing the suffering subjects experience *because* of the regulatory power that governs subject formation and the constraints of gender and sexual identification (see: Distelhorst 103-104). However, Distelhorst’s critique is oblivious of the fact that Butler herself points out, that parody is not *per se* subversive and that there are forms of parody, which support heteronormativity (see: Bublitz 114): In *Bodies That Matter* (1993) Butler modifies and relativizes her elaborations on drag performances as subversive strategies articulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and argues that parody does not necessarily have to have a subversive effect:

But here it seems that I am obliged to add an important qualification: heterosexual privilege operates in many ways, and two ways in which it operates include naturalizing itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm. But these are not the only ways in which it works, for it is clear that there are domains in which heterosexuality can concede its lack of originality and naturalness but still hold on to its power. Thus, there are forms of drag that heterosexual culture produces for itself - we might think of Julie Andrews in *Victor, Victoria* or Dustin Hoffmann in *Tootsie* or Jack Lemmon in *Some Like it Hot* [...] This is drag as high het entertainment, and though these films are surely important to read as cultural texts in which homophobia and homosexual panic are negotiated, I would be reticent to call them subversive.

Indeed, one might argue that such films are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness, and that this displaced production and resolution of homosexual panic actually fortifies the heterosexual regime in its self-perpetuating task. (Butler 1993, 85-86)

In her later work, Butler argues that the assumption of drag or gender parody as an intrinsically political or subversive intervention is wrong. Rather, it has the *potential* of subversion, it *potentially* has a politicizing effect, since, as soon as the –usually invisible - contingency of subjecthood is revealed, subversive intervention and, as a consequence, transformation is rendered possible (see: Distelhorst 105). Through the destabilization of a binaric gender regime, gender parody thus might but does not necessarily *have* to have subversive effects.

Again, the question arises, how we can differentiate, which non-normative bodily practices can be classified as subversive and which cannot. Butler answers this question only partly by claiming, that only those gender-performances can be qualified as subversive, which reveal the non-naturalness, the non-originality and the performative nature of hegemonic gender identities and the heteronormative framework in which they are produced (see: Bublitz 114): “In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality.” (Butler 1993, 85). However, this does not answer on the basis of which criteria we can identify whether and which practices reveal the constructedness and the imitative nature of gendered and sexual identity and which do not. This is a question particularly relevant when applying Butler's concept of subversion for analytical purposes. However, Butler unfortunately does not provide us with criteria for identifying, whether or not a given gender performance can be conceptualized as subversive. In order make Butler's theoretical articulations of subversion fruitful for textual analysis – I would like to expand it by two aspects in the following pages.

2.5. REWORKING BUTLER

2.5.1. *Subversion and Humour*

If not all non-conforming performances of sex and/or gender and/or desire are automatically subversive, then the question arises, what the criteria for distinguishing between subversive performances and heteronormative performances are. At this point and in the context of my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, I therefore would like to suggest, that the use and direction of humour in texts might indicate the extent to which those texts are grounded on a heteronormative sub-narrative, or framed by a heterosexual and gender binaric norm, and thus, whether or not a specific gender performance depicted can be read as a subversive intervention. The question, whether a text is subversive might be answered by an examination of how humour is structured in certain scenes. Who is laughed at? Who are the ones given the authority to laugh about others and are thus constructed as normative and “normal” subjects by the discursive performative power of humour and laughter? Humour is often used strategically to devalue, injure and reject what is outside the norm. It is therefore also a way of making “the Other” less threatening. With Butler, these processes of devaluation via laughter can be easily explained and understood with the necessity of the heterosexual subject in a heteronormative framework to defend itself against the intrusion of homosexuality and/or ambiguity, incoherence and unintelligibility, in short: “queerness” – an intrusion which, if tolerated, might lead to risking one’s own legibility and acceptability *as* subject. One strategy with which norms are upheld, reproduced and stabilized is the rejection, negation and devaluation via the ridicule of its negative – the abnormal, the abjected. My suggestion therefore is, that those identities and identifications, which a text presents as laughable might in fact be those which are most dangerous and destabilizing to the normative framework that the text is based on. Thus, by examining what is rejected via ridicule, we can find out what the text needs to negate in order to stabilize the normative discursive framework it relies on. On the other hand, humour might also function as a subversive force, in that it destabilizes the norm by directing laughter at behaviour that is constructed as “normal” in a gender-binaric, heteronormative order. Those normative identifications and performances, which Butler refers to as “ontologically consolidated phantasms” (Butler 2003, 378) are unmasked for the phantasms they are and thus de-consolidated.

By denaturalizing and de-essentializing norms, humour can unmask the constructed, contingent and discontinuous character of sex/gender/desire. It can reveal how those aspects of identity, and therefore identity as such, are in fact produced and framed in(to) a regulatory discursive regime.

Furthermore, laughing at what is normatively legitimized, in other words – socially sanctioned and authorized as “normal” – , in a given context automatically implies a change in the hierarchical construction of the binary normal/abnormal, in this case heterosexual/homosexual or male/female. When queer – abjected – characters in texts and audiences of texts are allowed to laugh at the normative discourses that abject them as well as at norm-conforming subjects that are created by those discourses, then the result is a destabilization of the authority and hegemony of those norms as well as of the hierarchical, asymmetric heterosexual/homosexual-binary. Thus, humour has the potential of shifting and subverting norms by revealing their status as self-perpetuating constructs as well as by abrading and challenging the norm’s authority by ridiculing it. I therefore want to suggest the structure of humour in a text as one possible criterion for identifying the subversive content of a text or performance. In my analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants* I want to find out, whether the texts analysed rework or perpetuate the heteronormative matrix, described by Butler, by looking at, amongst other aspects of the texts, how humour is used and structured and whom laughter is directed at.

2.5.2. Hegemonic masculinity as privileged heterosexual gender identity

The fact that genders in a heterosexual matrix are constructed in relation to each other does not imply that this relation is symmetrical or non-hierarchical. Quite on the contrary, in the binary man/woman or male/female or masculine/feminine, the former is clearly privileged. One useful way of describing male privilege was introduced 1987 by R.W. Connell with the concept “hegemonic masculinity”. Connell uses the term to explain the dominant or normative variety of masculinity in a given context, arguing that hegemonic masculinity is always constructed hierarchically “in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women.” (Connell 183). Similar to a Foucauldian concept of power, hegemony, a term originally borrowed from Gramsci, does not necessarily or even usually imply force, but is achieved through “culture, institutions and persuasion.” (Connell/Messerschmidt 832). Hegemonic masculinity is thus what is accepted as

ideal mode of masculinity in a given context. Similar to Butler’s concept of coherently gendered subjects in a heterosexual matrix, hegemonic masculinity is always approximated but never achieved. It is a phantasmatic ideal of how masculinity and manhood are supposed to be acted out in a given cultural context. Connell argues that hegemonic versions of masculinity have the “effect of an unattainable ideal” (Connell 185). Hegemonic masculinity is copied and imitated without actually existing. Furthermore, just as Butler argues that “man” and “woman” are imagined as opposites, as mutually exclusive in the heterosexual matrix, Connell states that hegemonic masculinity does not have a fixed set of characteristics, signifiers or meanings, but it changes from context to context. However, it is always defined (and thus necessarily needs to defend itself) against what is envisioned as its opposite in a heteronormative framework: femininity and homosexuality: “Hegemonic masculinity needs to defend itself against other, homosexual or “soft” versions of masculinity to remain its dominance. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men as well as the exclusion or discrediting of women.”(Connell/Messerschmidt 834).

In my analysis, I therefore discuss hegemonic masculinity as not only one variety of coherent gendered subjecthood, but, more precisely, as the *privileged* gendered subject position inside the heteronormative framework that Butler describes as heterosexual matrix. Due to the fact, that hegemonic masculinity is not characterized by any fixed set of elements, but is only defined by what it is imagined to be *not* – by the exclusion and repudiation of femininity and homosexuality, in the context of a textual analysis, hegemonic masculinity cannot be decoded on the basis of distinctive features. It is rather the mode of masculinity that a given text idealizes. It is the mode of masculinity that is presented as ideal and/or one, which characters strive for. I thus argue that hegemonic can only be recognized with regard to its valuation in a text. Certainly, the two aforementioned aspects are also intertwined, because subversive humour, besides its ability to undo the heterosexual matrix, can also destabilize the privilege of hegemonic masculinity inside that matrix and unsettle its hegemonic status. The concept of hegemonic masculinity is particularly useful in the context of an analysis of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, since deconstruction and destabilization by means of humour and gender parody are recurring themes in *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

3. ANALYSIS – QUEER READING OF *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

3.1. GENDER AS PERFORMANCE – EN-GENDERING AMBIGUITY IN *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

3.1.1. *The Performativity of gender in SpongeBob SquarePants*

Griffin (2004) argues that the genre of animation is of particular interest for a queer reading, since it exposes processes of identity construction by bringing to life and animating the inanimate. There is literally “no being behind doing” (Nietzsche, qtd. in Butler 1990, 34), no identity behind, before or beyond what is shown and performed, in animation. Therefore, Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender is particularly useful for the analysis of such a text. Due to the fact that explicit sexuality is avoided and cartoon characters need to be as asexual as possible in order to be considered appropriate for premature audiences, there is much room for ambiguity and therefore interpretation with regards to the gender identities and sexualities of the characters depicted (see: Griffin, 2004 and Johnson, 2010). As pointed out above, Butler argues that sex and gender are both cultural constructs, or that sex *is* gender, since it relies on cultural framework to make it legible. In cartoons/animation the supposedly “natural” basis, which is usually categorized as sex, is missing. Still, characters are usually (in most animation films and cartoons rather unambiguously) gendered. Cartoon characters “[...] are never drawn with sexual organs. Many never wear clothing [...] Yet, the sexual organs of the animals are not visible [...] without those signifiers, cartoons must rely on voices and attire to assign gender [...]” (Griffin 2004, 107). Thus, in animation, gender and sex are entirely performative *and* cartoons furthermore often reveal the constructedness and the performative “nature” of gender-sex-desire even off screen by depicting their processes of construction. In the following sections, I will discuss those moments in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in which gender and sex are depicted as performative or in which processes of gendering are made visible.

In the episode *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, SpongeBob and Patrick adopt a baby scallop and raise it together as foster parents. The episode combines many of the recurring topics in *SpongeBob SquarePants* relevant for this thesis: it provides an excellent

example for Butler’s notion of the performativity of genders, her articulations of their forcible production in a heterosexual matrix as well as her concept of subversion via parody. Furthermore it obviously thematizes same-sex parenting, since it depicts Patrick and SpongeBob not only as romantic, but even as parental and possibly reproductive couple. The obvious issues of cross-dressing, same-sex romance and the parodying of normative and traditional heterosexual relationship-constellations will be discussed later. For now, I want to read the episode against the background of Butler’s performativity theory, since it offers interesting insights into how gender is dealt with in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. After SpongeBob and Patrick have decided to take care of the baby scallop, they discuss their roles and, in the light of Butler’s performativity-concept, it is striking, how gender is negotiated in that scene. Both of them want to be the “mother”, but when Patrick tries to convince SpongeBob of his maternal qualities, the latter answers: "I don’t think you can be the mom, Patrick, because you never wear a shirt." Thus, gender identity is something, that one can – in the literal sense of the word - "put on", comparable to the putting on of a piece of clothing. The comic effect of the scene lies in the viewer's expectation of SpongeBob reasoning against Patrick as a mother with arguments based on biology and anatomy. SpongeBob thus holds a mirror up to the viewers, making them aware of their biology-based assumption of gender-identity, a way of thinking that is usually not recognized, because it is, as the hegemonic and dominant ideology, taken for granted as an unquestioned fact. In this scene the constructed nature of gender is hinted at and the norms that govern gender/sex/desire are parodied. The humour created in the scene has two levels. On the one hand it is directed at SpongeBob and Patrick, who are depicted as “stupid” characters and unaware of the societal norms governing gender. On the other hand, those norms themselves are ridiculed. Furthermore, SpongeBob indicates that there would be other possibilities of thinking and talking about gender-identity, than those possibilities a heteronormative economy of signs provides us with. Additionally, viewers witness the *making* of gender, when SpongeBob and Patrick *both* start putting on clothes (which mark their identities as parents) and impersonating femininity and masculinity respectively. In the negotiation between SpongeBob and Patrick they are confronted with a situation in which sex/gender and gender roles are not taken for granted as natural or an a priori state-of-being but in which gender is treated as a *doing* and thus something which *can*

be negotiated. The mere fact that gender roles *are* negotiated between SpongeBob and Patrick implies that they are not traced back to an inner or natural or innate core, but rather de-naturalized and de-essentialized. This implication certainly challenges heteronormative notions of the nature of gender identities *and* roles, because they are not portrayed as following naturally or coherently from the assumed sex of the bodies which act them out, nor are they stable entities which pre-exist their discursive construction. Furthermore, gender boundaries are blurred and the hegemonic conceptualization of gender/sex as a binary is challenged. Firstly, SpongeBob’s supposed sex is not coherent with his acting out of gender and secondly, the performance of a gender that is incoherent with the supposedly biological sex (Patrick as mother) is presented as just as unstable, arbitrary and contingent and therefore natural/unnatural, “normal” and therefore negotiable as the performance of a coherent gender-identity (Patrick as father). Gender performance is, in the case of the negotiation of identity in this episode, just a matter of choice and decision. This contradicts Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender to some extent, since she stresses, that the range of choices in our gender performances we are provided with is very limited. The heterosexual matrix *compels* us to act out sex/gender/desire in a coherent manner and demands intelligibility and coherence as prerequisite for our acceptability as subjects. Furthermore the mere fact that individuals *are* compelled to perform gender identities *at all* and to perform them as expression of *one* subject-position out of *two* possibilities (i.e. in a binaric logic of gender/sex), is a result of their embedment of heteronormativity, since gender is considered to be intrinsic elements *of* identity in that matrix. Thus our performances of sex/gender/desire are not effects of voluntary choice, but results of powerful and (for the sake of coherent subjecthood) inescapable regulatory practices (see: Butler 1993, xxiii; Butler 2003, 380; Glover and Kaplan xxvi) .

After SpongeBob has told Patrick that his physical appearance disqualifies him for the role of the mother, Patrick’s body is shown and, in this shot, he is much hairier than usual in the series. The association of masculinity with hair or hairiness is typical for the series (see: Brownlee 42-43). The logic behind SpongeBob’s argument against Patrick taking over the female and maternal role in their parental constellation is consistent with the heteronormative assumption that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive, that men and women are defined as opposites of each other. Due

to the fact that masculinity is associated with hairiness, it cannot and must not be associated with femininity (as in the role of the mother) in a heteronormative framework. His hairiness thus disqualifies Patrick for the role of the mother. However, the fact that femininity *and* masculinity in the scene are both acted out by characters usually depicted as males adds another element of meaning. It not only denaturalizes the concept of gender but also ridicules the logic of basing gender on physical or biological properties. This way of thinking is ridiculed by bringing forward hair as the physical marker constructed as inconsistent with femininity, instead of sex characteristics such as genitalia (as typical for a gender-binarc framework which conceptualizes the sexed body as natural material entity and basis for gender). Furthermore, Patrick does not argue against SpongeBob’s performance of femininity, despite the fact that the latter is also depicted as a male character in the series. Thus, it is not a body categorized as male, which is classified as incompatible with a performance of femininity in the text but an arbitrary bodily feature such as the amount of body hair. This also directs attention to the arbitrariness of choosing other bodily features, such as those usually accepted as sex characteristics as the basis of a gender classificatory system.

However, *Rock-A-Bye-Bivalve* is not the only *SpongeBob SquarePants* episode, in which gender identity is depicted as performative. There are various instances in the series and the film, in which sex/gender is not presented as an a priori state-of-being, but rather as something that is acted out, often by putting on certain clothes or other distinctive markers of masculinity. In the texts analysed, one of the most frequent signifiers of masculinity is, as pointed out before, body or facial hair. Brownlee (2011) analyses *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* and points to the recurring association of masculinity, or more precisely its hegemonic variety, with hair or hairiness: King Neptun loses his crown and thus cannot cover his bald spot anymore and Dennis the Hit Man can grow a beard through willpower (see Brownlee 42-43). Due to the fact that King Neptun is more concerned about losing his crown because it reveals his lack of hair than about losing a signifier of royalty stresses the power and the normative status that masculinity (signified by hairiness) has in the text.⁴² Furthermore, in a moment of despair SpongeBob and Patrick are given fake seaweed-

⁴² *SpongeBob SquarePants*’ treatment of masculinity will be discussed in 3.3.

moustaches by Princess Mindy (see: fig. 1). She tells them that those moustaches will make “men” out of them. After being equipped with fake body hair, they take up courage again and sing the song “Now That We’re Men”, indicating, on the one hand, that they have not been men before, but also illustrating that what makes them men is not a core or essence or their inner “truth”, but rather merely a *performance* of manhood. Certainly, it also implies that hegemonic masculinity, a topic recurrently thematized and negotiated in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, is associated with competence and bravery in the text. In order to *be* brave enough to go to Shell City and return it to King Neptun, SpongeBob and Patrick have to become *men* first. However, they do not *become* men neither have they *been* men from the beginning, but they *do* masculinity. Gender (in this case its hegemonic variety) is not a *being* but a *doing* which needs to be achieved and performed (via hairiness). In the song “Now That We’re Men”, similarly, they also refer to hairiness as a signifier for masculinity: “Now that we’re men, we have facial hair” Additionally, in the episode *Grandma’s Kisses*, SpongeBob puts on sideburns to illustrate his adult masculinity. They are, according to him “the icing on the maturity cake”.

By depicting the masculinity of even those characters who are constructed as “biological” males in the text as *performative* (SpongeBob and Patrick “put on” certain items of clothing or fake hair in order to perform masculinity appropriately), the text de-naturalizes and de-essentializes gender.

Figure 1 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



3.1.2. *Ambiguous design – ambiguous behaviour*

One of the reasons why *SpongeBob SquarePants* has repeatedly received criticism and praise alike is its depiction of rather ambiguously gendered characters. In my

analysis, I will focus on SpongeBob and Sandy, since both frequently transgress the boundary masculine/feminine and are thus particularly interesting for a queer reading. In the following pages, I want to point out, that they are not constructed as transgressive characters by the narratives of individual episodes only, but that they rather are, from the very beginning, designed and coded as cartoon characters performing their genders in very ambiguous and non-binaric ways.

Johnson (2010) characterizes *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a text that frequently challenges “signifiers of traditional masculinity” (Johnson 247). Generally, the signifiers coding SpongeBob as a male character lie in his characteristic clothes: rectangular brown trousers, a white shirt and a red tie. However, this performance of traditional masculinity is counteracted by SpongeBob’s facial features. Johnson calls attention to the fact that those are rather atypical for a cartoon figure designed to represent a male character. He argues that “the signifiers that traditionally govern the gender of the anthropomorphized character are particularly evident in their facial design” and analyses SpongeBob as a character, who is designed with both signifiers that are traditionally linked to masculinity and those which are traditionally linked to femininity (see: fig. 2):

Possibly the most interesting aspect of his design is the hybrid of masculine and feminine signifiers within his facial features. His eyes and eyelashes are exaggerated, his cheeks rosy and freckled: traits most commonly found in female characters. Conversely, his long nose and wide-toothed mouth are male signifiers. (Johnson 250-251)

Furthermore, SpongeBob’s voice is similarly indeterminate as his facial design – it is rather high-pitched and not without ambiguity recognizable as feminine or masculine voice. In addition to his ambiguous facial features and his voice, his behaviours, hobbies and interests also range from activities traditionally associated with normative masculinity to those traditionally associated with femininity: “With hobbies ranging from karate to blowing bubbles, SpongeBob has the ability to fluctuate between a display of overt masculine aggression and flowing feminine passivity.” (Johnson 251). Many critics agree with Johnson and read SpongeBob and Patrick as protagonists, who are very fluid in their expressions and performances of gender and thus frequently transgress the male/female or masculine/feminine-boundary (see: Brownlee 2011, Johnson 2010, Halberstam 2005; Pillar 2011).

Figure 2 (SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One)



Figure 3 (SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One)



Figure 4 (Pressure)



The only female protagonist featured on a regular basis in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is Sandy Cheeks. Other than SpongeBob, however, her facial features “match” the gender she is assigned with as a female in a heteronormative economy of signs – she has large eyes and eyelashes, which is, according to Johnson a typical feature of cartoon characters, which are designed to represent females. However, other than SpongeBob, whose clothes match his “sex”, the design of her characteristic clothes is striking in the context of an analysis focusing on performances of gender. Sandy usually wears a white - rather gender-neutral – overall (see: fig. 3). The only aspect of her clothing, which is coded “feminine” is a pink flower she always wears on her glass helmet. Sometimes, Sandy wears a violet bikini and it is only in those scenes that Sandy’s vestimentary gender performance unambiguously matches her design as a female character (see: fig. 4). In *Pressure* the gender-ambiguity resulting from Sandy’s sartorial choices is articulated by Patrick. When Sandy takes her white overall off and wears her bikini underneath, he asks, in a very irritated and surprised manner: “Sandy’s a girl?”. The fact that Patrick does not know Sandy’s gender creates a moment of irritation with the audience, since, in a heterosexual matrix, gender is one of the most crucial pieces of information about subjects. Creating such moments of irritation with a potentially comic effect is a typical aspect of the series’ treatment of gender/sex/sexuality. Obviously, in the series ambiguity concerning the protagonists’ gender-identities is a recurring theme. While SpongeBob’s interests, hobbies and behaviours range from activities which are traditionally coded “masculine” to those traditionally coded “feminine” in a gender-binarc and heteronormative framework, Sandy’s hobbies are almost exclusively ones which are coded “masculine. First of all, she is a natural scientist and inventor, sent to Bikini

Bottom to do research at the bottom of the sea. She is depicted as educated, intelligent and smart. In the episode *SpongeBob vs. The Big One* Sandy is stranded on an island. While Patrick, SpongeBob and Squidward, stranded on a different island, almost despair of their situation and seem very helpless, Sandy reacts very competently and even builds houses and a helicopter, with which she is able to fly back to Bikini Bottom. Thus, in the episode, Sandy is depicted as a scientific genius and proud of her own intelligence and innovativeness, as the following monologue shows:

Well, Sandy, using only your bare hands and the resources found on this deserted island, you have not only survived, but thrived. You've built a five star hotel, a steam-powered generator, a car that runs on coconut milk, and even an espresso bar. I almost don't wanna leave. But I miss Bikini Bottom. Now I can find SpongeBob and the gang and fly us right back. (*SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One*)

Sandy's preferred activities are extreme sports and martial arts, which she masters to an extent that she even teaches SpongeBob karate. She is portrayed as a very athletic and physically fit character. In *MuscleBob BuffPants*, in which she is depicted as a bodybuilder, Sandy lifts her sleeve and shows her very muscular upper arm. Thus, as a character whose vestimentary performance is rather masculine, her body is likewise depicted as one very close to an ideal of muscular maleness. While SpongeBob fails to accomplish the mission of “becoming” a man by achieving a male body, Sandy succeeds at her physical performance of masculinity. This certainly de-naturalizes femininity and masculinity alike, by de-linking gender from the notion of a stable and pre-existing material body it is only built upon. Furthermore, in *MuscleBob BuffPants* and *No Weenies Allowed*, Sandy, other than SpongeBob, is accepted *as man* by those male characters, who are depicted as conforming to or very closely approximating the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. In *MuscleBob BuffPants* Sandy even excels the male bodybuilders in a contest and thus, in her performance of hegemonic masculinity. However, she clearly has a feminine name and is designed as a female character. Thus, in a gender-binarc framework in which gender is supposed to follow from sex coherently, her gender performance is not “coherent” with the sex she is supposed to represent. Similar to SpongeBob, the line of fracture between masculinity and femininity is blurred with Sandy. She defies clear gender categorization. In the light of Butlerian theory, the fact that a character, who is coded as a female in the series, she is more successful at *being* a man, or rather at *doing* masculinity reveals the non-naturalness of gender-identity per se, because it implies a *detrterritorialization* of

masculinity in the context of maleness and a *reterritorialization* of masculinity as female masculinity and thus, again, a breaking up of the supposedly natural sex-gender-system:

One surely cites norms that already exist, but these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation. They can also be exposed as non-natural and nonnecessary when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative expectation. What this means is that through the practice of gender performativity, we not only see how the norms that govern reality are cited but grasp one of the mechanisms by which reality is reproduced and altered in the course of that reproduction. (Butler 2004 , 218)

3.1.3. Cross-Dressing

As pointed out above, Butler only classifies those instances of cross-dressing and drag as subversive, which expose the non-naturalness and non-originality of gender per se, therefore also of those gender performances which conform to the binaric identificatory logics of a heteronormative matrix. Butler points out that drag can subvert the heterosexual matrix, because, by stylizing the compulsory production of sex/gender, it has the potential of revealing that the triad sex-gender-desire is not inherently coherent, but that heterosexual genders are moulded into a framework, which *makes* them coherent, or more precisely, demands coherence from them (see: Butler 2004, 218). In *SpongeBob SquarePants*, cross-dressing/drag is a repeatedly occurring issue and the following sections are dedicated to examining those instances of transgressive vestimentary gender performance in the texts. I have already pointed out, how the usage of humour in texts can be used to detect, whether it challenges or perpetuates heteronormativity and the corresponding ideology of a binaric gender-system a given text is embedded in. Thus, I will pay particular attention to how humour is used in those depictions of cross-dressing, aiming at identifying who and what (normative or non-normative performances of gender) is laughed at and who is given the power and authority to laugh. Furthermore, the following sections will pay attention to whether the instances of cross-dressing analysed serve the purpose of exposing gender as non-natural and performative. The direction of humour, and the question whether coherent depictions of sex/gender/desire are denaturalized, makes it possible to identify whether the texts undo or perpetuate a heteronormative and gender-binaric understanding of gender/sex/sexuality and therefore, whether the

instances of cross-dressing in the text depict or reject queerness and subversion in the Butlerian sense.

Figure 5 (Rock-A-Bye Bivalve)



Figure 6 (Rock-A-Bye Bivalve)



In *Rock-a-Bye Bivalve*, SpongeBob dresses up as woman in order to coherently perform his maternal role in his parental arrangement with Patrick, wearing a red white-dotted dress, a straw-hat with a red hatband and a violet flower on it, a violet umbrella and white heeled boots (see: fig. 5). Later in the same episode, SpongeBob also wears a violet nightgown and pink hair rollers (see: fig. 6). Due to the fact that the effect of the cross-dressing depicted in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* is not predominantly a comic one, but rather serves the purpose creating of a superficial sense of “coherence”⁴³ of SpongeBob and Patrick as a *heterosexual* couple, the fact that identity is depicted as performative in the text creates more room for a queer reading than the text’s use of humour. The analysis of Patrick’s role as a father and his corresponding vestimentary performance of masculinity provides us with an answer whether the episode challenges the heterosexual matrix described by Butler. Patrick, taking the role of the “father”, wears a bow-tie and a hat or later on a suit and a tie. Just like SpongeBob, he *dresses up* as a man, i.e. to be acceptable as a father. Here, the performance-element of all gender identificatory practices becomes evident. Patrick’s masculinity is just as fabricated as SpongeBob’s femininity is in the episode. Thus, even those gender performances which conform to the norms of a

⁴³ It is striking that SpongeBob’s sex, which is usually depicted as “male” in the series, is incoherent with his gender in this episode, in order for SpongeBob and Patrick to perform coherent heterosexuality. In 3.2.2.2. the episode’s parodic deconstruction of heterosexuality will be discussed in more detail.

heterosexual matrix are not natural or pre-discursively/pre-performatively given, but quite clearly depicted as constructions.

Figure 7 (Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy)



Figure 8 (Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy)



Similar to the cross-dressing depicted in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, in *Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy* SpongeBob and Patrick also cross-dress together and again, SpongeBob dresses up as a woman and Patrick as a man. In this episode they similarly dress up for the specific purpose of acting out roles – Patrick plays a pickpocket and SpongeBob his victim (see: fig. 7). However, they only cross-dress in one scene and not for the entire episode. Additionally, in the context of vestimentary gender-performances, the figure of Mermaid Man (Bikini Bottom's retired superhero) himself is interesting. Not only, does his name suggest a certain "inbetweenness" when it comes to gender identification, his way of dressing continuously combines “masculine” items of clothing with “feminine” ones: a violet bra made of shells, presumably ironically alluding to Disney's mermaid Ariel, who wears a similar bikini (see: fig. 8). Thus, Mermaid Man, despite the fact that he is called “man”, wears women’s clothes. This can either be read as a constant depiction of cross-dressing in the series, which is portrayed to an extent of consistency that it is normalized in the text and does not create the effect of irritation in the viewers since it is always worn as characteristic outfit of a character in the series, or it can be read as the depiction of a character, who is generally neither man nor woman. Furthermore, this instance of cross-dressing has the effect of destabilization of heroic or hegemonic masculinity. As a superhero, Mermaid Man is a representative of heroic masculinity.

His performance of masculinity is queered by his design as both male and feminine. Again, the humour created by this transgression is ambivalent. On the one hand, Mermaid Man’s cross-dressing creates a comic effect by being contrasted by his status as superhero in the text. On the other hand, Mermaid Man is still admired as a superhero despite his ambiguous genderedness. This creates the impression that Bikini Bottom is a space, in which the normative power of the heterosexual matrix is, to some extent, ineffective in its disciplinary power.

Figure 9 (Can You Spare A Dime?)



Figure 10 (F.U.N)



Figure 11 (I'm With Stupid)



In *Can You Spare A Dime?* SpongeBob cross-dresses by putting on a maid-outfit (see: fig. 9), however, when he turns around, viewers can see that he wears his white underpants underneath. This instance of cross-dressing is different from the cross-dressing usually acted out by SpongeBob, because, other than Patrick, who usually does not appear in full drag but only combines elements of his characteristic outfit with “feminine” items of clothing, SpongeBob almost always appears in full drag when cross-dressing. Furthermore, the combination of “masculine” and “feminine” items of clothing again creates a moment of irritation in the text, which could be read as a moment, in which the normative ideal of coherence and the binaric organization of genders is counteracted by a queer and transgressive character that performs both genders of a binary at the same time. However, the fact that it is precisely his underpants which are incoherent with his feminine outfit creates the impression that the text rather constructs masculinity as SpongeBob’s “true” gender. It is a masculine item of clothing, even more so a masculine item of clothing which is associated with intimacy and privacy, which is “revealed”. As Pillar (2011) points out in the context of the episode *The Fry Cook Games*, the “revealing” of underwear is often associated with the revelation of something private in the text. Thus, the scene can also be read

as one of the few instances, in which SpongeBob’s sex is depicted as natural and stable – it is his sex, which “spoils” his performance of femininity. Thus, the cross-dressing-scene in *Can You Spare A Dime?* is, other than most other instances of cross-dressing in *SpongeBob SquarePants* one, in which the text does not challenge a biology-based assumption of gender. While in the episode, SpongeBob combines feminine with masculine items of clothing, there are also many instances in the text, in which he appears in full drag. One example for this is the episode *F.U.N.*, in which he wears a Hawaiian outfit consisting of a hula skirt, a necklace and a red flower pinned to his head in one short (see: fig. 10). It is especially in such short scenes, in which cross-dressing is normalized in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Often, in those moments, the transgression is not thematized in the text, but rather presented as a part of creating an ambiguous character.

In *I’m With Stupid*, SpongeBob can be seen wearing a pink blouse under his characteristic trousers (see: fig. 11). This scene is an exact opposite of the cross-dressing in *Can You Spare A Dime?* Again, SpongeBob neither puts on pieces of clothing instead of his characteristic outfit, nor does he combine his characteristic outfit with feminine items of clothing, but the cross-dressing rather functions as a moment of revelation. However, other than in *Can You Spare A Dime?* SpongeBob wears a typically feminine item of clothing *underneath* his characteristic masculine clothes. The scene suggests that he does so regularly, but that his choice of underwear is hidden for the most part of the series and only shown in this sequence. Furthermore, in the episode SpongeBob is ridiculed for his transgressiveness with regard to his gender performance. Patrick exposes that SpongeBob wears mascara – Patrick also suggests that he does so on a regular basis, when he asks SpongeBob: “Hey, SpongeBob do you have any mascara I could borrow?” Patrick and his parents laugh at SpongeBob and Patrick’s parents ask: “The boy wears makeup? [...] What a card!”⁴⁴ In the scene, SpongeBob is ridiculed for his queer behaviour by other characters. However, the scene does not invite viewers to participate in that ridicule of queerness. On the contrary, the ridicule is depicted as unfair and damaging, since SpongeBob’s feelings are obviously hurt. Furthermore, Patrick and his parents are portrayed in a rather dislikeable way – as characters, who on the one hand disregard

⁴⁴ In the German version of the episode, Patrick’s mother asks: „Ist der verkehrt herum?“ – much more obviously alluding to SpongeBob’s sexual identity.

SpongeBob’s feelings, but on the other, are intellectually inferior, because they do not understand and/or notice that SpongeBob only *pretends* to be stupid. In the end, we even find out, that the two starfish featured as Patrick’s parents in the episode, are not actually his parents, but that Patrick forgot, who his real parents are and the couple featured as his parents do not even have a son. Thus, it is the characters who *police* queer behaviour, who are ridiculed in the end, not the character displaying queer behaviour.

Figure 12 (Toy Store of Doom)



Figure 13 (Money Talks)



Figure 14 (Money Talks)



In *Toy Store of Doom*, SpongeBob can be seen dancing in a pink tutu and in pink ballet shoes (see: fig. 12). When Patrick asks him: “Hey, SpongeBob! What’s with the tutu?”, SpongeBob answers: “It’s not a tutu! It’s a man-tu! You can tell because it has [deeper voice] extra support. [SpongeBob’s voice] I got the last one.” Here, the series pokes fun at gender categories. First of all, SpongeBob combines the word “tutu” (an item of clothing traditionally associated with femininity very closely) with “man”, which in a heteronormative framework is defined by its exclusion of femininity. This combination of femininity with masculinity (in this case not only visually by combining feminine and masculine elements of clothing but also verbally by calling one of those items “man-tu”) questions the heteronormative assumption that gender is always structured as a binary and that the subject-positions, which are imagined as the end-points of that binaric framework are and have to be mutually exclusive. SpongeBob thus again indicates, that his performance of masculinity is one which *does not* imagine femininity as its opposite, but one, which is rather a combination of both elements which are traditionally considered feminine and elements which are traditionally considered masculine. In this context, it is interesting, that, despite wearing a tutu, SpongeBob is still wearing his tie (a

traditionally masculine item of clothing). As pointed out above, already his vestimentary performance in the scene depicts gender identity as a set of fluid and flexible *identifications* and appropriations. Other than SpongeBob’s maid-outfit in *Can You Spare A Dime?* which is combined with white underpants and a sense of “revelation” of a stable, true core and inner self (as contrasted with SpongeBob’s clothes), the scene in *Toy Store of Doom* stages a notion of identity, which is not rooted in an essence or inner truth, which is not coherent with such an imagined inner core and which does not conform to a gender-binary, but rather one, which is acted out on a spectrum of possibilities. Furthermore, in the episode, there are more moments of gender-bending, however, they are not expressed via clothes. In one scene, for example, Patrick asks SpongeBob: “Are we going to the ladies’ room again?”. The “again” certainly suggests, that they go to the ladies’ room on a regular basis, thus, once more, depicting the two characters as ambiguously gendered. Later, Patrick suggests: “Now, let’s dress up like fairy princesses!”.

Dressing up like fairy princesses is an activity in which SpongeBob and Patrick also engage in *Money Talks*. In the episode, Mr. Krabs is endowed with the ability of communicating with his money. His dollar-notes force him to spend them, amongst other things, on a “princess-fairy-costume”. First, Mr. Krabs refuses to buy fairy costumes, but in the next shot we can see him in the costume shop wearing the dress he has just purchased, when all of a sudden, SpongeBob and Patrick - also in princess-dresses - appear behind him (see: fig. 13). SpongeBob greets him by complimenting him on his looks: “Mr. Krabs, looking good!”. The fact that neither SpongeBob nor Patrick react irritated, when they see Mr. Krabs dressed up as princess, suggests that for them cross-dressing is “normal” – they are not aware of the fact that a heteronormative matrix demands a vestimentary performance from them which is coherent with their assigned genders/sexes. Thus, the scene depicts the two as explicitly queer characters, which are unable or unwilling to conform to the norms a heteronormative framework imposes on them. Mr. Krabs, on the other hand, is embarrassed and shocked about being “caught” in a princess dress and as a result runs away (see: fig. 14). When Patrick asks SpongeBob: “What’s wrong with Mr. Krabs?”, SpongeBob answers: “I don’t know. He’s acting kind of weird.” In this scene, the hierarchy and binary of *queerness* vs. “normality” is deconstructed by the turning around of the meanings of those categories. It is Mr. Krabs who is referred to as

"weird" for considering the wearing of princess-dresses as embarrassing/shocking/abnormal for males, thus representing the hegemonic viewpoint of a heteronormative, gender-binarcic society. In the scene, Patrick and SpongeBob are two characters who do not only *not* conform to societal norms of being “properly” gendered subjects, but they are not even *aware* of the norms they do not conform to. SpongeBob and Patrick are not embarrassed about their “queer” gender performance in the scene, because they consider their own behaviours “normal”. Their reaction to Eugene Krabs’ embarrassment and shock about being “caught” in an incoherent gender performance (wearing clothes which are considered feminine as a subject who is assigned with performing masculinity) can be read as an instance in the series in which they subvert normative frameworks simply by not recognizing them as such and by not being aware of their regulatory power. After the incidence in the costume shop, SpongeBob visits Mr. Krabs at home, telling him: “Hi, Mr. Krabs! I just came by to make sure you were not...you know...totally insane.” Here, the impression that queerness is established as *norm*, while normative behaviour is othered and ridiculed is intensified. SpongeBob, the queer character who wears princess costumes, imputes insanity to the norm-conforming character Eugene Krabs. Furthermore, it is one of the few moments in the series, in which Mr. Krabs has a “queer” moment, one, in which his gender performance does not match his assigned sex. However, his discomfort with his own transgression of the masculine/feminine-dichotomy again confirms him as normatively acceptable subject from a heteronormative perspective, while Patrick and SpongeBob remain queer.

While it is usually either SpongeBob or Patrick who cross-dress in the series, almost all characters – even those, who are almost exclusively coded as heterosexual and who display intelligible subjecthood, experience “queer” moments. In *Money Talks* and, as will be pointed out later, in *That’s No Lady*, Mr Krabs usually re-establishes his coherent gender identity by reacting embarrassed about his own “queer” behaviour. Similarly, Squidward is a character who does not only conform much more consistently to a heterosexual norm of gendering than SpongeBob and Patrick, but he also functions as a character who often, such as in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* or *Not Normal*, disciplines SpongeBob for his queer behaviours. In *Slimy Dancing*, however, he transgresses the

Figure 15 (Slimy Dancing



boundary of masculine/feminine himself, by engaging in bodily practices traditionally associated with femininity. Squidward wants to take part in a dancing contest and is shown in a black unitard and pink sweatbands doing ballet and free dance. He can also be seen waxing his legs in the episode (see: fig. 15).

In *The Fry Cook Games*, SpongeBob wears cosmetics, which are traditionally associated with a feminine gender performance. In the scene, Patrick and SpongeBob quarrel and in the course of the fight, Patrick reveals that SpongeBob wears nail polish (“At least I don’t polish my fingernails!”). The next shot shows SpongeBob’s polished fingernails. Again, SpongeBob is depicted as a character, who transgresses the feminine/masculine-boundary, in this case, by using cosmetics, which are, in a binaric gender-system, linked to femininity and thus are considered incompatible with a coherent performance as a male. However, in this instance, unusual for *SpongeBob SquarePants*, SpongeBob reacts offended by his friend’s comment.

Figure 16 (Whale of a Birthday)



Figure 17 (Whale of a Birthday)



In *Whale of a Birthday* SpongeBob does “detective work” for Mr. Krabs to find out what Pearl wants for her birthday. In one scene, SpongeBob dresses up in a pink dress, wearing pink lip stick and a black wig. In that moment, Billy Fishkin, one of Bikini Bottom’s celebrities comes by and SpongeBob, together with the other girls, expresses his infatuation with Billy (see: fig. 16): “Haaa, isn't he dreamy?”. Similar to *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, SpongeBob cross-dresses as part of a heterosexual arrangement. While in *Rock-a-Bye Bivalve*, his “mothering” of the baby scallop is preceded by his dressing up for that role, in *Whale of a Birthday* dressing up as a girl is the predisposition for desiring a male. In both cases, the element of cross-dressing establishes heteronormative coherence on a superficial level. Read more closely, however, both texts convey a parody of heteronormative coherence. Furthermore, in

the episode, similar to *That's No Lady*, full drag is used as a means of disguising. Later in the episode, SpongeBob also wears red high heels, he has purchased for Pearl (see: fig. 17). In this scene, he again combines his characteristic outfit with a “feminine” item of clothing. In *Whale of a Birthday* it is the depiction of Pearl's exaggerated femininity which is mostly depicted as laughable, while SpongeBob's transgressive vestimentary performance is not used for comic effect but rather as disguise in the context of his “detective work”. Again and typical for *SpongeBob SquarePants*, it is both conformity to gendered norms and their “deviations” that are poked fun at.

The episode *The Slumber Party* adds another ironic layer of intertextual meaning to the issue of cross-dressing in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In this episode, a character called “Girly TeenGirl”, who looks exactly like SpongeBob, appears at Pearl's slumber party (see: fig. 18). Pearl is convinced that the girl is actually SpongeBob in drag trying to join the party. Interestingly, in the next scene, SpongeBob “dresses up” as man (by putting on a fake moustache) and in this disguise, Pearl does not recognize him immediately, while she instantly mistakes a woman in women's clothes for SpongeBob. Here, the text ironically plays with the fact that SpongeBob and other characters frequently cross-dress in the series. When Girly TeenGirl appears on screen, the viewer, being so used to SpongeBob's cross-dressing, immediately shares Pearl's perspective that she in fact must be SpongeBob. Thus, sex and gender have been established as non-linear and incoherent to an extent, that behaviours, which reiterate a coherent relationship between the two categories are considered “odd”. What leads to irritation and confusion in this scene is not cross-dressing itself but the absence of it. It is puzzling and funny, that the character, wearing girl's clothes is a girl. Again, in this episode, laughter is not directed at “queer” characters or non-normative gender identifications/performances, but rather at their normative varieties. Furthermore, the difference between “girls” and “boys” is deconstructed. In one scene SpongeBob tells Mr. Krabs that girls destroy their parents' house, when they party: “You know how girls are.” After he destroys Mr. Krabs house, he tells him: “Well, Mr. Krabs, you know how boys are.” In *The Slumber Party* and *Whale of a Birthday*, SpongeBob's “disguise” as woman is successful – other characters in the text do not recognize him. Pearl's reaction and her inability of identifying SpongeBob disguised as man also establishes SpongeBob's vestimentary performance of femininity as more

compatible with the way SpongeBob’s identity is generally constructed than his performance of masculinity.

Figure 18 (*The Slumber Party*)



Figure 19 (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*)



Figure 20 (*That's No Lady*)



In the series, it is predominantly the main protagonist SpongeBob, who cross-dresses. In *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, however, it is Patrick, who wears fishnet-stockings and black high-heeled leather boots complemented by his usual green-violet shorts (see: fig. 19). In this case, as in other instances in the series, cross-dressing seems to function as a mockery of both masculinity and femininity. Patrick's sexualized feminine outfit mocks femininity by exaggeration, but it also mocks Patrick's supposedly "natural" masculinity by combining masculine elements of clothing with feminine ones, blurring the line of these two categories and thus providing an excellent example for Butler's idea of subversion via parody. Here again, the text does not only ridicule the transgression male/female or masculine/feminine, but also parodies both gender performances by exaggeration – humour is therefore also directed at normative gender identifications, not only their transgressions, at non-conformity *and* conformity. This also implies a destabilization of the hierarchical relationship between coherent and incoherent gender performances.

Similar to the movie, in *That's No Lady*, it is Patrick who acts out a feminine gender via cross-dressing. He dresses up as "Patricia", in an attempt to disguise himself, because he mistakes a sales representative for an assassin and believes that he is after him. When Patricia appears on screen for the first time, we can hear a saxophone solo in the audio, which can be best described as “seductive”. Patricia is wearing makeup (red lipstick, mascara), blonde braids, a green mini-skirt and a green

belly top (see: fig 20). S/he wears very close-fitting and short clothes and is styled in a very sexualized way. Firstly, in the series and in the movie, the instances of Patrick’s cross-dressing differ significantly from SpongeBob’s cross-dressing. While SpongeBob usually appears in full drag, Patrick usually combines his characteristic clothes with feminine items of clothing, except in those cases, where the cross-dressing has the purpose of disguise. Furthermore, while SpongeBob usually performs de-sexualized, predominantly care-taking roles such as the role of the mother or the maid, Patrick’s outfit is almost always sexualized. Both “types” of cross-dressing provide room for the destabilization of the heterosexual matrix. SpongeBob’s “maternal” performance breaks with the traditional assumption that in a gender-binarcic order it is female characters who take over caring tasks, while Patrick’s sexualized performance challenges and “queers” the heterosexual male gaze in the text. This aspect of Patrick’s cross-dressing will be discussed in more detail in then section dealing with the deconstruction of sexual identity categories. However, in the context of the question, how humour is structured in the text, Patrick’s cross-dressing has two functions: Certainly, in the text, cross-dressing and the resulting incoherence in Patrick’s/Patricia’s gender performance creates a fault line and moments of irritation, which have a comic effect on the viewer. This is especially true for the contrast created between Patrick’s sexualized performance as Patricia and his “unfeminine” behaviour. Secondly, however, the text does not only and not predominantly ridicule Patrick’s gender-indeterminacy or his non-conformity to the rules governing gendering in a heterosexual matrix. Rather, the text also and primarily directs humour at those characters in the text, whose gender and sexual identity is usually coherent and norm-conforming and whose conformity to norms is queered by Patrick/Patricia. *That’s No Lady* creates schadenfreude by fooling characters who have considered themselves as norm-conforming and safe in their unquestioned self-identifications, which, by their desire for a ambiguously gendered character is put into question.⁴⁵

The individual instances of cross-dressing in *SpongeBob SquarePants* differ from each other, but two major “types” can be differentiated: There are instances of cross-dressing in which items of clothing usually associated with femininity (tutu, high heels, fishnet-stockings) are combined with elements of the characters’ characteristic

⁴⁵ See: section 3.2.

outfits and there are instances, in which the characters appear in full drag. Certainly, the implications of these two types of gender-bending are different. Combining feminine aspects with masculine aspects evokes ambiguity, it locates the characters in a “queer” realm, in which masculine and feminine are not mutually exclusive anymore, but where gender rather (also on a sartorial level) is a mixture of diverse and from a heteronormative perspective contradictory elements. In two instances clothes (underwear) are used as means of “revealing” elements of SpongeBob’s character. In *Can You Spare A Dime?* the idea of an inner core is reified, by the revelation of SpongeBob’s masculine underwear, while in *I’m With Stupid* his choice of underwear is used to construct him as queer character. On a surface level, the series’ implicit aspect of voluntarist mastery in the aforementioned episodes implies discordance with Butlerian theory. However, Patrick and SpongeBob are also often reminded of the incoherence of their behaviour by other characters in the text, although they often ignore or do not recognize other characters’ negative responses. Thus, the series also reveals disciplinary strategies, such as the ridicule of “queerness”, while SpongeBob and Patrick are depicted as characters, which are, often, “immune” to heteronormative conditioning because of their “childishness” and their unawareness of norms. Both aspects will be discussed in more detail later on. Furthermore, full drag is often used as a way to disguise oneself in the series. It is striking, that the disguise in *That’s No Lady* is successful to an extent that even Squidward and Mr. Krabs think they are confronted with a woman and see a sex object in him/her. In other words, Patrick “passes” as woman. In *The Slumber Party* this aspect of passing is ironically twisted: SpongeBob does not succeed in passing as a man, while a girl is mistaken for him.

Despite drag’s capacity of deconstructing the male/female-binary and of denaturalizing gender, in an anthropomorphic cartoon, such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* it also transgresses the human/animal-boundary, since cartoon characters are “always in drag as human beings” (Griffin 2004, 107). Griffin’s explanation of Bugs Bunny can also be applied to SpongeBob and is thus interesting in this context. He writes:

[T]o see Bugs wearing lipstick and a wig is to see a drawing of a gender-neutral rabbit acting like a human male pretending to be a human female. The levels of

impersonation reach the sublime, to the point where boundaries seem impossible to nail down.” (Griffin 2004, 107).

Griffin furthermore argues that it is precisely this breaking down of categories and boundaries, which is the “essence” of queerness and points out that animation films and cartoon series are “a perfect instance of multiple discourses swirling within one text, exposing the constructedness of gender and sexuality” and thus offer examples for Butlerian subversiveness, in which “[t]he material discourses of power that define identity are subverted by playing them out in such a manner that the various levels reach absurd and parodic extremes, exposing the constructedness of gender, sexuality, and sex, itself.” (Griffin 2004, 107).

3.2. SEXUALITY AS NON-IDENTITY: SEXUAL AMBIGUITY IN *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

I lost something once. I lost something I couldn't live without-- my identity. (Missing Identity)

3.2.1. Are cartoon characters asexual?

It might, at first sight, appear far-fetched, to talk about depictions of sexuality, sexual otherness or queerness in texts that are aimed at premature audiences and, as a consequence of that target group, do not explicitly feature sexuality as such. Bloodsworth-Lugo points out that the frequent argument, cartoon characters would have “no sexuality” and thus should not be discussed from an analytical perspective that focusses on representations of sexuality, often precisely implies that they do not and must not have any other sexuality than *heterosexuality*. (see: Bloodsworth-Lugo 89). It is striking that the accusation of reading “too much” into texts – “a conventional weapon against queer readings” (Griffin 2004, 105) - is only raised in connection with non-straight and non-normative readings, because for the most part “it seems fairly undeniable that cartoon characters certainly *do* have sexualities, which is to say, they have *heterosexualities*.” (Bloodsworth-Lugo 88). This also reveals the heteronormative assumption implicit in the arguments against such readings: in a heteronormative framework, heterosexuality is what is unmarked and “invisible”; a taken for granted basis that is often not even recognized as “sexuality”

or sexual orientation as such.⁴⁶ Giffney similarly stresses that traditional animation is not an asexual sphere but often permeated by discourses that reproduce heterosexuality as normative way of being:

For readers who say ‘leave it alone, it’s only a cartoon and just for kids’, I say by way of response: the cartoon as a cultural product is often used to indoctrinate children and re-institute adults in the (correct) ways of heteronormativity.⁴⁷ (Giffney 368).

SpongeBob SquarePants, however, cannot be categorized as traditional animation, but rather, as Dennis puts it, as “[...]surreal cartoon[...]

” (Dennis 2003a, 135). Still, the frequent argument that a queer perspective is inappropriate in connection with cartoons and animation because it would imply “reading too much” into the text was also brought forward against those, who, albeit from a homophobic and not from a queer perspective, discussed *SpongeBob SquarePants* as a text depicting same-sex desire and romance. Its creator, Stephen Hillenburg, argued that the main character would be asexual rather than sexual (see: Brownlee 41). However, as pointed out above, embedded in poststructuralist thinking, a queer reading is usually not concerned with authorial intention but rather decentres the author and regards viewers and readers as actively engaging in meaning-making processes. A queer reading tries to offer an alternative non-hegemonic interpretation by “reading between the lines” of texts otherwise read from a heteronormative perspective. In the following pages, I therefore discuss *SpongeBob SquarePants* not as a text free from sexual politics, as a “mainstream” reading⁴⁸ would (see: Cranny-Francis et al. 116) , but as a cultural

⁴⁶ Nobody has ever accused a Disney-movie for inappropriately confronting premature audiences with sexuality by openly displaying opposite-sex love, romance or desire, while cartoons that are “suspected” of depicting non-straight desire/love are accused of precisely that. Additionally analyses that read the heterosexual content as heterosexual content are not dismissed as illegitimate, while queer perspectives often are.

⁴⁷ “Traditional” animation, with Disney-movies often understood as the epitome of that tradition, usually focusses on heterosexual romances (typically culminating in a wedding at the end) as the centre of its storyline and more generally presents heterosexuality and a binaric conception of gender/sex as taken for granted, unquestioned and “natural” while queer characters are either dangerous villains or trivialized, funny, “comic relief” characters (see: Cokely, 2005; Dundes/Dundes, 2006; Griffin, 2000; Essig, 2005) or “masquerading as high-camp androgyny” (Johnson 263), while representations which do not fit into this logic are generally “kept to a minimum” (Johnson 263). Disney-movies, which perpetuate conservative “family values”, are, as Johnson points out, known for their “careful censorship of homosexuality” (Johnson 263).

⁴⁸ According to Cranny-Francis et al., a mainstream or compliant reading “[...]does not describe the reader’s or the text’s politics, but the politics of reading in the reader’s society (Cranny-Francis et al 115). In a heterocentric/heteronormative society this certainly implies the disregard for or the decentring of queer elements of text.

artefact, which frequently depicts sexuality and desire in non-identitarian, or in other words, queer ways.

3.2.2. Sexual ambiguity – non-identitarian treatment of sexuality in *SpongeBob SquarePants*

In the heterosexual matrix sexuality is envisioned as reified in the form of identity and as directly and coherently following from sex and gender. The aforementioned gender-related ambiguity in *SpongeBob SquarePants* logically also leads to ambiguity concerning sexual desire and identities in the text. As Johnson points out, SpongeBob’s transgression of the boundary masculinity/femininity does not render him “docile or domesticated [...], on the contrary, it enables him to use his ambiguity to subvert not only his gender but, moreover, his sexuality.” (Johnson 251). There are many instances in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in which the protagonists, particularly Patrick and SpongeBob, display same-sex desire or romance, or in which they are depicted in constellations traditionally coded with heterosexual romance, such as holding hands (see: *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*), spending their Valentine’s Day together (see: *Valentine’s Day*), or taking care of and raising an infant (see: *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*). The relationship between SpongeBob and Patrick frequently transgresses the boundary between friendship and romance. Despite the fact that both SpongeBob and Patrick are often depicted as romantic couple, or, as Dennis puts it, coded with “erotic intensity” (Dennis 2003a, 137), *SpongeBob SquarePants* combines those elements of same-sex eroticism/desire/romance with opposite-sex romance and desire displayed by the same characters. Thus, sexuality is not discussed in identitarian terms; SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s sexualities are not reified as sexual identities in the text. Neither the moments of heteroromance or heterosexuality nor the displays of same-sex desire in the text are linked to a notion of sexual identity as an essence or inner core. Moments of romance and/or desire do not “compose” coherent sexual identities in the texts. Rather, most characters in *SpongeBob SquarePants* have queer and normatively heterosexual moments and sometimes they display normative heterosexual desire and “queer” desire at the same time and in the same episode, since often, gender performances are subverted to an extent that renders those differentiations impossible. “Queer” in this context does not simply mean “gay” or functions as an umbrella term for “not straight”, but rather as a term describing a complex and sometimes contradictory and (from a normative

perspective) incoherent mesh of displays of desires and behaviours, which are not normatively straight, but which also cannot be sufficiently and reasonably described as “heterosexual” before the background of a binaric (heterosexual vs. homosexual) conceptualization of sexuality. Dennis (2003a) argues that this element of treating sexuality as a mesh of desires rather than an identity is a typical characteristic of what he calls “surreal cartoons”. Other than cartoon sitcoms (such as *The Simpsons*), which depict sexual identities emptied of desire, cartoons such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* depict “desire without identity” (Dennis 2003a, 135):

[...]the very fluidity of the cartoon form allows the medium a unique place for the subversion of not only gender but friendship, love, desire and identity itself. Where no characters are specifically identified as gay or lesbian, we can locate same-sex desire in an interaction between two characters of the same sex [...] (Dennis 2003a, 133).

Although Dennis does not refer to queer theory explicitly in his analysis, the discovery of those cartoons presenting “desire without identity” (Dennis 2003a, 135) is of particular interest from the perspective of queer theory, since the deconstruction of essentialist identity categories is one of its basic tenets. Dennis thus conceptualizes surrealist cartoons, with *SpongeBob SquarePants* being one of them, implicitly as decidedly queer spaces. The following sections aim at pointing out the moments, in which the notion of “sexual identity” is broken up in the text as well as the strategies with which an identitarian treatment of sexuality is undermined and replaced with a non-identitarian, or “queer” understanding of desire.

3.2.2.1. *Same-sex desire and romance*

Dennis argues that *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a text, which “frequently portrays same-sex desire as valid and important” (Dennis 2003a, 137) and Halberstam (2005) claims that “[s]avvy viewers know that Spongebob’s sexuality is crucial to his character.” Often the characters displaying same-sex desire and/or romance are SpongeBob and Patrick, however, the series as well as the film contain many instances of such dynamics between various characters in the text.

Figure 21 (F.U.N.)



Figure 22 (F.U.N.)



Figure 23 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



In the episode *F.U.N.*, Plankton steals Mr. Krabs' secret “Krabby Patty”-recipe and SpongeBob, in an allusion to superhero-movies, runs after him to catch him. In one scene, he runs past a policeman, who is holding a truncheon in his hands. SpongeBob uses it as a propeller to fly after Plankton, who is trying to escape. In that moment, the police-officer looks at SpongeBob in a very enamoured and adoring way. There are even red hearts flying around his head, clearly portraying a romantic interest in SpongeBob (see: fig. 21). The policeman is not a regular character in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, but is only featured in this episode in one scene. His sole purpose is creating a moment of same-sex desire in the text. The episode generally is about SpongeBob and Plankton forming a friendship. After spending a day together, Karen, Plankton's wife, catches him wearing SpongeBob's characteristic trousers – coding their newly-formed friendship with erotic intensity (see: fig. 22). The series frequently uses sartorial codes to code male characters as romantically or erotically involved. While in *The Fry Cook Games* and *Grandma's Kisses*, SpongeBob's and Patrick's relationship is coded with eroticism/romance via the wearing of clothes in their partner's characteristic colours or the wearing of the same clothes respectively, in *F.U.N.*, it is the relationship between SpongeBob and Plankton which is coded with homoeroticism via, inter alia, the use of sartorial codes. Besides that, SpongeBob and Plankton also engage in behaviours traditionally coded with romance, e.g. they go to the movies together to watch a romantic film. In the cinema, however, SpongeBob learns that Plankton only befriended him in an attempt to steal the Krabby-Patty-formula. The scene between them is depicted as overtly dramatic – both cry as they end their friendship and there is romantic music in the background. Similar to Dennis' (2003a, 137) interpretation of the conversation between Patrick/SpongeBob/Gary in *Dumped*, which will be discussed later, the conversation between SpongeBob and Plankton is also coded with romance rather than friendship:

SpongeBob: How can you not see it?

Plankton: O.K., O.K., I see it! It's a Krabby Patty, O.K.? I couldn't help it!

SpongeBob: But we sang the Fun song! I think I'm gonna be sick! How long?
Plankton: How long what?
SpongeBob: How long were you planning on doing this?! Tell me! What?! (F.U.N.)

Similar to the series, the *SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* also has a homoerotic subtext. Besides Patrick's and SpongeBob's relationship (they are seen holding hands and hugging in the movie), which will be discussed in later sections, in one of the first scenes in the movie, SpongeBob and Squidward are depicted showering together (see: fig. 23). SpongeBob surprises Squidward in the shower and starts scrubbing his back. The latter reacts very shocked and reminds SpongeBob of the inappropriateness of his behaviour. Again, in the scene, Squidward has the function of a disciplining voice representing the norms and values of heteronormativity. SpongeBob says that he needs to tell Squidward something important and Squidward answers: “Whatever it is, can't it wait until we're at work?” SpongeBob replies: “Well, there's no shower at work.” A reading, which interprets this scene as homoerotic seems obvious in this context and the impression is reinforced by SpongeBob's suggestion, that whatever he has to discuss with Squidward requires the intimate setting of showering together. In the series, SpongeBob is often presented as a character who comes intimately (and from Squidward's perspective: uncomfortably) close to his neighbour and Squidward is usually irritated about this behaviour. In *Not Normal*, one of the things that Squidward defines as “abnormal” is physical closeness between males (between him and SpongeBob to be more precise). In one scene, Squidward is lying in bed, but woken up by SpongeBob's voice. He is sitting on top of him, asking him: “Squidward? How does one become normal?” Squidward reacts very irritated and throws SpongeBob out of his house, shouting: “Well, how about you start by ... getting away from me, you little creature!”. Furthermore, again and similar to many instances of cross-dressing in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, both the (from a heteronormative perspective) inappropriateness of SpongeBob's behaviour and Squidward's reaction to it are used to create a comic effect.

In *Can You Spare A Dime?*, SpongeBob agrees to let Squidward live with him during his time of joblessness. In the episode, SpongeBob can be shown engaging in many care-taking activities, which are traditionally associated with femininity, or even motherhood. On the other hand, the episode can also be read as an example for the homoerotic subtext in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. SpongeBob, in his role as

nurturer, kisses Squidward goodnight and says to him: “Good night, my little angel.” Furthermore, in one scene at the beginning of the episode, SpongeBob tells Squidward: “We’re like brothers, only closer.” SpongeBob lifts their shirts and we can see that their hearts are grown together. Squidward reacts very terrified upon that revelation. As pointed out above, in many episodes as well as in the movie, Squidward is depicted as a character, who “polices” SpongeBob and tries to discipline him into appropriate behaviour, usually in connection with an acceptable performance of heterosexual masculinity.

In *Dumped*, the relationship between SpongeBob and his pet snail Gary is coded with romance when Gary leaves SpongeBob for Patrick. In the episode, Gary purrs at Patrick and starts crawling over his body in a way that Dennis (2003a), reading a homoerotic subtext into the scene, describes as “seductive [...]” (Dennis 2003a, 137). Right after that, Gary joins Patrick and stays at his place overnight. When SpongeBob wants to pick up Gary on the next day, he finds that Gary wants to stay with Patrick. SpongeBob is depressed and jealous and decides to have another pet: “[...] I’m going to get a pet that won’t go off with my best friend!” It is striking that SpongeBob uses the phrasal verb “to go off with sb.” when referring to Gary’s and Patrick’s new-formed relationship. According to the *Cambridge Online Dictionaries*, “go off with sb.” has non-ambiguous connotations, in that it is used in the context of romantic and/or sexual relationships. The dictionary definition reads as follows: “to leave a wife, husband or partner in order to have a sexual or romantic relationship with someone else.” (CDO, n.p.). Thus, the choice of vocabulary alludes to the relationship between Patrick and Gary and the former relationship between SpongeBob and Gary as a sexual and/or romantic one. This impression is also intensified by the title “dumped” – which usually also refers to the leaving of someone one has had a romantic/sexual relationship with. In the episode, SpongeBob begs Gary to come back: “I’m a wreck without you!”. Patrick answers: “How pathetic! [...] I’m sorry, SpongeBob, but Gary is with me now. You had your chance and you failed. You have to stop living in the past. Face it, you’re only hurting yourself. It’s what Gary wants and what Gary wants is me.” After the revelation, that Gary only wanted a cookie in Patrick’s pocket, Patrick realizes: “He only liked me for my shorts.” And exclaims: “Gary, I thought what we had was special!”. Dennis argues that the episode insinuates a conflict between intimate partners rather than friends (see: Dennis 2003a, 137).

Grandma's Kisses depicts both allusions to same-sex desire and cross-dressing: In one scene, Patrick and SpongeBob go swimming in swimwear alluding to women's lingerie. They are whistled at and thus, Pillar argues, turned into objects of desire. Furthermore their swimwear has the same color, “which reinforces the idea of a couple” (Pillar 74). Pillar claims that the type of whistle viewers can hear in the audio is culturally associated with a performance of masculinity and used as a means of demonstrating sexual interest for and/or sexually objectifying a woman. She argues that, what renders this scene unfamiliar is the gender-reversal. Instead of depicting the sexual objectification of females, male characters are addressed with whistles, implying a homoerotic subtext of two males having aroused sexual interest of other males (see: Pillar 74). However, Pillar does not consider the possibility that the whistler could also be a woman. In any case, both interpretations imply a subversion of traditional gender roles. In the case of a male whistler, the text depicts same-sex desire and subverts hegemonic masculinity by portraying males as not only subjects, but objects of desire (male sexuality is thus depicted as passive and active at the same time). In the case of a female whistler, the traditional patriarchal gender dynamics are turned around, in that a woman (whose sexuality, in the patriarchal imagination, is traditionally associated with passivity) takes on the active, desiring role, and objectifies men (whose sexuality is depicted as passive and not compatible with the patriarchal idea of male sexuality being active, or even intrusive or predatory). These two aspects of same-sex desire in the text – on the one hand the allusion to SpongeBob and Patrick being a romantic couple, on the other their sexual objectification through another man also implies non-conformity to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Rather, a variety of manhood is depicted, which is not sharply contrasted with femininity but rather fluid. *SpongeBob* thus offers portrayals of masculinity,

[...] in which the quantitative variations in intensity between male and non-male assume various nuances. These nuances relate to the possibilities of the constitution of the masculine gender that range, gradually from the hegemonic model of man related to force, brutality, rationality, to the constitution of a frail, sensitive man who expresses his emotions. Moreover, in the hegemonic model, the affective relation of men necessarily takes place with a woman [...] This other form of masculinity can be perceived in the clothing of the character, in the relationship of affection insinuated between the two, and in the context of being observed by others and not wanting to be seen, of assuming the role of the seducers. (Pillar 74)

In *Chocolate With Nuts*, SpongeBob and Patrick decide to become chocolate bar-salesmen, because they learn from a magazine that entrepreneurs are rich (they even wear shoes, as Patrick points out). In an attempt to sell more chocolate bars, he tells one male customer: “I love you.” However, the man slams the door, deeming Patrick’s behaviour inappropriate. Again, the type of behaviour, which is considered objectionable by other characters in Bikini Bottom, is behaviour, which is not consistent with the heterosexual matrix.

Figure 24 (SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One)



Figure 25 (SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One)



Figure 26 (SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One)



In *SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One*, SpongeBob, Patrick and Squidward are stranded on an island and the only way to get back to Bikini Bottom is to surf back there. However, the other island’s inhabitants do not succeed in teaching them surfing and for that reason, they tell them to seek out the surfing guru “JKL”. The scene, in which JKL first appears is full of sexual innuendo and allusions to same sex desire. JKL comes out of his hut and wears a surfboard under his arm, which is depicted with very phallic connotations in the scene (see: fig 24, fig. 25, fig. 26). SpongeBob, Patrick and Squidward are impressed by JKL’s appearance (and his surfboard), Squidward even faints. After that he tells JKL: “Look, surf-boy, are you gonna teach us how to surf, or are we just gonna stand there and stare at you all day?” Patrick replies: “I kinda like staring at him.” and SpongeBob adds: “I have never seen anything more beautiful [...]” The scene clearly constructs SpongeBob, Patrick and Squidward as carriers of a gay gaze directed at JKL. The depiction of same-sex desire in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is rarely more clearly portrayed than in this scene.

I'm Your Biggest Fanatic is another episode, in which, similar to Patrick's and SpongeBob's interest in JKL in *SpongeBob vs. The Big One*, and SpongeBob's display of infatuation in *Whale of A Birthday*, SpongeBob's admiration and fandom for another male veers towards amorous. In the episode SpongeBob and Patrick are at a jelly fishing convention. SpongeBob sees his icon, Kevin, the Sea-cucumber, and expresses the desire to touch him. The fact that he expresses the desire to physically

Figure 27 (*I'm Your Biggest Fanatic*)



touch another male adds, besides SpongeBob's admiration of Kevin as an idol, a homoerotic component to the narrative, similar to the desire to stare at JKL in *SpongeBob SquarePants vs. The Big One* or the wish to stare at Patrick in *That's No Lady*. Later in the episode, Patrick also sees his idol, Jeffrey the Jellyfish walking by, and similarly runs after him, again, in an attempt to touch him. When talking to Kevin, SpongeBob is very bashful at first, only able to repeatedly stutter: "Hi, Kevin!". Then he tells him: "Hi, Kevin, I'm your biggest fan! [...] I would do anything for you." (see: fig. 27). Kevin orders him to jump off a building and SpongeBob, to prove his loyalty, does so. When he comes back, he says, in a very adoring and worshipping voice: "Anything!" Certainly, not only the fact that SpongeBob wants to touch Kevin and furthermore tells him, he would do anything for him alludes to an amorous interest rather than a platonic one, but SpongeBob is also drawn with red cheeks and sparkling eyes in that scene, which evokes the impression that his admiration for Kevin is not just the admiration of a fan for an idol, but rather romantic attraction. In *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, as typical for the series, same-sex desire also manifests itself in the admiration of a fan for a "celebrity" in the text. However, in this case a similar dynamics as the one described above takes place between Plankton and an interviewer, when Plankton tells him, that he would do "anything" for him. From a Butlerian perspective, homoerotic desire (as expressed in

I'm Your Biggest Fanatic by the wish to *touch* and in *SpongeBob SquarePants* vs. *The Big One* by *gazing* at another male, is behaviour, which is not “allowed” by the rules of coherence in a heterosexual matrix, because the desire to be a man forbids the desire to love or be sexually intimate with a man. Furthermore, as Connell points out, hegemonic masculinity implies a repudiation of homosexual love/desire. Thus, SpongeBob’s desire to touch Kevin does not only make SpongeBob perform a queer variety of masculinity, one which is not hegemonic, but it also turns him into an incoherently gendered subject in a heterosexual matrix:

[...] compulsory heterosexuality not only constructs a view of acceptable or viable sexuality, but also uses this view as the basis of its gendering practice, constructing acceptable or viable genders on the basis of compulsory heterosexuality. So any individual who is not heterosexual is not only unacceptably or non-viably sexed, but also unacceptably or non-viably gendered. And because we relate an individual's subjectivity to their gender, then such a person is not a viable or acceptable subject. (Cranny-Francis et. al. 74)

3.2.2.2. *Queer desires and non-identities*

One episode, in which SpongeBob and Patrick are obviously coded as romantic and even reproductive couple, is the aforementioned *Rock-A-Bye-Bivalve*. In the episode, SpongeBob and Patrick become foster parents of an orphaned scallop and then act out a “[...]same-sex, yet traditionally role-governed partnership.” (Johnson 251). This “performance” of heterosexuality by a same-sex couple can be read as a subversive parody in the Butlerian sense – I will focus on this reading in the section on “deconstructing heterosexuality”. However, what is important in the context of the question, how desire and sexual “identity” is treated in the text, is that in the episode the queer content of *SpongeBob SquarePants* is not *subtext* anymore, but surfaces as *text*. It is striking, how *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* turns normative and hierarchical understandings of sexuality around. When SpongeBob and Patrick go for a walk, with their baby in a pram, other characters react confused and irritated about them being the parents of a scallop. However, it is not their supposedly “natural” sex and that both “are” the same sex, which irritates people, but rather the species-boundary between them: the fact that a sponge and a starfish cannot have a scallop-baby together. This also evokes comedy because, again, in a heteronormative framework, viewers would expect the fact that both parents are males to be an irritating element too. However, the text completely ignores its embedment in a heterosexual matrix and

depicts same-sex parenting as “normal”.⁴⁹ The same-sex couple is not confronted with negative reactions or even surprise for being a same-sex couple, but only with puzzlement over their interspecies-coupling. Thus, the episode also shifts the boundaries of norms from one only including opposite-sex coupling to one which also includes the same-sex couple SpongeBob and Patrick as “normal”. The controversial reactions to *SpongeBob SquarePants* generally and to that episode especially reveal that this treatment of same-sex parenting as “normal” is precisely not accepted as “normal” on a broader societal level, but that it is perceived as unusual and subversive, even potentially threatening. The last line of the episode “Let’s have another one!” was often cut out before airing because it “[...]impl[ies] the act of reproduction between a sponge and a starfish” (Johnson 251). Given the controversy surrounding the series’ depiction of gender and sexuality it is however more likely that the implication of sexual activity between two males and not their interspecies coupling was the aspect deemed inappropriate and therefore considered necessary censoring.

However, despite reading SpongeBob and Patrick as a same-sex couple, the already discussed element of cross-dressing in the text allows for a different reading of the scene – one that treats it as a moment of successful “passing” as *heterosexual* couple. Certainly, this reading has other implications and challenges the heterosexual matrix in other ways than the inclusion of homosexuality into its realm of normative legitimization. The perception and acceptance of SpongeBob and Patrick *as* heterosexual couple deconstructs heteronormativity in much more radical ways – it takes away its basis of a biology-based assumption of gender-identity by denaturalizing “sex” and by de-linking it from “gender”. Furthermore, when a male in drag as female and another male perform heterosexual parenthood together, the very idea of sexuality and gender as binaries is called into question and destabilized. In this case, sexuality is entirely de-essentialized, and as a consequence, Butler puts it “[...] heterosexuality doesn’t belong exclusively to heterosexuals [...]” anymore, but is disconnected from both the compulsory assignment of coherence it is built upon as well as its sacrosanct status as ideal (Butler 2004, 199). As a result, in *Rock-A-Bye*

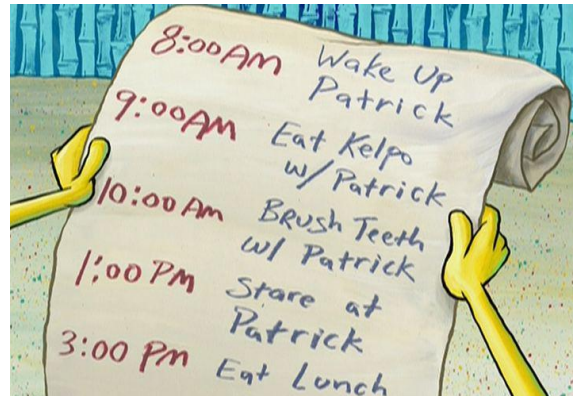
⁴⁹ By using “normal”, I certainly do not intend to take over the hierarchic heterosexist normal/abnormal-binary. Rather, I use “normal” as a way of indicating, that their behaviour is sanctioned as normative by the societal matrix, which is portrayed in the episode.

Bivalve heterosexuality’s status as normative and hegemonic breaks apart. Another layer of meaning of their cross-dressing in the context of their performance as parental couple, is that SpongeBob’s incoherent gender performance, his gender ambiguity expressed via cross-dressing renders him sexually ambiguous in a heteronormative framework, which conceptualizes sexuality as binary. Their performance is not “heterosexual”, because they are both depicted as male characters in the series and it is not “homosexual”, because they *perform* masculinity and femininity and thus act out their partnership as a heterosexual one. Again, SpongeBob and Patrick ultimately defy identity labels – the episode *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* provides a good example for the impossibility of deriving a notion of sexual “identity” from the desire and romance they display in the series.

Figure 28 (Valentine's Day)



Figure 29 (That's No Lady)



Apart from the obvious issue of same-sex-opposite-gender-parenting in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, which is in fact neither coherent as “homosexual” nor as “heterosexual”, perhaps, the best illustration of the ambiguity of depictions of desire in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is the episode *Valentine's Day*. In the episode SpongeBob and Patrick celebrate their Valentine's Day together, which (as raising a child) is an activity closely connected to the societal institution of monogamous heterosexual relationships. SpongeBob gives a huge chocolate-heart to Patrick, again a symbol that is tied to the dominant cultural idea(l) of romantic love and romantic relationships. Generally, hearts are omnipresent (see: fig. 28) in the episode. As a contrast to these connotations, which allude to a romantic connection between Patrick and SpongeBob, the episode is often cited as a proof for SpongeBob's heterosexuality and for him being in love with Sandy rather than Patrick. The reason for this argument lies in a dialogue between Sandy and SpongeBob at the beginning of the episode, in which Sandy says: "Happy Valentine's Day, SpongeBob. I'm nuts for you." and SpongeBob

answers: "Well, I'm bubbles for you, Sandy." Apart from that heteroromantic moment, however, Sandy, in contrast to Patrick, is more consistently depicted as a platonic friend. Sandy does not spend the day with SpongeBob, but Patrick does. Sandy flies the chocolate balloon to the Valentine's Day Carnival, where SpongeBob wants to present Patrick with his Valentine's Day gift, reifying the idea that she is constructed as platonic friend in the text, while SpongeBob and Patrick's connection is alluded to as romantic. However, Sandy only arrives at the carnival with great delay and in the meantime, Patrick reacts very jealously, when he finds out that SpongeBob has given presents to other inhabitants of Bikini Bottom, but not to him: "Patrick needs love too!". As a result, Patrick becomes very aggressive and starts attacking everything connected with hearts: "I defy you, heartman! [...] Heart on stick must die!" and he tells SpongeBob: "You broke my heart! Now I'm gonna break something of yours!". It is certainly not the aim of this thesis to "uncover" a sexual identity, or an inner truth about the characters depicted. Rather, these elaborations aim at pointing out the ambiguities of representations of desire in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. *Valentine's Day* is one of the many instances in the series, in which Patrick and SpongeBob are coded as romantic partners. However, it is also an episode, which deals with questions of sexual "identity" in very queer ways – precisely by not discussing it in identitarian terms. The episode breaks with the homoerotic underpinnings of the narrative by combining it with heteroromantic elements. Thus, again, SpongeBob and Patrick cannot be discussed as "gay" or "straight" or any other sexual *orientation*, because they do not have a consistent or coherent sexual *identity*, but rather as ambiguous and undefined *queer* characters.

Another episode, which also insinuates an intimate relationship between SpongeBob and Patrick is *That's No Lady*. When Patrick tells SpongeBob that he wants to leave Bikini Bottom, SpongeBob tries to persuade him to stay by showing him his schedule for the day. Every item on the list is an activity associated with Patrick (see: fig. 29): "Wait! Stop! What about all our plans? 8:00 AM - Wake up Patrick, 9:00 AM - Eat Kelpo with Patrick, 10:00 AM- Brush Teeth with Patrick, 1:00 PM - Stare at Patrick. Who's gonna do all that with me?". The fact that SpongeBob and Patrick spend so much time together points to a very close relationship between the two. Particularly, the item "Stare at Patrick" alludes to same-sex desire and romantic love, rather than a platonic friendship. Furthermore, as pointed out above, in

the episode, Patrick cross-dresses as Patricia in an attempt to disguise himself. This element of cross-dressing/drag renders the heterosexual gaze Patricia is subjected to in the episode ambiguous. Heterosexuality and queerness are represented by the same characters. In the episode, various male characters respond to her/his appearance with very objectifying behaviour: they make remarks about her/his beauty and physical qualities (such as Squidward, calling him/her "my Rubenesque beauty") or whistle at her/him. Squidward and Eugene Krabs even fall in love with her/him and therefore try to win his/her attention. When Larry meets SpongeBob and Patricia he says: "Bro, your girlfriend is not ugly." Patricia performs her femininity in very stereotypical ways and reacts with giggles to objectifying and/or complimentary remarks. S/he thus does not only wear women's clothes but, in this scene, also reacts in ways that are part of clichés about women. Conversely, s/he also displays behaviour that is usually considered unfeminine, such as burping. Patricia is thus superficially objectified as woman by a heterosexual male gaze (a heterosexual gaze which is queered by the fact that Patricia is Patrick in drag), although his/her own performed gender-identity is ambivalent. When Mr Krabs and Squidward find out, that the object of their (supposedly heterosexual) desire, Patricia, is in fact Patrick at the end of the episode, they react in a rather shocked ways: This "fooling" and thus queering of the – supposedly – heterosexual male gaze certainly ridicules hegemonic and stereotypical masculinity and therefore also mocks its privileged status, which, as the episode depicts, allows masculine individuals to objectify feminine individuals. Moreover, it destabilizes the heteronormative, supposedly safe assumption of those male characters' heterosexuality *and* the idea of (stable, coherent) sexual identity *per se*. Patrick/Patricia's cross-dressing obviously confuses the heterosexuality/homosexuality- dichotomy: First of all, Larry the Lobster refers to Patrick/Patricia as SpongeBob's new "girlfriend". Secondly, all the - supposedly - heterosexual men (such as Squidward, Eugene Krabs, Larry the Lobster) that s/he meets, feel sexually and/or romantically attracted to her/him and articulate their attraction by commenting on her/his physical attractiveness, and/or trying to win her/his attention. Their upset reaction – Mr. Krabs' eyes explode – in the light of the revelation that their sexual desire has been queered can be explained with Butler's notion that "being a man" always implies the prohibition of loving or desiring another man. Connell points out that hegemonic masculinity defines itself via the rejection of

both femininity and homosexuality. Obviously, Squidward and Mr Krabs feel threatened in their masculinity, because of their own *queer* desire. Mr. Krabs even wants to hide in his office: “Uhh, if anybody needs me, I’ll be in my office for, I dunno, the next 20 years or so.” In contrast to their shocked behaviour, SpongeBob reacts delighted and suggests working through their to-do list of shared activities mentioned at the beginning of the episode: “Hey, buddy, what do you say we go home and get started on this list?”. I have already pointed out that the list alludes to a very close relationship between the two, which could also be read as romantic rather than platonic. This last sentence reifies this impression, since the phrase “we go home” implies that they in fact *share* a home and are living together.

Despite its aforementioned homoerotic and queer elements, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* also contains heteroromantic moments as well as a critique of heterosexuality as a societal institution, which will be discussed in later sections. In the film, Patrick falls in love with Princess Mindy (see: fig. 30) and expresses sexual desire for her. He makes

Figure 30 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



comments about her physical appearance: “You’re hot!” and even offers to show her his underwear in the following conversation: “Did you see my underwear?” – “No, Patrick.” – “Did you want

to?”. However, despite its heterosexual and heteroromantic elements, Halberstam (2005) discusses *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* as a *queer* text, and specifically points to the relationship between Patrick and SpongeBob, cross-dressing, SpongeBob’s “queenly tendencies” and the frequent occurrence of sexual innuendo and double entendres in the text:

Spongebob and Patrick are inseparable; Patrick appears toward the end of the movie in fishnets and stilettos; on their journey to find the king’s crown (and become “real men”), Spongebob and Patrick find themselves in a leather bar but disappear to the men’s room together; they are chased by a big leather daddy on a motorbike and secretly want to be caught by him; they show much more interest in each other than in the pretty mermaid; and, last but not least, their final ride back to Bikini Bottom

comes courtesy of David Hasselhoff’s ass. As Hasselhoff speeds across the ocean with the little fellows, he looks back at them fighting over his ass and says, “Hey guys, go easy on me back there!” (Halberstam 2005, n.p.)

Certainly the combination of contradicting subject-positions makes the displays of desire, romance and sexuality in the texts impossible to understand from a normative perspective which conceptualizes desires and sexualities as binaries. Rather, *SpongeBob SquarePants* opens up a queer realm of possibilities.

SpongeBob SquarePants plays around with gender and sexual identity to an extent, which at many points makes it impossible to distinguish between homosexual and heterosexual desire, therefore undoing the heteronormative organization of desires into a binaric system of “straight” vs. “gay”. When Patrick in drag as Patricia is objectified by Mr Krabs – is Mr Krabs’ gaze gay, because it is directed at another male character, or is it straight, because it is directed at a woman, or is it both at the same time because it is directed at a male character in drag as woman? The text’s complex mesh of identifications and performances illustrates, that the term “queer” is necessary in reading and analysing *SpongeBob SquarePants* – precisely *because* often the performances of sex/gender and desire do not only *not* conform to heterosexual norms, but furthermore are also not legible in a binaric conceptualization of sexuality. The term “queer” is a useful term in this context, since it points out that the behaviour of the characters is neither straight nor gay nor bisexual and that it does not lead to any stable sense of sexual identity at all. Rather, the characters’ desires and behaviours can be described as a queer multitude of positions, which can be and are, embodied at once.

3.2.3. Deconstructing heterosexuality as societal institution

Apart from its recurring depiction of desire and romance in ways which do not underpin those displays with an identitarian notion of sexuality/ies, *SpongeBob SquarePants* also depicts heterosexual constellations as societal institutions and often, by means of parodic replication enacted by same-sex partners or by depicting them as either unsuccessful and failing or unjust arrangement, also destabilizes their normative status.

On a superficial level, *Rock-Bye-Bivalve* certainly raises the (politically controversially discussed) topic of same-sex parenting. As pointed out above, the

episode has been criticized and censored for precisely this reason. On the other hand, however, taking the treatment of sex/gender in *SpongeBob SquarePants* into account and thinking of sex/gender in non-biological terms one could argue, that SpongeBob and Patrick, by the former performing a feminine role and the latter a masculine one and in performing their roles very traditionally, conform to a heteronormative order. Looking at it even more closely, certainly, the constructedness of that order becomes obvious, because SpongeBob evidently only "plays" the role of a mother and Patrick merely "plays" the role of the father, thus revealing the performativity of gender construction as such. This depiction of a “heterosexual” arrangement is particularly interesting in the light of Butler’s elaborations on parodic replications as subversive interventional strategies. Apart from cross-dressing and drag, which she conceptualizes as subversive bodily practices and which are also featured in the episode, the replication of a heterosexual marriage by two male characters is reminiscent of her elaborations on butch/femme- constellations, which she analyses as subversive in that they do not merely replicate heterosexual arrangements, but, in fact, similar to drag-performances, point out the non-originality and replicated status of heterosexuality *as such*: “The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames bring into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original.” (Butler 2003, 380). Dennis (2003a), in his analysis of a *Ren&Stimpy*-episode, reads their impersonation of heterosexuality similar to the interpretation that I suggest in the context of *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* – he interprets the acting out of heterosexual monogamous coupling as a parody of heterosexuality: “They are [...] presenting a parody of heterosexual relationships, supposedly funny because they are both men, yet one of them is acting like a woman. (Dennis 2003a, 135).⁵⁰ The already discussed element of cross-dressing is closely intertwined with the “acting out” of their heterosexual arrangement. As pointed out above, *both* dress up as mother and father – revealing the constructed nature of sex and gender per se. Furthermore, the fact that femininity and masculinity are acted out by two subjects who are otherwise male questions the very concept of “heterosexuality” and destabilizes its normativity. Certainly, the fact that two otherwise “male” characters form a heterosexual couple (with SpongeBob being the

⁵⁰ The episode also repeats the usual element of humour directed at both the norm (heterosexuality) and the deviation from that norm.

woman and Patrick being the man) to raise a child shows the multi-layered ambiguities of gender categorization in the series. Despite the fact that SpongeBob and Patrick are two characters otherwise and usually coded as males, the text reveals the performative element of their gender identification by pointing to the constructedness of both their femininities *and* their masculinities. Additionally, it illustrates Butler’s idea, that the binary production of gender/sex is brought about by a heterosexual matrix (and not vice versa) in a condensed form: SpongeBob and Patrick literally only *turn* into man and woman in order to become two compatible subjects (and thus parents) in a heteronormative framework.

Another crucial aspect of the episode’s parody of heterosexual relationships is that SpongeBob and Patrick do not act out *any* heterosexual constellation, but rather one, which is, in heteronormative discourse, inherently intertwined with a notion of sex and sexuality as rooted in biology and the conceptualization of sex as something *natural*: the roles of mother and father. Furthermore, the heterosexual couple, or, more precisely, the heterosexual married couple is not only the sexual ideal in a heteronormative framework, but also *the* representative and normatively legitimized and idealized form of heterosexuality as a sociocultural and political institution. The episode thus depicts subjects, which are non-coherent in a heterosexual framework as representatives *of* that heterosexuality. This certainly implies the paradoxical facet that they represent *coherent* subjects as *incoherent* subject, thus leading the very notion of coherence and therefore the basis for gendering practices in a heterosexual matrix ad absurdum.

SpongeBob and Patrick perform their heterosexual constellation in very traditional and conventional ways, reiterating the traditional heteronormative housewife-breadwinner-model in their parenting. While SpongeBob- the "mother"- stays at home, taking care of their child and the housework, Patrick - the "father" - goes to work. Interestingly, this organization of duties -almost- tragically fails, since it nearly leads to the death of the child at the end of the episode. SpongeBob and Patrick’s parody of traditional heterosexual marriage with its unjust division of labour presents the constellation as problematic, unfair and unsuccessful. First of all, it has to be pointed out, that traditionally feminine-coded household and childcare tasks, parodically acted out by a male character, are presented as hard, monotonous and

unsatisfactory labour. SpongeBob is obviously not happy about it, but looks exhausted, overwrought and miserable after a few days, whereas Patrick's job, despite him saying "Work was a killer!", does not leave any visible signs of exhaustion. Thus, the binary man/woman is not only destabilized in the episode, but also exposed as hierarchic and asymmetrical by pointing out the inequalities that result from those identity categories and their binaric organization. Furthermore, from the point of their "transformation" from SpongeBob/Patrick to mother/father and housewife/breadwinner, they seem to have lost their personalities and only follow the script of what is known about these traditional gender roles. This issue is also verbalized, when SpongeBob wants Patrick to change their baby's diapers and Patrick responds: "Wish I could, but I gotta get going.". SpongeBob then asks: "Going? Where are you going?" and Patrick answers: "Going to work. I'm the dad, remember?" Here it becomes obvious, that Patrick is merely following a pattern, that he acts out what he thinks is appropriate for the role of the "dad". There is no deeper meaning to his "going to work" than a performance of masculinity. As the father and as a man he has to; it is part of his role. In fact, most of what SpongeBob and Patrick do and say in the episode is not merely stereotypical but almost prototypical for clichés about men and women in heterosexual housewife-breadwinner-constellations. The following dialogue is only one of example for this of many in *Rock-a-Bye Bivalve*:

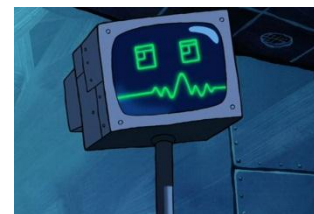
SpongeBob: Patrick Star, we need to have a talk right now.
Patrick: Um, just one more minute, I gotta catch this part...
SpongeBob: Don't 'one more minute' me, Mr. Man, Dung Beetle, Lizard, or whatever you are, give me the remote, turn off the television!
Patrick: Hey, I'm missing the coconut!
SpongeBob: You haven't been helping at all with Junior all day! We made a commitment and you're not doing your share! You never do anything.
Patrick: I changed his diaper!
SpongeBob: Yeah, once.
Patrick: He's only this big. How many diapers could he possibly use? (*Rock-a-Bye Bivalve*)

This scene, as well as others in the episode, evokes the impression that Patrick in this constellation stands prototypically for the identity category and socio-political category "man", while SpongeBob represents the position "woman" per se. This impression is intensified when SpongeBob calls Patrick "Mr. Man". Their stereotypical behaviour has a comic effect, because the viewer knows, that

SpongeBob and Patrick in fact only act out roles. In the light of Butler’s articulation, that heterosexuality is always only a repetition of a repetition, always a citation of a citation without an original and certainly never an original in itself, SpongeBob and Patrick’s acting out of a script, can be read as a moment, in which the series reveals the “scripted” and replicate status of heterosexuality and heteronormative genders. The episode parodies and thus unmasks the “scriptedness” of the heterosexual matrix and the genders it produces as well as heterosexuality’s non-originality by excessively exaggerating its repetitive nature and destabilizing its normative status by poking fun at it. Furthermore, the *decontextualization* of those roles from firstly a real-life context and secondly a heterosexual constellation and their *recontextualization* in the unexpected context of a cartoon-series and a “same-sex”-partnership - again – reveals the artificiality and "unnaturalness" and constructedness of *all* gender roles.

The episode *F.U.N.* features the only “heterosexual” relationship which is consistently portrayed in the series and the only relationship which is clearly referred to as “marriage” (the societally, socially and institutionally legitimized form of heterosexuality and thus the epitome of a normative relationship): the relationship between Plankton and “Karen, the Computer W.I.F.E.”, which stands for “Wired Integrated Female Electroencephalograph” (see: fig. 31). As her name suggests, Karen is a computer. This is an aspect of her character, which instantly ridicules and de-naturalizes the societal institution of heterosexual marriage she engages in,

Figure 31 (F.U.N)



because it counteracts the heteronormative notion of the “naturalness” of heterosexuality. It could be argued that Karen’s “non-naturalness” also queers the relationship between her and Plankton, in that it does not fulfil the normative expectations imposed on heterosexuality as hegemonic identification. Furthermore, Karen is only *made* for the purpose of heterosexual marriage. Therefore, the only consistently portrayed heterosexual relationship is obviously merely a replicate of what heterosexuality is supposed to be. Therefore, the notion of heterosexuality’s originality is parodied and challenged. The institution of heterosexual marriage is deconstructed by presenting a constellation, which is exposed both as unnatural and non-original. Furthermore, certainly the fact that Karen only is a woman and a wife,

because she is programmed to be one, *made* for the purpose of heterosexual marriage, again unmask the ideal of heterosexual marriage as well as her gender as utterly “unnatural” and fabricated. Thus, even constellations, which seem normative at first sight, are eventually exposed as “unnatural” and non-biological in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Even those relationships, which appear normative at first sight, are very unusual and “queer” when taking a closer look⁵¹.

In *SpongeBob SquarePants The Movie*, heterosexuality as an institution is also de-idealized and denaturalized, again in its depiction of the “marriage” between Plankton and Karen. In the context of gender performativity it is striking that Karen literally does not have a body and she still is a woman – more precisely, a heterosexual one. Apart from the fact that in this particular constellation, the text queers the heterosexual institution of marriage, it also, just as in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, points out that it is a constellation rooted in an asymmetrical hierarchy between the genders. Karen, just like SpongeBob as mother in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* is responsible for doing the housework: “I just mopped the floors”. Furthermore, the relationship between the Karen and Plankton can also be read as a mockery of the heterosexual constellations, which can be found in traditional animation, such as Disney-movies. In those films, princesses who are married to and by princes are often not even asked if they want to, but often the marriage is “sealed” in the form of a declaration by the *prince*. Thus, the women are reduced to mute and passive objects. In Karen’s and Plankton’s relationship, this patriarchal constellation is put to an extreme, because Karen literally *is* an object. Even more so, she is an object owned by Plankton. Furthermore, the fact that she never agreed to marry him, but merely is an object that he possesses is explicitly articulated in the film. Plankton tells her: “Karen, baby, I haven’t felt this giddy since the day you agreed to be my wife.” And Karen answers: “I never agreed.” Thus, instead of taking the violent gender dynamics that underlie the heteronormative logics of many traditional fairy tale-narratives for granted, *SpongeBob SquarePants* pokes fun at those arrangements by unmasking them *as* violent, unfair and asymmetrical.

⁵¹ In this context, it is also necessary to point out that all relationships in Bikini Bottom are in fact interspecies relationships.

Additionally, in *F.U.N.* the normative and ideal status of heterosexuality is deconstructed on yet another level. SpongeBob and Plankton go to the movies together and the film that SpongeBob and Plankton watch features a heterosexual couple. The woman tells the man: “Oh, darling! I know nothing would ever tear us apart!” In that very moment, Plankton rips the screen into two halves, literally *tearing* them apart. The scene ridicules the ideal of heteroromantic relationships as stable, or “ever-lasting” by depicting one which is literally ripped apart by a character, who has, before that incidence been portrayed as a rather “queer” one (- a character who is married to a computer and romantically involved with another male in the episode).

Furthermore, in the context of the deconstruction of heteronormative relationship ideals and heterosexuality as societal institution, the family-constellation between Pearl and her father, Mr Krabs, is striking. The fact that she is a whale and her father (Mr. Krabs) is a crab leads the idea of “biological” or “natural” kinship ad absurdum (similar to the interspecies-coupling in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* and the marital relationship between Karen and Plankton). While in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, Bikini Bottomers react irritated about SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s interspecies parenthood, Mr Krabs’ and Pearl’s suggested blood relationship is never a source for irritation. Furthermore, despite the fact that Pearl is introduced as Mr Krabs’ biological daughter, never in the series or the film is there any appearance or even any mention of a biological mother. The father-daughter relationship between Pearl and Mr Krabs is not, like other constellations described above, interesting for its queer moments in the context of the texts’ depiction of desire, romance and sexuality/ies. However, the highly unusual family constellation between Mr Krabs and Pearl is interesting from a queer perspective, because it de-links the concept of “family” from the concept of blood relations. In *SpongeBob SquarePants*, viewers are presented with a variety of different possibilities of living and being together, different relationship-constellations, different versions of community which cannot be conceptualized in traditional, heteronormative and monolithic “father-mother-child”-notions of “family”. However, when the texts depict such traditional constellations, they are always undermined by queer elements of incoherence or denaturalized in the course of the narrative. *SpongeBob SquarePants* depicts, as Halberstam puts it in her

analysis of animation films⁵², “radical new imaginings of community and association.” (Halberstam 2011, 119).

3.3. OF “KIDS“ AND “MEN” – MASCULINITY AND HETEROSEXUAL GENDERS IN *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

3.3.1 *From idealization to rejection – parodic deconstruction*

Many episodes of the series explore masculinity/masculinities thematically. Usually, hegemonic masculinity is established as ideal in the beginning – it is the mode of being gendered, which SpongeBob strives for. This development is typically triggered by another (male) character in the text, who functions as a reminder of the rules SpongeBob should conform to in a heterosexual matrix. SpongeBob therefore tries to fulfil his assignment of coherent genderedness, only to find out that those, who approximate this ideal most closely are dislikeable, one-dimensional and uninteresting characters. Often, representatives of hegemonic masculinity are ridiculed by the parodic exaggeration of their bodies. Eventually, SpongeBob either fails to conform to the norm of masculinity imposed on him or actively rejects it as a mode of being that is not suitable for him. Thus, usually, *SpongeBob SquarePants* follows the pattern of idealization – parodic exaggeration – ridicule – rejection or failure in its treatment of hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, one of the most important elements in the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is its humorous and parodic destabilization.

3.3.1.1 *Hegemonic masculinity vs queerness*

As mentioned before, hegemonic masculinity is established as ideal in the beginning of many episodes. This is usually done by the emphasis of SpongeBob’s non-normative genderedness. Usually, those episodes create a tension between SpongeBob’s gender-ambiguity and an ideal of being gendered, which he does not

⁵² Despite the fact, that Halberstam (2011) does not refer to *SpongeBob SquarePants* specifically, her observation that animation provides its audiences with new ideas about family and alternative arrangements of community also applies to the series/film analysed in this thesis.

but should conform to in order to be a coherent subject. SpongeBob’s masculinity is therefore constructed as non-hegemonic. As discussed above, it does not reject femininity, but rather consists of various subject-positions, aspects traditionally considered feminine and masculine alike. Thus, the episodes usually construct SpongeBob as a queer (undefined and ambiguous) individual in the beginning, who strives for coherence in the course of the narrative, but eventually fails to conform or is resistant and rejects normative genderedness. In this section, I will focus on SpongeBob’s construction as an ambiguous character contrasted with hegemonic ideals of masculinity in the text.

In *One Krab’s Trash*, SpongeBob buys an old “soda drink hat” from Mr. Krabs. Mr. Krabs tries to get the hat back, because other potential buyers offered him far more money than the amount SpongeBob had paid. In an attempt to spoil SpongeBob’s fun with his new hat, Mr. Krabs tells him: “Listen, I didn’t want to say this in front of Patrick, but that hat makes you look like a girl.” Instead of reacting irritated or upset, however, SpongeBob seems flattered. His pupils widen, his cheeks blush, and his eyes light up, while he asks, in an even higher voice than usual, indicating that he is hoping for a positive response: “Am I a pretty girl?” Mr. Krabs is very surprised about that reaction, since the aim of calling SpongeBob a “girl” was shaming him and insulting his masculinity, so that he would win the item back, which *makes* him look like a girl. In a heteronormative framework, masculinity needs to defend itself against femininity, because both are conceptualized as opposites and as mutually exclusive. Thus, “girl” is incompatible with masculinity in a heterosexual matrix, and even less compatible with its hegemonic variety (also because it is associated with maturity). SpongeBob therefore shows, that *his* variety of masculinity is not hegemonic and not coherent in a heterosexual matrix, because it does *not* repudiate femininity and, what is more, is even flattered by being associated with it. SpongeBob performs his masculinity, or his genderedness, in a very fluid way and frequently positions himself on different points on a spectrum rather than on one side of a binary. Again, as in other instances discussed before, the series creates a moment of irritation in connection with its treatment of gender. Viewers expect SpongeBob to be insulted, but he reacts in a rather flattered way and therefore disappoints and “queers” its audience’s normative expectations by implicitly thematizing them and therefore making them *visible*. It is furthermore interesting, that SpongeBob uses the

word “pretty” in combination with “girl” to talk about his physical attractiveness, a word, which is clearly associated with females rather than males, furthering the association of his genderedness with femininity. Mr Krabs reacts very puzzled, first he obviously does not know, what to say, but then he answers: “Well...erm...you’re beautiful.” SpongeBob reacts with enthusiastic laughter to that compliment. When SpongeBob does not give the hat back to Mr. Krabs, the latter says: “You’re not beautiful either”. SpongeBob breaks out in tears, asking: “I’m not?” Again, his gender-performance is not in line with a hegemonic ideal with masculinity, rather, he is not afraid or reluctant to openly express emotions and cry in front of Mr. Krabs.

Similarly, when Patrick tells SpongeBob that, out of fear, he intends to leave Bikini Bottom in *That’s No Lady*, they fall into each other’s arms, crying. Therefore, already in the beginning of the episode, SpongeBob and Patrick are depicted as characters that do not conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity as Connell describes them, because they openly show emotions and affection for each other.

The thematic exploration of diverse forms of masculinity, particularly the contrasting of hegemonic *adult* masculinity with the “queer” and – on many levels - ambiguous version of masculinity that SpongeBob represents, is a central topic in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*. SpongeBob and Patrick’s quest for the crown is also a quest for masculinity. This is an association, which is established rather early in the text.⁵³ In the first scene of the movie, SpongeBob dreams of being the new manager of the Krusty Krab II. In the dream his performance of masculinity differs drastically from SpongeBob’s usual gender performance/s: he performs a very self-assured, adult and “cool” identity – which is, in the next scene, contrasted with his typical cheerful, hyperactive and ambiguous performance of gender/identity. Thus, already the first scene of the movie thematizes the divergence between an idealized – or hegemonic - performance of masculinity (SpongeBob as manager) and a queerer, more ambiguous variety of manliness, one that the “real” SpongeBob stands for. SpongeBob dreams of becoming a manager and strives for embodying a variety of masculinity that is associated with coolness, competence, power and being unemotional or repressing emotions. In his “manager”-role, SpongeBob even disciplines Eugene Krabs for

⁵³ SpongeBob even calls the country that they go to on their search for Neptune’s crown “man’s country”.

openly displaying emotions. He slaps him and tells him: “Get a hold of yourself, Eugene.” Thus, in the movie, from the very first scene, gender and masculinity more specifically is established as a vital issue in the text and “cool”, unemotional and powerful masculinity is established as hegemonic and ideal. In the course of the movie, this ideal of masculinity is negotiated, questioned, ridiculed, humorously destabilized and eventually rejected. In the beginning, however, viewers learn that SpongeBob is “incomplete” as a man – that his performance of masculinity/gender does not comply with society’s standards of what a “man” has to be like – We learn that the idealized gender performance of *man/ager*-SpongeBob differs radically from how SpongeBob’s identity is usually constructed in the series. This implies that he needs to strive for that type of masculinity in order to be acceptable and viable as a gendered subject in a heterosexual matrix. This impression is intensified, by the narrative’s further treatment of masculinity. SpongeBob wants to become the manager of the new Krusty Krab 2, but he is passed over for the promotion. Mr. Krabs explains to him, that he would not have the necessary qualifications for the managerial position, because of his immaturity. He is “just a kid” and he is looking for a *manager*, not a *kidager*. Mr Krabs tells SpongeBob “[...] to be a manager, you have to be a man. Otherwise they'd call it kid-ager.” After the aforementioned opening-scene, which implies that SpongeBob’s way of doing gender is not compatible with normative conceptualizations of manhood, in this scene, his not-being-man-enough is explicitly articulated by another adult male character. Furthermore, the construction of masculinity as ideal and as privileged subject-position in a heteronormative and gender-binarc framework is reiterated – in order to become a manager and thus hold a powerful position, SpongeBob needs to be a *man*. Therefore, not only does the heterosexual matrix demand compliance to its disciplinary gendering practices from SpongeBob, but, due to its hierarchical and asymmetrical arrangement of the gender-binary also constructs masculinity, particularly its hegemonic variety, as privileged and ideal.

When SpongeBob and Patrick have crossed the county line on their quest for the crown on their way to “man’s country”, they visit a club called “Thug Tug”. As the name suggests, it is, similar to the “Salty Spitoon” in *No Weenies Allowed*, a club for “tough guys”. Patrick and SpongeBob, however, visit the rest room and there they start playing with soap bubbles. During the scene, the dark and gloomy colours that

the room is painted with gradually merge into pink – a colour traditionally associated with both immaturity and femininity, more precisely with girlishness.⁵⁴ The scene constitutes a sharp contrast to the hypermasculinity embodied by the men in the club. While both the men’s hypermasculinity and maturity does not change or influence SpongeBob and Patrick, they, on the other hand, leave their visible trace and “pinkify” man’s country (see: fig 32, fig. 33).

Figure 32 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



Figure 33 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



Figure 34 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



After the scene in the “Thug Tug” they find out, that even “man’s country”, as it is called in the text, is inhabited by a multitude of queer creatures and not only the muscular brutal men they meet in the club. Equipped with fake moustaches they have to cross a trench inhabited with what they believe to be dangerous and monstrous creatures on their way to Shell City. Convinced that their newly-found masculinity (symbolized by their moustaches) prevents them from harm, they confidently pass the gorge and sing “Now That We’re Men”. SpongeBob and Patrick are followed by a group of colourful “monsters” (see: fig. 34), however, despite the original warnings

⁵⁴ Similarly to SpongeBob calling himself a “girl” in *One Krab’s Trash*, the movie associates the protagonist with both femininity and immaturity or the rejection of adulthood and masculinity.

SpongeBob and Patrick received from Princess Mindy (“Listen, you guys, the road to Shell City is really dangerous. There's crooks, killers and monsters everywhere.”) the monsters do not do SpongeBob and Patrick any harm but let them pass the valley safe and sound on their way to Shell City. They even join in the song and sing a chorus together with SpongeBob and Patrick: “Now that they're men, we can't bother them; Now that they're men, they have become our friends”. Despite their uncategorizable outward appearance, SpongeBob and Patrick learn that the “monsters” they were warned against are not “monstrous” after all. It is those queer, monstrous, unidentifiable creatures, whom they make friends with rather than the non-ambiguously gendered, hypermasculine men they meet. The monsters in the trench are not only illegible with regard to species, but also with regard to gender, while the men are clearly and coherently gendered. The latter remain alien and strange for SpongeBob and Patrick, while the monsters, which are “strange” from a normative perspective, turn into their allies. Again, SpongeBob and Patrick are associated with queerness – in the sense of indeterminacy and uncategorizability. Their alliance with the monsters while singing “Now That We're Men”, counteracts the aforementioned lyrics of the song, in which the monsters sing that they have become friends *because* of their manliness. The scene rather illustrates that they in fact have not become men, but are still in line with the queer creatures of the sea, rather than *men*. The lyrics to the song generally provide an excellent example of *SpongeBob SquarePants*'s treatment of (hegemonic) masculinity in an area of tension between idealization and rejection and for the importance that humour has in its destabilization. In the beginning of the song, manliness is idealized: 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. (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*). However, in the following lines, it is again ridiculed: “Now that we're men, we have facial hair; Now that we're men, I change my underwear; Now that we're men, we got a manly flair; We got the stuff, we're tough enough to save the day!” (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*). Furthermore, in the song, again, “man” is contrasted with the gender-neutral “kids”. SpongeBob and Patrick sing about their supposed development from kids to men: “We never had a chance when we were kids [...] But take a look at what the mermaid did.” (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*) Everything the “[...] mermaid did [...]” was giving them moustaches – they are the

only difference between SpongeBob and Patrick as “kids” and SpongeBob and Patrick as “men”. Again, the lyrics suggest that the difference between those two subject-positions is only the element of hairiness. Masculinity is located in an item as non-natural and superficial as a fake moustache, SpongeBob and Patrick wear.

Figure 35 (The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie)



Figure 36 (The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie)



The scene in which Princess Mindy outfits SpongeBob and Patrick with seaweed-moustaches and as a result “turns” them into “men” creates a similar contrast as the scene in which SpongeBob and Patrick cross the trench and, despite their apparent “queerness”, sing a song about having become men. While Mindy tells them, that her “mermaid magic” would make men out of them, they can be seen holding each other’s hands, jumping up and down, singing “We’re gonna be men.” (see: fig. 35) SpongeBob tells Patrick: “She’s using mermaid magic to turn us into men.” in a very high-pitched voice. When Mindy tells them to spin around three times, they dance on their tiptoes like ballerinas (see: fig. 36). Each aspect of SpongeBob and Patrick’s behaviour in the scene counteracts Mindy’s statement that she can make men out of them, providing an example for a performative speech act, which does not work. As Butler points out, the success of any speech act depends on its embedment in a societally established framework of norms and conventions. A performative speech act can only succeed as a repetition: when it replicates another speech act. The performative power of the speech act lies in its citational character. Thus, the performative speech act “It’s a boy” only unfolds its power when embedded in a normative framework, which legitimizes the categorization of the subject in question *as* male. The *making* of a boy can only succeed, when the term *boy* is used to refer to a subject, who fits into the narrow space defined as male/masculine provided by a heterosexual matrix. The categorization as “male” is only successful, when it is based

on a tradition of categorizations legitimized by the normative framework in a given context. SpongeBob and Patrick, in the scene, are portrayed as subjects not compatible with societal notions of masculinity. Thus, the speech act aimed at *making* men out of them fails.

Shell of a Man is one of the many episodes, in which masculinity is explored thematically. In the first scene, SpongeBob is crying over a Krabby Patty. We learn that he has developed “maternal” feelings for it, but now has to give it away. This is one of the many instances in which SpongeBob breaks with normative ideals of masculinity, since, again, both open display of emotions (crying) and the showing of caring or even maternal feelings are traditionally associated with femininity. As Connell points out that hegemonic masculinity is based on the rejection of anything that is coded feminine in a given societal context. Thus, in the aforementioned scene SpongeBob clearly performs a version of masculinity, which is not hegemonic in that it is not defined by its exclusion of femininity, but which rather is an “open mesh of possibilities” (Sedgwick 1993, 7-8). In this scene, as well as in many other scenes of the series and the film, gender is thus not conceptualized as binary, but rather as spectrum. Furthermore, sex and gender are denaturalized in that the one, in Butlerian terms, does not coherently follow from the other. SpongeBob performs behaviour which is, in a heterosexual matrix, traditionally categorized as feminine and thus, in order to be coherent, has to be excluded from masculinity. The sentence “You grow up so fast!”, which SpongeBob sobbingly exclaims, when he has to say goodbye to “his” Krabby Patty does not only associate SpongeBob with femininity, but can even be read as an instance of “maternal” emotions. As already pointed out above in the context of his performance of motherhood in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, motherhood is not *any* version of femininity, but one, which is often understood as *the* prototypical version of femininity and, above all, usually closely connected with a biological understanding of *being* a woman (since the “difference” between men and women is not only located in their bodies, but, often precisely located in women’s ability to be pregnant and give birth).

Figure 37 (The Fry Cook Games)



In *The Fry Cook Games*, Patrick and SpongeBob compete in a wrestling match. At the beginning of the fight, their bodies change drastically and they suddenly have very muscular bodies. In the scene, male physicality is ridiculed by exaggeration, a frequent strategy of subversion of heterosexual genders in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which will be discussed in more detail later on. During the fight, they rip their shorts - SpongeBob is shown wearing pink and Patrick yellow underpants. Thus, both of them are dressed in underwear in their friend's characteristic color. Realizing, through this vestimentary confession of friendship/love, that they are in fact best friends, they hug, cry and then walk out together holding hands, wearing nothing but their briefs (see: fig. 37). Pillar (2010) suggests that the color of their pants alludes to an affectionate relationship between the two and furthermore argues that the ripping of shorts symbolizes the “revelation of something intimate” (Pillar 75). According to Pillar, a secret is revealed in the scene, since culturally, underwear is associated with intimacy, often even with seduction and eroticism. It is thus furthermore considered clothing, which is not appropriate in public surroundings; it is intimate and hidden under other clothes. Showing the characters in their underwear, according to Pillar thus implies “to publicize something of a personal, private nature.” (Pillar 75) The “secret” revealed in the scene is the affectionate, suggested intimate, relationship between the two, which is expressed in the color of their underwear. Again, as pointed out by Brownlee, this depiction of affection between two men marks a break with hegemonic varieties of manhood: “Here, another form of masculinity is indicated: the expression of feelings, emotions, of affection between men, which is traditionally regarded as a characteristic of women.” (Pillar 75). Furthermore, they walk out hand in hand, a practice, which is also associated with romantic love, again, contrasting the “masculine” characters in the series with SpongeBob and Patrick's variety of masculinity, which is not rooted in heteronormativity and does not distance

itself from homoerotic desire. In the episode, their hypermasculinity (exaggerated muscularity) is contrasted with the text’s homoerotic subtext, which is incompatible with a hegemonic performance of masculinity. This supposed incompatibility creates comedy and at the same time challenges a binaric conceptualization of gender. The moment of irritation that results from the scene has the potential of making viewers aware of their unquestioned binaric assumptions about gender.

In the already mentioned episode *F.U.N.*, in which SpongeBob is romantically admired by a police officer is, because of its homoerotic subtext, a scene which deconstructs hegemonic masculinity in two ways. First of all, the policeman’s romantic interest in SpongeBob (another male) clearly implies a departure from a traditional conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, which, against the background of Butler and Connell, has to reject homosexuality as a possibility in order to be readable as hegemonic masculinity, or masculinity generally. Furthermore, in the scene, SpongeBob also functions as a representative of masculinity in much more traditional ways than he usually does, since he, as a “superhero”, impersonates a heroic variety of masculinity. However, the fact that he is adored and desired by a man (rather than a woman, as the heterosexual matrix would compel him to) breaks with his heroic performance of masculinity. Thus, even in a scene in which SpongeBob performs his gender in more hegemonic and traditional ways than usual, he is still caught up by Bikini Bottom’s queerness (and romantically/sexually desired by another male character).

SpongeBob’s gender performance is, as pointed out above, not consistently “masculine”, but rather frequently transgresses the binary man/woman. Therefore, SpongeBob is often portrayed as a character who does neither conform to the norm of gender-coherence, nor to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in the movie and the series, it is usually not femininity, but rather queerness which is contrasted with (hegemonic) depictions of masculinity. SpongeBob and Patrick as characters are both situated in a realm in which they are neither adults nor children and neither feminine nor masculine – in a state of in-betweenness, which defies both normative understandings of growth and maturation as well as normative notions of coherent genderedness in a binary logic.

3.3.1.2. *Parodic exaggeration of hegemonic masculinity*

One of the main subversive strategies frequently employed in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is the exaggeration and thus parodic and humorous deconstruction and ridicule of male physique, which destabilizes hegemonic masculinity as ideal and norm in the text. In this section, I will point out how, after its initial construction as ideal, hegemonic masculinity and a heteronormative variety of genderedness is gradually destabilized in the course of the narratives.

In *No Weenies Allowed*, SpongeBob and Sandy want to enter the Salty Spitoon, a sailor club which is defined as “[...] the roughest, toughest sailor club ever to be built under the seven seas. Only the baddest of the bad can get in [...]” by one of the fish waiting in line. The dialogues between the men, queuing up in front of the club expose them as rather unintelligent, one-dimensional, uninteresting and unlikable characters. Their performance of masculinity is presented as highly ridiculous, which encourages viewers to participate in laughing about stereotypical masculinity. In this scene, once more, the series invites viewers to laugh at *unambiguous* and *normative* performances of gender, in this case precisely hegemonic masculinity, rather than ambiguous and queer ones (as embodied by SpongeBob). This element of subversion becomes obvious by how one of the “tough guys” explains the characteristics that one has to have in order to be granted entrance to the club: “You need to have muscles. You need to have muscles on your muscles. You need to have muscles on your eyeballs.” In *No Weenies Allowed*, as well as in other episodes, this variety of muscular masculinity is what SpongeBob strives for, or, rather, what he needs to strive for in order to be granted the privilege of entering the Salty Spitoon. It is thus the mode of masculinity, or, more generally, the mode of being gendered, which is constructed as hegemonic and ideal in the text. However, SpongeBob does not achieve that ideal, illustrating the failure inscribed in hegemonic masculinity and heterosexual gender performances that Butler and Connell describe. Furthermore, against the background of the one-dimensionality of the characters, who are depicted as the ones embodying this variety of masculinity or who approximate it most closely, SpongeBob’s (un)gendered ambiguity, his failure to conform to an ideal of hegemonic masculinity, is, in fact, portrayed as a much more creative, interesting and worthwhile way of being in the world. Thus, hegemonic masculinity, despite being established as model variety of masculinity in the beginning, is rejected as an ideal

eventually, mostly by its exaggerated and humorous depiction as ridiculous. While the “manly” man in the series are mocked and ridiculed, SpongeBob, as a main protagonist, is still the hero of the story despite being a “weenie” (and therefore not acceptable from a heteronormative perspective).

In *Shell of a Man* Mr Krabs plans to go to a reunion with former navy-colleagues. He tells SpongeBob about this plan and shows him navy-related items he has collected, amongst those is his “Manly Toughness Trophy”, which he won, as he tells SpongeBob, “[...] by being the toughest of the tough.” as well as a picture of his navy-colleagues, which, typically for *SpongeBob SquarePants* depict muscular men (actually fish), whose bodies are exaggerated to an extent that they, in the Butlerian sense, can be read as parodies of hegemonic masculinity rather than idealized or idealizing depictions. Similar to the portrayal of muscular men in *No Weenies Allowed* parodic exaggeration is again the strategy with which hegemonic masculinity is deconstructed and deposed from its status as desirable ideal. Furthermore, Mr. Krabs tells SpongeBob that he used to be called “Armour – Abs – Krabs”, which impresses SpongeBob (“Wow!”). In this scene, again, *SpongeBob SquarePants* constructs hegemonic masculinity as a desired, admired and strived for ideal and at the same time ridicules and thus destabilizes it. The series eventually portrays SpongeBob’s *desire* for achieving a hegemonic variety of masculinity as erroneous, by depicting it as non-desirable. SpongeBob’s desire to be a man allegorizes the desire to approximate a gendered ideal in a heterosexual matrix. Therefore, the depiction of the strive for coherent subjecthood as non-desirable and, as will be described in more detail in later sections, eventually doomed to failure, can be read as a rejection of the heterosexual matrix, which demands such coherence from subjects. In *Shell of A Man* as well as in the series generally, many examples for the depiction of hegemonic masculinity (and therefore a normative ideal of gender identity in a heterosexual matrix) as undesirable can be found. After Mr. Krabs has shown his “manly” navy-souvenirs to SpongeBob, he tells him to punch him in order to prove his toughness. As a result, SpongeBob’s arm disintegrates. Instead of reacting upset, however, SpongeBob is very impressed by Mr. Krabs’ toughness and exclaims: “Wow! My entire arm disintegrated!” In this scene, once again, a variety of masculinity related to force and brutality is portrayed as one-dimensional, shallow and limited. Shortly after that, Mr. Krabs loses his shell, because, as he tells

SpongeBob, he has put on too much weight and thus outgrew it. He fears, that the loss of his shell undoes his masculinity and without it, he cannot attend the reunion: “Armour Abs Krabs can’t show up at the reunion like this. All pink and soft and unmanly! [...] And no abs!” Again, it is striking, that the “male” body that Mr. Krabs is so proud of, is in fact just “put on” – it is only his shell, which makes him “a man”. Without it, he is not “Armour Abs Krabs” anymore. Losing his shell thus also implies losing his masculinity. Similar to the performative element of the masculinities depicted in the movie and in other episodes of the series, (in which masculinity is often located in vestimentary performances or in other features with which bodies are enhanced and masculinized, such as the putting on of artificial hair or muscles) Mr. Krabs’ masculinity is depicted as located in his shell. As much as his shell, and therefore his masculinity, is an element of his body, it is, as the episode shows, an element that cannot be taken for granted a priori, but has to be *earned* (by staying physically fit and not putting on weight). Obviously, the physical marker defining his masculinity can be lost, by non-conformity to the physical demands of being a man. By not performing his masculinity on a physical level properly, he loses his shell and with it the artefact that communicates his masculinity to others.

After the aforementioned scene, SpongeBob “falls” into Mr. Krabs shell and goes to the reunion, pretending to be Mr. Krabs instead of him. Mr. Krabs follows him and watches the reunion from behind a plant. When SpongeBob enters the club, in which the reunion takes place, he exclaims: “Wow! I have never seen so many manly navy man! So tough! So brave! So [pause] clever! And I’m one of them!” While SpongeBob is saying this, we can see the men in the club – again, the majority of them with exaggerated muscles – engaging in entirely useless activities, again

Figure 38 (Shell of a Man)



sitting on the treasure chest is the only female in the room and only appears in the

constructing this variety of masculinity at the same time as hegemonic (SpongeBob is proud to be one of them) and dismissing it as non-desirable. One of the men is lifting a treasure chest with a woman sitting on it, adoring him; another man lifts tongs with his tongue (see: fig. 38). Interestingly, the woman

episode for this short scene. She does not have any active function in the narrative. This aspect is interesting against the background of Butler’s and Connell’s theoretical work, since her presence seems to merely serve the purpose of stressing the men’s masculinity by making it possible to define it against *her femininity*. It has already been pointed out, that hegemonic masculinity always needs the negative of femininity to define itself against. Furthermore, Butler also stresses that genders in a heterosexual matrix are always constructed in relation to each other. Thus, in a heterosexual matrix and its resulting organization of gender in binaric terms, a man is everything that a woman is not. In this case, the ex-marine’s performance of physical strength is contrasted with the woman’s “weakness” and lightness (she is lifted by him). Additionally, she only appears in the context of heterosexual desire – her facial expression is full of admiration for the man lifting her. Reading this aspect against the background of Butlerian theory, her femininity is only defined *by* her heterosexual desire for masculinity, because, in a heterosexual matrix, it is precisely the law of heterosexuality, which *makes* her a woman. Furthermore, in the scene in which SpongeBob enters the club, he pauses between saying his last “so” and “clever”. In that pause, we see two men bang their heads against each other, thus a creating comic effect by contrasting SpongeBob’s characterization of those men as “clever” on the one hand and their not-so-clever behaviour on the other. The men in the club furthermore fight solely for fun, while idealizing their own behaviour by stressing its manliness: “That’s manly!”. Despite the fact that this variety of masculinity is established as hegemonic ideal in the text - it is the type of masculinity that SpongeBob admires and wants to achieve and/or participate in (“And I am one of them!”). It is at the same time presented as ridiculous, making viewers share the view, that Spongebob is wrong in his admiration and should not strive for being “one of the men”. Furthermore, masculinity is also poked fun at by the redundant repetition of the words “manly” and “man” as well as “toughness” in the text. At the end of the reunion, the “Trophy of Manly Toughness” is awarded to the “toughest” man present. Eugene Krabs wins the trophy, thus, SpongeBob, in his disguise as Mr. Krabs, has to deliver an acceptance speech. Unfortunately, in his speech, he talks about jelly-fishing and blowing bubbles, which irritates Mr Krabs’ navy-colleagues. In this scene, SpongeBob’s fluid, open and transgressive masculinity is again contrasted with the hegemonic masculinity, the marines embody. In order to save his honour (which

is equated with his acceptance as a male subject), Mr. Krabs comes out of his hiding place and reveals his secret. As a result, the other men at the navy-reunion start confessing secrets too. Strikingly, all of them have “enhanced” and modified their bodies to appear “tougher” or more “manly”. Again, male bodies are not *naturally* male bodies, neither do they naturally conform to an ideal of maleness, but they have to be *made*. One of the fish confesses that his sideburns are fake. This is especially interesting in the context of the aforementioned observation of the frequent association of masculinity with hairiness. Again, male hairiness is not naturally given, but attached to a body to make it unmistakably masculine. The scene is one of the many instances in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in which gender-identity and the sexing of bodies is revealed as a *doing*, as performative.

In *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* Dennis the Hit Man and the men in the “Thug Tug” are representatives of the frequently occurring variety of muscular manliness in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. As pointed out above, those males are predominantly used in a contrastive function with SpongeBob and Patrick. They represent SpongeBob and Patrick’s opposites. While Dennis is their antagonist in the movie and therefore constructed as a negative and “evil” character from the very beginning, the males in the “Thug Tug” are ridiculed by their exaggerated performance of hegemonic masculinity and eventually mocked by Patrick and SpongeBob, illustrating their rejection of hegemonic masculinity.

The Fry Cook Games also thematizes the recurring issue of exaggerated male physique and its humorous deconstruction. In this episode, however, hegemonic masculinity is not only deconstructed by means of parodic exaggeration, but also by exposing it as an always approximated but never fully achieved ideal. Even the masculinity of those characters conforming to its hegemonic ideal most closely is fragmentary, inconsistent and incomplete. Before the SpongeBob and Patrick enter the ring as competitors, the presenter announces them: “Representing the Chum Bucket, a creature so fearsome, so terrible, so mind-bendingly large, that those of you with weak constitutions may want to leave the stadium.” Strikingly the only member of the audience, who gets frightened and thus wants to leave the stadium (“I gotta get outa here!”) is the most muscular man in the stand (see: fig. 39). This does not only create a comic effect because it creates a discrepancy between the man’s

exaggeratedly muscular “male” body and his “weak constitution” (as the presenter puts it), but also because it again mocks a character, who superficially conforms to an ideal of manhood and exposes his conformity as illusional and phantasmatic. A similar effect is created in the following scene: Patrick is carried into the stadium by a tall and muscular man – again, with a very exaggerated male body (see: fig. 40). Due to the fact that SpongeBob represents the Krusty Krab and Patrick represents the Chum Bucket in *The Fry Cook Games*, they are instructed by Mr. Krabs and Plankton respectively, who also try to pit the two off against each other until SpongeBob and Patrick are so angry, that they start screaming out of rage. As a result, the character, who has carried Patrick into the stadium starts screaming too, but contrasted with his hypermasculine appearance, in the audio, we can only hear a very nasal and rather high-pitched voice. Here, the fish’s traditional masculinity is mocked, by contrasting it with his rather “unmanly” voice. Similarly, SpongeBob and Patrick’s exaggerated

Figure 39 (The Fry Cook Games)



Figure 40 (The Fry Cook Games)



muscular bodies are contrasted with their wrestling “techniques” during the fight, which involve the tickling of feet and the erasing of name-tags instead of actual fighting. Again, putting those depictions into the context of Butler’s theories, those two gender-performances are also instances in which, despite their superficial conformity, the norms governing the production of gender do not succeed thoroughly. Despite their performance of hegemonic masculinity (and thus their rejection of everything feminine in their gender-performance), the gender-binarc logic underpinning those representations is broken up by the men acting in ways which are not considered “manly” and, in SpongeBob and Patrick’s case, by the insinuation of a homoerotic subtext. Butler argues that gender is always only an approximation, while Connell similarly states that hegemonic masculinity is an empty ideal that is never and can never be fully achieved. In the case of the masculinities in *SpongeBob*

SquarePants always-approximated and never achieved status of heterosexual genders is rendered visible.

3.3.1.3. *Femininities*

Complementing the discussed depictions of masculinity in the texts analysed, their treatment of femininity is particularly interesting, given the binaric organization of sexes/genders that the heterosexual matrix is structured according to. In *SpongeBob SquarePants*, there is only one female main protagonist: Sandy Cheeks and, as has already been pointed out before, her depiction is, similar to that of the series' male protagonists, rather ambiguous. In *SpongeBob SquarePants* therefore, the female and the male protagonists do not constitute a binary but rather inhabit a middle ground in which they oscillate between behaviours traditionally associated with femininity and behaviours traditionally associated with masculinity. However, similar to the minor male characters, which are usually portrayed as ridiculously hypermasculine and predominantly fulfil the function of providing a contrast to SpongeBob's and Patrick's sometimes rather “queer” gender performance, the female minor characters are also often exaggerated parodies of hyperfemininity. Another similarity between the text's depiction of hypermasculinity and its portrayal of hyperfemininity is that those gender-varieties are never depicted as thoroughly coherent. Rather, the characters' gender identities are broken up with elements contradicting their excessive genderedness. Pearl, Mr Krabs' daughter provides an excellent example for this depiction of femininity. In *Whale of a Birthday*, Pearl celebrates her 16th birthday. As usual in the series, she is portrayed in a very stereotypical way, embodying many clichés about teenage girls. She is interested in, as she puts it “[...] music and clothes and shiny things [...]”. She goes shopping with her friends and in the mall, she is excited about pink and glittery items, predominantly clothes and cosmetics. As pointed out above, in *SpongeBob SquarePants* hegemonic masculinity or the performance stereotypical masculinity is very often combined and contrasted with elements, which are, in a binaric conceptualization of gender, incompatible with masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is often deconstructed by, inter alia, its exposure as fragmentary, inconsistent and incomplete. It is exposed as a phantasm that can never be fully achieved. Similarly, Pearl's stereotypical femininity is contrasted with elements, which do not fit into her exaggerated performance of teenage femininity. In contrast to her female friends, Pearl is portrayed as clumsy and ungraceful – she is a

whale, after all. Thus, not only hypermasculinity is ridiculed in the text, but also stereotypical femininity. The two main strategies of subversion are exposure of hegemonic impersonations of gender as fragmentary and parodic exaggeration. Both masculinity and femininity are deconstructed by creating a contrast between bodies and genders. Hypermasculinity is represented by bodies, which exaggeratedly dramatize an ideal of muscular masculinity and which are then (from a heteronormative perspective) “spoiled” with incompatible “unmanly” behaviour. Hyperfemininity, on the other hand is located in characters’ behaviour rather than their bodies. Opposed to the texts’ treatment of masculinity, the characters’ femininity is counteracted by their unfeminine bodies. Pearl’s body, despite her performance of femininity, often sabotages this performance and renders it incoherent. Certainly, Sandy, a character already discussed in the context of masculinity, could also be mentioned in that context. In *No Weenies Allowed*, Sandy Cheeks, as a female is, in contrast to SpongeBob, allowed into the Salty Spitoon. Before being allowed entrance, everybody has to give an example of their “toughness”. Sandy replies: “How tough am I?” and illustrates her “toughness” by ripping the doorman’s tattoo off and turning it around (see: fig 41). The heart-shaped tattoo read “MOM” before and “WOW” after Sandy’s intervention. Thus, her “toughness” is stressed, which certainly is particularly interesting in connection to the portrayal of the male protagonists in the series, who are frequently portrayed as “soft” and sensitive characters. In this episode, as well as in others, Sandy conforms to an ideal of male strength and muscularity as a *female* character. In fact, Sandy is often

Figure 41 (No Weenies Allowed)



the only character in the series, who manages to fulfil a hegemonic masculine role. Thus, the idea of coherence between bodies, gender identifications and identities is broken up, which also exposes sexed bodies as fabricated, since it is a female subject performing masculinity. Sandy’s performance of masculinity, however, is only superficially a performance of masculinity by a female subject. There is another layer of meaning to her performance of masculinity. Due to the fact, that, in animation generally, and *SpongeBob SquarePants* specifically, there is no being behind doing, no reality before, or beyond what is depicted, no essence behind performance and no sex behind

gender, what viewers are confronted with in the gender-bending moments of the text are in fact two layers of gender which do not match and are incoherent, rather than a materiality that gender is only built upon. This certainly mirrors Butler’s notion of sexed bodies as constructed by the same mechanisms and processes as gender. As pointed out above, Butler conceptualizes matter as a process – as materialization. In *SpongeBob SquarePants* this process of materialization is revealed by the depiction of bodies as performative and the denaturalization of sex, i.e. its processual character as *sexing* of bodies. Similar to Pearl, Sandy is often depicted as “unfeminine”. As pointed out above, as a main character, her gendered ambiguity is comparable to SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s queerness. Generally, however, femininity is often embodied by (both otherwise male and female) characters, who combine their performances of femininity with masculine elements and vice versa, countering the idea of (gender) identity as an essence.

Both genders constructed *by* and *in* the heterosexual matrix are unmasked as empty ideals in *SpongeBob SquarePants*; they are never actually achieved or completed in the series and when they are approximated closely, they are dismissed as ridiculous stereotypes rather than desirable ideals. Much of the comic effect created in *SpongeBob SquarePants* is a result of its parodic depiction of failing subjects unsuccessfully trying to fulfil their mandatory assignment of coherently gendered subjecthood in a heterosexual matrix exposing the limits, restrictions, rules and constraints that the heteronormative identificatory regime imposes on them. It furthermore particularly creates humour via its mockery of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the series often undoes a heteronormative logic by destabilizing, rejecting and mocking the subject which is constructed as ideal in a heteronormative, gender-binarc framework: hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, *SpongeBob SquarePants* shows a way of being in the world, which is not only *not* subjected to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and a heteronormative logic structured around the phantasm of a binarc gender-system, but a variety of subjecthood, which is only partly “subjected” to a heterosexual matrix, only partly coherent, one that remains ambiguous, incoherent, “queer”. As Halberstam puts it, *SpongeBob SquarePants* presents viewers with a version of masculinity, which does not define itself by rejection and exclusion of femininity and homosexuality, but “makes a daring pitch for a softer, more absorbent masculinity” (Halberstam 2005, n.p.).

3.3.2. *Childhood vs. adult masculinity*

In the series as well as in the movie, the binary adult/child is frequently transgressed and deconstructed. SpongeBob is, as illustrated above, an ambiguous “man-child” (Hillenberg, qutd. in Brownlee 41), who is often depicted as adult and child at the same time. On the one hand, he leads the life of a grown-up – he lives alone, he goes to work, he earns his own money, while, on the other hand, SpongeBob and Patrick also “play like children” and exhibit very childlike interests and behaviours (see: Brownlee 40-41). The following sections aim at showing, how SpongeBob’s indeterminacy with regard to his age is intertwined with his gender and sexual ambiguity and how it is precisely his “immaturity” or his rejection of adulthood, which opens up room for a queer subtext.

Figure 42 (*Grandma’s Kisses*)



In the episode *Grandma’s Kisses* the recurring topic of adulthood vs. childhood is explored thematically. SpongeBob is humiliated and ridiculed at work, because his grandmother kisses him goodbye. Thus, he decides that he does not want to be a child anymore and therefore visits his best friend Patrick to ask him for advice. Just as in the movie, adulthood is associated with masculinity when Patrick tells SpongeBob: “You’re a man now, SpongeBob, and it’s time you starting acting like one. “ They put on sideburns (see: fig. 42) - SpongeBob calls them “[...] the icing on the maturity cake [...]” - and visit SpongeBob’s grandmother to inform her about her grandson’s adulthood. Hairy masculinity is thus established as ideal version of being an adult – it is “the icing on the maturity cake”. In the episode, SpongeBob declares: “I have grown up. It is nature’s way.” From this point on, she treats SpongeBob as a grown-up, while Patrick gets all her attention. As a result, SpongeBob cries hysterically and wants to be a child again. Thus, in the end of the episode, adult masculinity is rejected as ideal by SpongeBob and he again displays rather childlike and ambiguously gendered behaviour.

While in the series generally SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s identities are constructed as a mesh of adult and childlike behaviours, in *Toy Store of Doom*, Patrick and SpongeBob predominantly perform childhood and only SpongeBob’s clothes (suit and tie) construct him as an adult character. They are also addressed as “boys” in the text. A new toy store opens up in Bikini Bottom and when SpongeBob and Patrick arrive at the site, where it should already have opened they start crying, because it has not opened yet. Again, their transgressiveness with regard to their age is closely linked to their transgressiveness with regard to their gender performances and masculinities. It is precisely because they are not clearly and consistently coded as adults that they are allowed to display behaviour, which is not consistently masculine. While they are crying, the toy store opens and a construction worker - displaying the muscular variety of masculinity, which is frequently featured and ridiculed in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, comes by and shouts at them: “Quit your crying and get in there!”. In that context it is striking that the man, as a representative of adult hegemonic masculinity, on the one hand shouts at them for crying, thus, disciplining their non-masculine behaviour, but on the other hand does not shout at them for wanting to enter a toy store as adults. While they are policed for not conforming to the norms governing gender, they are not policed for transgressing the adult/child-binary. When SpongeBob and Patrick enter the store, they are enthused by all the toys. With the same enthusiasm that he displays for the toys in the store, SpongeBob points at Steve, the cashier, saying: “Patrick, look at that!”. Patrick, staring at the cashier, awestruck, replies: “WOW!” In the next shot, SpongeBob jumps onto the cashier’s desk and hugs Steve. Later in the episode, Patrick and SpongeBob jump around, holding hands. Again in these scenes, their childishness opens up a realm of possibilities, in which Patrick and SpongeBob have the opportunity of disregarding the rules that they actually ought to conform to in order to be coherent adult males. In the episode, SpongeBob and Patrick are allowed some transgressive queerness in their gender performances, precisely *because* they are categorized as children (“boys”) by the adult characters in the episode.

In *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* the boundary adult/child is transgressed, when Patrick shows SpongeBob that he is wearing diapers, telling him: “And I’ve been doing it all by myself for almost a year.” Despite the fact that SpongeBob and Patrick are generally characters, whose age is rather undefined and ambiguous, this transgressive

element is particularly striking in the context of *Rock-a-Bye Bivalve*, because here Patrick transgresses the adult/child-binary as a parent and therefore occupying a prototypically adult role. He is a *father* wearing *diapers*. This can easily be read as another instance of the ridicule of not only adulthood, but more precisely, adult heterosexual masculinity, or, even more precisely, of a very specific and very prototypically masculine role: the role of the father. Notably, in *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve*, the binary-transgression of childhood/adulthood takes place in the context of transgressions on the level of gender (masculinity/femininity, male/female) and on the level of sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual).

Thus, one aspect, which is particularly interesting from a queer analytical perspective, is the multi-layered transgressiveness of the text and its resulting deconstruction of binaries and their intertwinement in the text. As Brownlee (2011) points out, the film is not only transgressive with regard to gender, sexuality and age, but also in its use of media, since it merges live action and cel animation in one and the same text. Furthermore, the different layers of transgression and deconstruction of binaric identity-categories are closely intertwined. Additionally, *SpongeBob SquarePant's* media-related transgressiveness is associated with its transgressiveness and indeterminacy with respect to gender, sexuality and age. The usage of cel animation and live action is of particular interest when exploring depictions of genders, particularly masculinity, in the film, since animation is associated with gender-neutrality and childhood, whereas live-action is associated with adult masculinity:

The contrast of medium primarily corresponds to the film's investigation of gender and age difference: grotesque, adult hypermasculinity is associated with live action, while animation is associated with ambiguously gendered, polymorphously perverse childhood (Brownlee 40)⁵⁵.

At this point, I would like to add that the difference between live action and cel animation does not only illustrate the difference between masculinity and gender-

⁵⁵ “Polymorphous perversity” is a term originally coined by Freud. It is used to describe the pre-Oedipal phase, in which pleasure is still unstructured. According to Freud, in this phase, the infant experiences anal and oral drives, while its “sexuality is unchannelled [...] its libidinal economy is unstructured.” (Cranny-Francis et.al 51). Furthermore, it is also important in the context of *SpongeBob's* undgendered childishness, that, according to Freud, up to the Oedipal-phase the psychosexual development is the same for boys and girls, since only “[w]hen the child separates from its mother and breaks out of this close unity with her, the path for each gender differs.” (Cranny-Francis et.al. 51).

neutrality or adulthood and childhood in the film, as Brownlee points out, but it is even more generally associated with the difference between human and animal. All live action characters featured in the movie are humans, more precisely, human adult males⁵⁶. The only animals, which are depicted as “live action” characters are in fact dead and waiting to be reanimated (in the literal sense). At the end of the movie, SpongeBob and Patrick almost die and in this moment they turn from animated characters to a real (live action) sponge and starfish. Thus, it is in fact live action – and therefore also traditional masculinity and adulthood – which is connected with “deathly inaction” in the film, while animation – and therefore queerness and childhood – is associated with live and vitality. This is also illustrated by the fish coming to live after the aforementioned scene – at the moment they are (literally) re-animated they turn back from live-action figures to animated characters: “SpongeBob and Patrick’s deaths set up the alienating uncanniness of live action, which casts a long shadow over the ‘real’ flesh of the live-action men.” (Brownlee 43). After the fish in Shell City are re-animated, they attack and restrain the live-action diver, who wanted to make souvenirs out of them. It is animated characters who defeat a live-action, human, adult male, allegorizing the victory of queer, ambiguous, polymorphously perverse childhood over adult masculinity. SpongeBob and Patrick are eventually saved by a heart-shaped tear which activates a sprinkler and thus saves them from drying out (see: fig. 43). Apart from the fact that the tear is animated – again associating animation with live and survival – its heart shape also alludes to romance, thus adding a queer layer of meaning to the scene. Furthermore, the crying also implies a move away from hegemonic masculinity, which is not associated with showing emotions, especially not with affectionate emotions between two men. Brownlee stresses the “double significance of the teardrop as same-sex desire and unmanliness”:

[...] the persistence of the drawn medium demonstrates that even when SpongeBob and Patrick are rendered lifeless by ‘reality’, a remnant of them remains animated and

⁵⁶ The realm of the animated is a queer world, in which desire is (still) unstructured – note Brownlee’s description of SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s sexuality as “polymorphously perverse” (Brownlee 40) – in which genders are (still) ambiguous and in which characters reject or fail to grow up into adults. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the animated can be interpreted as part of the Imaginary, while the world of live action belongs to the Symbolic – a realm of adulthood and reason. However, as will be pointed out later with the example of David Hasselhoff, even those characters who appear as (adult, masculine, live-action) representatives of that order in the text, are disassembled and “queered” by animation and therefore, via their contact with the animated world, thrown back to their own queerness.

still capable of movement. This animated remnant is furthermore in a shape that symbolizes love, however much the show’s creators may officially deny intentional queerness. It is also explicitly unmanly. [...] Thus the tear in this image helps to cement the equation of childishness on a narrative level with both same-sex erotics and the aesthetic strategies of cel animation. (Brownlee 43)

Thus, in this scene, the topic of transgressiveness on a media-level is combined with a signifier of same-sex romance and the undoing of hegemonic masculinity. The victory of the animated over live action at the end of the movie is not only, as Brownlee argues, a “victory of childhood over adulthood” (Brownlee 41), but, as pointed out, a victory of childhood, gender-neutrality/diversity, life, a queer, incoherent and ambiguous performance of identity over human, adult masculinity.

Figure 43 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



As analysed above, earlier in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, SpongeBob is passed over for a promotion because of his lack of masculinity. As argued before, the fact that his ambiguous genderedness *is* conceptualized and explicitly articulated as a *lack*, specifically a lack of *masculinity* already implies the text’s construction of hegemonic masculinity as normative ideal in a heteronormative logic. In Mr Krabs’ explanation that he needs a *man* to be *manager*, SpongeBob’s lack of qualification is not simply associated with childishness or a lack of maturity, but explicitly described as a lack of manliness, since SpongeBob is not referred to as “boy”, but as “kid” in the scene. The narrative then develops as a quest for maturity *and* masculinity – SpongeBob and Patrick leave Bikini Bottom to become adult men. As pointed out above, this quest is subverted in the text, in that adulthood, masculinity and the logic of success that is attended by the concept of maturation it are rejected in the end. The movie therefore does not explore *boyhood* and *manhood*, it is not simply a narrative exploring the maturation from boy to man, but it explicitly creates a tension field of *childhood* vs. *adult masculinity*. Brownlee (2011), who discusses the movie’s transgressiveness with regard to its use of media (cel animation and live action) in the context of its other layers of transgression- such as gender, sexuality and age, argues

that “[t]he opposition between the potentially gender neutral ‘kid’ and explicitly gendered ‘man’ is [...] of paramount importance and is central to the film.” (Brownlee 41). She stresses that SpongeBob and Patrick are never referred to as “boys” throughout the movie but always with gender-neutral terms such as “kids” (see: Brownlee 42). Brownlee disregards that Princess Mindy calls them “guys” once, referring to them with a gendered label. However, the denomination “kids” is used more consistently and thematically, as can also be seen in the last scene of the movie, when SpongeBob declares that he is now confident and happy with being “a kid” (which, taken the narrative of the movie into account, implies not only *not* being an adult but *not* being a man). Throughout the film, the two labels “man” and “kid” are repeatedly contrasted. When SpongeBob returns to the Krusty Krab after his rejection as manager to confront Mr Krabs with his disappointment and anger, SpongeBob tells him: “[...] you say I’m a kid. Well, I am 100% man!” Before SpongeBob and Patrick leave Bikini Bottom, SpongeBob also tells King Neptune that he is able to find the crown and take it back to him, precisely because he is *man* and *adult* enough to do it. Being a man is associated with competence and fearlessness: “But I’m not a kid. I can do it.” At the county line, SpongeBob informs two men who refer to them as “kids”: “For your information, we are not *kids*. We are *men*.” Similarly, in the club they visit after crossing the county line, it is gender-ambiguous childhood which is contrasted with masculinity, not (gendered) boyhood. Thus, SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s identities are again constructed as ambiguously gendered or *not gendered enough* to be acceptable as the subjects they are supposed to be: as *men*. Brownlee argues that the ways in which their identities are constructed are far from normative (i.e. clearly gendered) boyhood: “Although SpongeBob and Patrick are both ‘kids’, they are not kids in the same way, and they are certainly not ‘boys’ in the same or any normative way.” (Brownlee 42) and furthermore criticizes Halberstam (2005) for referring to SpongeBob and Patrick as “boys” despite the fact that this term is never used in the film and for discussing them in the context of “boyhood”, while not recognizing the gender-neutrality of the term “kids” with which they are actually labelled (see: Brownlee 42).

Brownlee (2011) argues that it is precisely SpongeBob’s childishness, which opens the text up for queer interpretation. The gender and sexual ambiguity in the text is closely connected with SpongeBob’s indeterminacy with regard to his age, since

the sexuality depicted can be more appropriately described as infantile – Brownlee uses the psychoanalytic term “polymorphous perversity” - than as adult sexuality:

While the *SpongeBob SquarePants* television programme and the feature film both leave plenty of room for queer interpretation, neither commits explicitly to erotic same-sex desire and allusions to adult, genital sexuality are confined to double entendres. More overtly and consistently, *SpongeBob* is characterized by infantile polymorphous perversity [...] In the feature film’s most orgiastic scene, for example, *SpongeBob* and Patrick overdose on enormous ice-cream sundaes in a frenzy of childish oral sexuality. The hangovers they experience the next morning encapsulate the way in which *SpongeBob* is overdetermined by both gleeful, ‘innocent’ childish excess and adult meanings and experiences. (Brownlee 41)

When *SpongeBob* and Patrick cross the boundary from one country to another, they also transgress a boundary between childhood and masculinity; however, despite allegorizing the crossing of a line as rite of initiation, *SpongeBob* and Patrick never *become* men. *SpongeBob* even articulates his feelings of alienation, when he tells Patrick: “What about us? We’ll never survive in that trench. You said it yourself, this is man’s country. And let’s face it, Pat. We’re just...kids.”. *SpongeBob* and Patrick never quite assimilate to man’s country. They do not belong there and eventually reject their desired development from kid to men as illusory. When *SpongeBob* and Patrick have finally arrived in “man’s country” it is clear, that they are only there as visitors, who will return to Bikini Bottom in the end. Thus, the narrative does not follow the heteronormative logic of development from childhood to adulthood or from “polymorphous perversity” and gendered ambiguity to coherent genderedness and masculinity, rather, it presents us with two characters who merely *visit* adulthood and masculinity in order to eventually reject that mode of being and return to everything that makes them “incoherent” from a normative perspective. The normative hierarchy of queerness vs. adult masculinity is turned around, when *SpongeBob* and Patrick make fun of the men they have encountered in the “Thug Tug”. This explicit poking fun at hegemonic masculinity is a good example of how humour is used as a means of subverting normative understandings of identity in the text. It is not the normative character, who laughs at the queer character but vice versa: those characters, which conform to a normative understanding of gendered identity are usually depicted in ways, which are exaggerated to an extent that they turn into grotesque parodies. In the aforementioned scene, they are even explicitly ridiculed by ambiguous characters, whose rather *queer* gender performances and identifications in turn are constructed as far more positive in the text.

3.3.3. *Denaturalization of sexed bodies*

In *SpongeBob SquarePants* masculinity (especially its hegemonic variety) is repeatedly denaturalized. This is often done by the disassembling or denaturalizing of male bodies. In this context the figure of David Hasselhoff in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* is of particular interest. The movie does not only merge cel animation and live action in one text, as Brownlee argues, but it in fact does so in just *one* character, since David Hasselhoff is, despite being a live action character, subjected to the rules of animation. His body is distorted, mechanized, changed and modified, just like the cartoon characters' bodies in the series and the film. The plasticity of forms, their constant shifting, shaping and changing is, as Johnson (2010) points out, a characteristic of cartoons, which “[...] ha[ve] a long history of distorting, moulding, and subverting reality, rendering the boundaries of anatomy, gender and sexually as infinitely malleable.” (Johnson 547) Cartoon characters do not have coherent, consistent identities or bodies, rather, they continuously shift and change their forms and shapes, they are “[...]able to re-mold their physical appearance, seamlessly switching gender, sexuality, or defying death by literally bouncing back to their original shape” (Johnson 249). This certainly opens up room for queer readings. As Johnson argues, the element of plasticity leads to cartoon characters' “[...] inbred capability for subversion, challenging the traditions of male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality.” (Johnson 247). Similar to that of a cartoon character, Hasselhoff's body is altered, mechanized and his muscles turn into grotesque machinery so that he can be used as a boat by Patrick and SpongeBob (see: fig. 44). At this point, it is important to note that the grotesqueness of his body is not used as a comic device in the text. Quite on the contrary, it adds an uncanny element to it (see: Brownlee 45). In this scene, it is not humour, which is used to differentiate between what the text establishes as “normal” and “abnormal”. It is not the depiction of the other as ridiculous or funny but its depiction as creepy and uncomfortable, which establishes normative boundaries. It is precisely an adult, masculine and male human who is depicted as somewhat unfitting and uncanny, as an “abnormal” and intrusive element in the realm of the animated (which is characterized by childishness as well as gender and sexual ambiguity). Thus, the subversive content of this scene predominantly lies in the excessive parodying of bodily ideals of masculinity and the deconstruction of a male human body by means of denaturalization. The strategy of

denaturalizing male physique by turning it into a bizarre mechanical instrument on the one hand “[...] pokes fun at heroic [...] manliness [...]” (Brownlee 46); on the other it might have potential subversive implications in that it hints to the non-naturalness of gender per se:

No longer natural, the ‘realness’ of the men does not appear as an *a priori* birthright, but as a fragile aesthetic construct. By extension, the contrast between animation and live action may even denaturalize ‘real’ bodies offscreen, so that we see these as discursive constructions as well. (Brownlee 46)

David Hasselhoff’s appearance, like those of other live action characters in the film and the series, “throws the notion of ‘natural’ masculinity into question (Brownlee 46). Brownlee thus concludes, that “[...] *SpongeBob* offers more than a queer or queer-friendly narrative. It offers a genuine challenge to the perceived naturalness of gender and of sexed bodies.” (Brownlee 47) Furthermore, the hierarchy of on the one hand coherent gendered identities and adulthood and on the other hand, incoherent, ambiguously sexed and gendered beings and childhood is reversed. Turning the viewers’ expectations around, it is precisely the supposedly “natural” live action male character whose body is turned into an unnatural element in the animated world and not vice versa.

Figure 44 (The *SpongeBob SquarePants* Movie)



Analysing the Hasselhoff-scene against the background of other male characters in the film adds another layer of meaning to the text. Male physique is not only rendered utterly grotesque and unnatural, but the series and the film also depict many more and many different animated “male” bodies. *SpongeBob* and Patrick are, despite being addressed with the gender-neutral term “kids” and despite the

ambiguity in their behaviour, predominantly coded as males in the text. They are signified as males via their vestimentary performances as well as by the pronouns and names they are addressed with. However, all the male characters in *SpongeBob SquarePants* are shaped differently. Male physique is therefore not only represented in a very diverse way but masculinity is fundamentally de-linked from physical materiality. Here, sexed bodies, or male bodies more precisely, are not material and “natural” facticities anymore. Masculinity is denaturalized and de-essentialized, because it is not represented by and located in a supposed pre-discursive physical reality, or rather *one type of* male physique. It is not depicted as an essence, which is only expressed, but rather as *entirely* performative. This implies a subversion of the heterosexual matrix on various levels. First of all, gender and sex do not follow coherently from each other in the texts’ depictions of masculine/male characters, since their bodies, which are categorized as male, differ from each other and from what viewers have learned to conceptualize and categorize as male to an extent that they cannot be categorized as *one* type of body, or *one* sex. Rather, male physicality is diversified into a multitude of different bodies. Secondly, also due to the multifariousness of depictions, what makes those bodies recognizable as male in the framework of a heterosexual matrix, is precisely and only their performative construction. Since their material diversity is not monolithically reified in the form of one type of physique, it is mostly the characters’ behaviour, sartorial codes, pronouns, they are addressed with, in short, the (non-biological, non-natural and non-essentialist) performance of their sex/gender, which classifies them as male in the eyes of the viewers. *SpongeBob* deconstructs the idea of “sex” as an a priori “natural” and material basis, because all sex that there is in the series and in the film, is and has in fact always been, gender. The fact that a number of different bodies come to be classified as one sex in *SpongeBob SquarePants* reveals the arbitrariness of the very category “sex” and the fact that everything, which gives meaning to this – supposedly natural – category in the text is in fact unnatural, fabricated and performative in the first place, reveals the constructedness of sex as well as its processes of construction. In *SpongeBob SquarePants* sex and gender are, in line with Butler’s argument, not separable in that both are, after all, performatively constituted.

Not only the movie but also the series contains numerous instances of the denaturalization of male bodies as well as their depiction as performative. The already

discussed element of parody by exaggeration in the texts’ treatment of hegemonic masculinity often also implies an aspect of denaturalization of the bodies which are exaggeratedly portrayed. In *MuscleBob BuffPants*, SpongeBob tries to modify his body in order to achieve a more “manly” appearance. Muscular manhood is thus established as “hegemonic” variety in the beginning of the episode. It is the mode of masculinity that is idealized and the way of being a man that SpongeBob strives for. In the beginning of the episode, SpongeBob tries to lift weights. However, he uses stuffed animals instead of actual weights. The animals are pink and blue, combining the stereotypical colours for boys and girls respectively. Sandy visits SpongeBob and the scene features a close-up of her arm, which is very muscular and closely assembles the variety of muscular masculinity often depicted in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. This scene is one of the many instances in the series in which Sandy approximates the ideal of hegemonic masculinity and male physicality more closely than SpongeBob does, denaturalizing the supposed “natural” coherence between sex and gender. SpongeBob is impressed by Sandy’s biceps and as a result, he imagines himself with a muscular body. Sandy puts together a training programme for SpongeBob, but after Sandy’s instructions, he is very tired, lies on his bed and obviously is in pain (“This working out-thing isn’t working out.”), when he sees an ad for inflatable arms on TV:

Are you too much of a wimp to work out? Are you a weakling built like a sponge? Well, now you too can have muscles. With anchor arms! Fits like a glove. Just add air. How big do you want 'em? Normal? Veiny? And for the ladies ...hairy. I was a wimp before anchor arms. Now, I'm a jerk and everybody loves me. So order now, wimp! (MuscleBob BuffPants)

The advertisement again illustrates how *SpongeBob SquarePants* establishes muscular masculinity at the same time as desirable ideal and ridiculous. SpongeBob, as the series’ main character, frequently strives for approximation to that ideal but, equally often, fails. In the next scene, we see a number of muscular men working out on the beach. They are only occupied with their bodies, when all of a sudden, SpongeBob comes along with his new arms. Sandy is the only female present. She chats with the men about muscles and training and is accepted as “one of them”. Sandy and the male bodybuilders are very impressed about SpongeBob’s muscularity and thus Sandy enrolls him for the “anchor-toss-competition”. At the competition, Again, Sandy is the only female character present. SpongeBob loses the competition

and his secret is revealed, because his arms burst. After that, SpongeBob returns to his old self and rejects the hegemonic mode of masculinity as an ideal. Sandy, however, as the only female taking part in the competition, wins. She is physically stronger than the male bodybuilders and thus closer to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity than them. In the episode, as in other episodes in which SpongeBob wants to approximate a physical ideal of manliness, masculinity is denaturalized, because it reveals that “natural” manhood is in fact an unnatural achievement. It is interesting, how masculinity, a theme of paramount importance in the series and the film, is usually first located in the body (reverberating the dominant view that sex and gender follow logically from each other and that gender identity is based on a biological and pre-discursive materiality), it is expressed via physical markers. However, *SpongeBob SquarePants* reveals how bodies are altered and modified so that they are *made into* natural and biological entities. They are exposed as entirely unnatural and fabricated. Male bodies are *made* and the processes of construction are shown, depicting SpongeBob striving for a male body as well as striving for a coherent sex/gender/desire-performance – and failing. It is furthermore striking, that Sandy Cheeks, the only female main protagonist in the series, wins the bodybuilding contest at the end of *MuscleBob BuffPants* and thus, similar to her display of “toughness” in *No Weenies Allowed* excels all the male characters in her performance of masculinity.

In the next – and last – chapter of my analysis, I will focus on the aspect of failure, immaturity and “stupidity” in connection to gender (performance), (gender) identity and sexuality in *SpongeBob SquarePants* already hinted at in former sections.

3.4. IDENTITY AS ASSIGNMENT – MATURITY, COHERENCE AND FAILURE

SpongeBob: “Let’s face it, Patrick, we’re failures.”

Patrick: “I can live with that.”
(*Chocolate With Nuts*)

3.4.1. Failure: The Rejection of “Normal”

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam argues that many animation films are queer texts, precisely because they do not follow a logic of success, but rather confront viewers with characters who fail to meet societal expectations and conform to norms. Rather, animation films depict “queer” modes of being, which are unstructured by a heteronormative logic:

Mainstream film marketed to children produce, almost accidentally, plenty of perverse narratives of belonging, relating, and evolving, and they often associate these narratives with some sense of the politics of success and failure. Rather than be surprised by the presence of patently queer characters and narratives in mainstream kid’s films and by the easy affiliation with failure and disappointment, we should recognize the children’s animated feature as a genre that has to engage the attention of immature desiring subjects and which does so by appealing to a wide range of perverse embodiments and relations. [...] we should use them to disrupt idealized and saccharine myths about children, sexuality, and innocence and imagine new versions of maturation, Bildung and growth that do not depend on the logic of succession and success. (Halberstam 2011, 119)

As pointed out, both in the series and the film, *SpongeBob* and Patrick often fail to fulfil the “assignment” of coherent genderedness that a heterosexual matrix imposes on subjects. In their case this particularly means failing to meet hegemonic expectations of masculinity. Often the two main characters are “not man enough” to fulfil a certain task or reach a certain goal.

SpongeBob SquarePants challenges the heterosexual matrix by deconstructing binaries on various levels and the deconstruction of the binaries child-adult and woman-man are closely intertwined. *SpongeBob* is ambiguous with regard to his gender precisely *because* he is ambiguous with regard to his age. He is, as we learn in the movie, a “kid” and not a “man”, which allows him to not always play by the rules of a heteronormative society. Certainly, in many instances in the movie and the series, *SpongeBob* is reminded of what he is *supposed* to be, of the direction his maturation

ought to take and which subject he *has* to develop into. However, this maturation is never accomplished and SpongeBob’s ambiguities remain unresolved. Often, this logic of growth is even actively rejected by SpongeBob and Patrick as an act of resistance. Reading SpongeBob against the background of Halberstam (2011) and Brownlee (2011), the absence of a logic of growth and success in the text is partly rooted in the fact that he is an animated character and therefore “there is no adult male propping up SpongeBob’s performance of childhood *or* adulthood” (Brownlee 41). *SpongeBob SquarePants* generally does not follow a heteronormative generational or chronological logic, but instead of evolving, in every episode the protagonists start anew. There is no consistent or linear development; *neither* success, *nor* succession.

In many episodes SpongeBob *wants* to change and evolve (*No Weenies Allowed*, *Grandma’s Kisses*, *Not Normal*, *MuscleBob BuffPants*, *SpongeBob SquarePants The Movie*), but in all of those episodes, he fails to accomplish his mission of maturation. In *No Weenies Allowed*, SpongeBob wants to visit the Salty Spitoon, but is not allowed to enter the club, because he is “not tough enough”. Again, masculinity is an ideal that SpongeBob wants to but fails to achieve. Similarly, in *MuscleBob BuffPants*, SpongeBob is depicted as a character who wants to conform to a heterosexual norm of gendering, but fails. *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* is *structured* around SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s quest for “masculinity” (represented by their quest for King Neptune’s crown) and their journey to “man’s country”. Masculinity is established as ideal in the beginning, but then unmasked as undesirable and un-achievable at the same time. Brownlee argues that the presence of hypermasculine characters in the movie predominantly fulfils the function of contrasting them with the two protagonists’ indeterminacy with regard to gender and sexuality. Eventually, it is rejected as ideal by SpongeBob and Patrick and not strived for anymore. Brownlee argues that Hasselhoff represents adult masculinity in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* and despite the fact that this mode of being is constructed as ideal in the beginning of the movie, by the time, SpongeBob and Patrick are confronted with him the first time, they have already rejected this mode of masculinity as ideal and are thus not touched by it:

By the time their impromptu boat enters the film, Spongebob and Patrick have already realized that they can be heroes *as kids*, so Hasselhoff is present primarily as a spectacle of the hairy adult hypermasculinity the protagonists have already rejected – a spectacle conjured in order to be exercised. (Brownlee 45)

SpongeBob and Patrick eventually actively reject maturation and growth and therefore also the assignment of becoming an unambiguously masculine subject. The movie eventually celebrates SpongeBob’s immaturity *and* queerness. In one of the last scenes, SpongeBob exclaims:

And you know, I've been through a lot in the past six days, five minutes, twenty-seven-and-a-half seconds. 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 promotion or some other third thing can make me anything more than what I really am inside: A kid. (*The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*)

The episode *Not Normal* is of particular interest in that context, because, despite the fact that masculinity and maturity are not addressed explicitly in the text, it is implied and associated with “normal”. Similar to other episodes, SpongeBob wants to change in order to fulfil normative idea(l)s of subjecthood. In the episode, SpongeBob wants to become “normal” because Squidward tells him that he is not. It is striking, that part of what makes him “normal” is adapting his behaviour according to the normative ideal of adult heterosexual masculinity. When SpongeBob appears at work “normal” after Squidward’s observation that he is not normal enough, his voice is different. Instead of his typical high-pitched voice, it is much deeper and more “masculine” in the episode. *Not Normal* furthermore is the only episode, in which SpongeBob consistently performs adulthood (apart from the beginning and the end of the episode when he changes back to his old “self”). Normal is thus associated with adulthood, but also with masculinity. Additionally, as already pointed out, the “normality” of adult masculinity is complemented by the normative expectation of heterosexuality, as can be derived from Squidward’s reaction towards SpongeBob’s physical closeness. However, once again, in the series gradually the negative side effects of conformity to norms show. Being “normal” implies that SpongeBob loses his personality (“You know it's a funny thing, Squidward. I smoothed out the edges of my personality and the rest just followed suit. Now I am utterly normal.”) and becomes, as Mr Krabs put it, “dull”. SpongeBob states: “What you call dull, I call normal.” Similar to the series’ frequent “unmasking” of hegemonic masculinity as undesirable,

one-dimensional, boring and constraining. At the beginning of the episode, Squidward tells SpongeBob: “There are two kinds of people. There are people that are normal. And then there's you.” When Squidward says the word “normal”, the scene cuts to a tank with real life fish.⁵⁷ Thus, “normal” is, from the beginning of the episode associated with being on the one hand acceptable by society’s standards but it is also associated with being domesticated and caged. At home, SpongeBob watches a video tape entitled “How to be normal!” On the tape, normality is explained as follows:

The life of a normal person is rather simple. Here is your typical average Joe on his way to work. See how he is dressed. Even his hair is boring. Notice his features, nice and smooth without a crater or freckle to be seen [...] In his office space, Mr. Normal, at least that's what it says on his name tag works at a steady and monotonous pace just as all the other normals do. (*Not Normal*)

All the “Normals” shown in the video look exactly the same (see: fig. 45), they do not have personalities and the only communication taking place between them is “Hi, how are you?”. Even their houses all look the same. In the video, again, “normal” is associated with domesticated, boring and constraining. After some time

Figure 45 (Not Normal)



of “normality”, SpongeBob visits Squidward, who is very happy about SpongeBob’s transformation. However, SpongeBob tells Squidward that he is not “normal” enough by making him aware of the fact that he does not wear pants. In this scene, the episode intertextually satirically points to the fact that even characters who are constructed as normative in the text display behaviour, which would not be considered “normal” in real life (such as not wearing pants). As a result of SpongeBob’s observation of Squidward’s lack of awareness of norms concerning sartorial choices, Squidward throws him out of the house. SpongeBob, in a monologue, contemplates his situation and finds out, that he does not want to be normal anymore, because it is rather disadvantageous for him:

Oh, what happened? I lost my job and my best friend and now I'm too normal for Squidward. Maybe I have taken this normal thing too far. No problem, SpongeBob. You made yourself normal. Now all you have to do is re-weird yourself. All it'll take is a mental adjustment and some tight clenching. [...] Oh, well, if I'm going to get

⁵⁷ Again, similar to *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, real live action has negative connotations and is contrasted animation.

weird I'm going to need to see a professional. (*Not Normal*)⁵⁸

Later, SpongeBob even cries: “I guess I became permanently normal. [...] I don't wanna be normal! [...] Normal isn't worth it!” Again, the series eventually rejects an ideal of being gendered, or even more generally an ideal of being in the world and of doing identity, which is imposed upon the main character in the beginning of the episode.

In *MuscleBob BuffPants*, *Not Normal* and *No Weenies Allowed*, as well as in *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Movie*, SpongeBob's failure to successfully perform masculinity has two implications in the light of Butlerian theory. On the one hand, Butler points out that the performative construction of heterosexual genders, i.e. coherently gendered and sexed subjects in a heteronormative framework, is always only an approximation. They are ideals, which can never be fully achieved, empty points of reference. In repeatedly portraying male characters, such as SpongeBob, trying to reach that ideal but failing, illustrates the failure inscribed in heterosexual genders *per se*. Secondly, due to the fact that hegemonic masculinity is often represented by male physique in the text, sex is not portrayed as natural, but as something which needs to be achieved and performed. Even the characters, who approximate this heterosexual ideal of gender very closely are often rendered incoherent and their genderedness exposed as fragile and fragmentary. Thirdly, *SpongeBob SquarePants* reveals the compulsive and forcible element of gendering. As a male, SpongeBob is frequently confronted with the assignment of becoming more manly, becoming more coherent in a heterosexual matrix. Butler argues that, despite their constructedness, genders are not constructions produced by voluntarist subjects, but that subjects are bound to gendering in order to be able to appear as subjects in the first place. Thus, for SpongeBob, trying to be a man and failing, is the result of a heteronormative matrix forcibly producing heterosexual, coherent and binarily structured genders. A male characters' failure to conform to an ideal of hegemonic masculinity also and again implies a denaturalization of masculinity on another level: despite the fact that SpongeBob and Patrick are designed as male

⁵⁸ In this scene, furthermore, the normative hierarchy of abnormal/normal is turned around in that SpongeBob visits “a professional” to make him abnormal instead of normal. Additionally, the “professional” for weirdness he decides to see is Patrick – this aspect reiterates the idea that the two main protagonists are constructed as characters who do not represent normative subjecthood – they are not, in the series' words, “normal”, but “weird”.

characters (with their maleness being revealed as construction rather than natural materiality), they are not depicted as masculine ones.

Therefore, *SpongeBob Squarepants* as a first step often establishes coherent subjecthood, usually in the form of adult masculinity, as an ideal state-of-being, to then conclude that this ideal is on the one hand never achievable, but on the other hand also not worthwhile, since only ridiculously one-dimensional characters actually achieve it. The two main protagonists of the series - SpongeBob and Patrick - never manage to arrive at this goal of masculinity, still their individuality (also in terms of gender-(non)-identification) is presented as something positive in contrast to the rather uniform picture that is painted of hegemonic ideas of masculinity. Halberstam (2005) also points out that *SpongeBob SquarePants* eventually paints a rather negative picture of hegemonic masculinity, while boyhood is ultimately a more creative, more sensitive, more worthwhile mode of being. She particularly refers to *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* stating:

Spongebob and Patrick understand that their quest to recapture the king’s crown will supposedly transform them from boys to men. But the film hilariously pokes fun at the archetypal rendering of this rite of passage, and actually makes boyhood look more complicated, more empathetic, more flexible than the forms of manhood modelled by adults in the story. Spongebob ultimately tells boys that it’s okay to be a boy rather than a man, that manhood is exploitative and competitive, and that business and pleasure, in the end, depend upon figuring out new ways to access the responsibilities of male adulthood without the violence and injustice that so often accompany it. Spongebob and Patrick know that manhood is just a bad combination of confidence, bullshit, humiliation, and Viagra; rather than acquiesce, the two friends set out to make fun of it while representing boyhood as a kind of in-between space free of the performance anxiety and anger that orbit the adult male and fuel his fear of failure. (Halberstam 2005, n.p.)

However, there is yet another aspect, which links the issue of masculinity to the issue of failure in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, which Halberstam does not address at all. Despite the fact, that the two protagonists often defy and fail to achieve normative expectations of performing gender, those characters who represent the normative ideal in the texts are often equally depicted as failing in other realms of life. Often, it is precisely their conformity to gendered norms, which makes them unsuccessful and/or unlikeable. In the movie, King Neptun loses his authority by being bold (and thus not “man” enough to be a king) and needs to rely on the “kids” SpongeBob and Patrick to get him his crown back. Thus, interestingly, despite the fact that

SpongeBob and Patrick fail to achieve gendered norms, they succeed in the end and find the crown. It is the *men* who represent the norm of masculinity that SpongeBob and Patrick fail to achieve that fail in other realms of life and it is precisely their conformity to hegemonic masculinity, which causes their failure. In *No Weenies Allowed* and *SpongeBob MusclePants*, those men representing the (physical) ideal of masculinity are depicted as rather one-dimensional and superficial characters. Contrary to SpongeBob and Patrick, they fail on an emotional or social level. In the movie, Dennis the Hit Man fails his mission of preventing SpongeBob and Patrick from getting the crown, because of his masculine pride. Neptune fails as a king, because he is more concerned about his masculinity than about Bikini Bottom’s inhabitants. Therefore, in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the recurring theme of failure is closely linked to gender and sexuality, or identity more generally, on many levels and therefore of particular interest for a queer analysis.

It is striking that, when SpongeBob wants to change and develop, the direction of development is almost always the same: He has to become both more masculine and more adult. However, Patrick and SpongeBob are no characters, who are successfully disciplined into being subjects – they are not subjectivated according to the regulatory rules of a heterosexual matrix and they do not succeed at *making* themselves. Rather, they repeatedly fail and return back to their old unsuccessful, polymorphously perverse, childish, ambiguous, queer selves. They practice what Halberstam (2011) calls “the queer art of failure”. In *SpongeBob SquarePants* identity is always a process, although not linear; it is never fixed and never stable. The characters in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, most importantly the two main protagonists, Patrick and SpongeBob are made up of a number of different selves. There is no essence to their performances of identity, their subjectivity is not fixed. Rather, their identities are constructed as multi-layered, multiple and radically anti-essentialist. Thus, *SpongeBob SquarePants* provides an excellent example for a poststructuralist understanding of subjecthood and identity. By depicting characters, who do not evolve into one coherent identity, *SpongeBob SquarePants* undoes the heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity by exposing its logic of success and succession as phantasmatic. *SpongeBob SquarePants* shows that identity is not an intrinsic or essential quality, but rather a prescription; it is something that is imposed on subjects in order to make them(selves) coherent. Furthermore, *SpongeBob SquarePants*

depicts the queer refusal of both maturation and coherence as more creative, interesting and colourful than conformity to the heterosexual matrix.

3.4.2. Ignorance

“Dumb people are always blissfully unaware of how dumb they really are.” (I’m With Stupid)

The protagonists’ rejection of maturation and growth, their failure to conform to the norm of adult genderedness as well as their unwillingness to do so is closely connected to the fact that they are often portrayed as “stupid” or unaware characters, who do not conform to norms, because they are not even aware that they exist. In the analysed texts, there are numerous instances in which characters, predominantly the two main characters SpongeBob and Patrick, acting unaware of the heterosexual matrix structuring the coherence of subjectivities both inside and outside the texts. In *Rock-A-Bye Bivalve* SpongeBob’s and Patrick’s discussion of their roles can be read as such an instance, in that they are oblivious to the societal norm of conceptualizing sex as something natural and biological and rather – queerly - regard it as something to put on and perform. Similarly, the reaction of the characters, who are not surprised about seeing two characters of the same sex having a baby, is an example of how the text subverts norms by presenting characters who are either not aware of or deliberately ignore the heterosexual matrix.

Very often, Patrick is presented as the character, who, due to his “stupidity” acts in ways, which are not acceptable and/or appropriate from a heteronormative perspective. Throughout the series and the film, he is depicted as rather simple minded, even dumb character. However, much of his “stupidity” takes the form of unawareness towards societal norms governing gender-identities and sexuality. His limited intellectual capacities, just as SpongeBob’s childishness, is also often the reason, why his queer behaviours or his expressions of queer desires, his transgression of norms is accepted by other characters. Thus, it is precisely this ignorance of repressive norms which makes his 'stupidity' interesting for a queer reading, since it allows him behaviours, which would, from a normative perspective, be considered unacceptable. His 'stupidity' makes Patrick - to a certain extent- and unpoliced subject.

In the episode *Pressure*, the topic of “difference” is explored thematically, because in it, SpongeBob, Sandy, Patrick, Mr. Krabs and Squidward discuss, whether “land-critters” or “sea-critters” are “better”. In the beginning of the episode, the quarrel starts between SpongeBob and Sandy when they compete in a climbing contest. The episode thus also provides one of many instances in the series, in which Sandy is depicted as very athletic and strong. In order to prove her friends that she, as a terrestrial animal is “better” than her aquatic friends, Sandy takes off her suit and wears a violet bikini underneath. As mentioned above, Patrick reacts in a very puzzled way and asks: “Sandy’s a girl?” I have already pointed out above, that Sandy’s clothes are rather gender-neutral, thus Patrick’s surprise might be a result of her vestimentary gender-ambiguity. However, it is also one of the many moments in the series, in which Patrick is unaware of norms concerning sex/gender. In the scene, we find out, that he cannot “properly” decode gender, as demanded from coherent subjects participating in a heterosexual matrix. He does not understand the gender-classificatory system. This is another instance, in which a main protagonist does not function according to a heteronormative logic. In the scene, Patrick reveals that he is not able to read the gendered codes of femininity in a binaric gender-system appropriately. Certainly, just as the characters’ sexual ambiguity un-structures the depiction of sexual desire in the text and de-links it from a binaric understanding, the characters’ “ignorance” concerning the “proper” decoding of gender also makes them characters, whose sexual desire is unstructured, necessarily *has* to be unstructured, because they, literally, cannot read the signs of gender.

In *Not Normal*, Patrick does not understand what the word “normal” means. When he sees SpongeBob in his new “normal” identity, he asks him: “What happened to you?”. SpongeBob replies: “I got normal.” Patrick does not understand and answers: “Whatever that is.” Thus, Patrick is not only a character, who is not aware of what constitutes “normal” (norm-conforming) behaviour, but he also does not understand that there *are* norms.

In *That’s No Lady*, Patrick furthermore does neither understand the concept of sexual identity, nor the norm of heterosexuality, nor the asymmetrical arrangement of gendered identities. He expresses this unawareness in his surprise about Mr Krabs’ and Squidward’s sexual interest and flirtatious behaviour towards him dressed as

Patricia. S/he wonders: “Why are those two so nice to me? They were never this nice to Patrick! It’s weird! [...] What is it about me that makes those two so friendly?”. First of all, Patrick is a character, who in this scene, obviously does not understand that he, dressed as a woman, comes into question as sexually desired object by the heterosexual male characters in the text. His surprise about their sudden change in behaviour also implies that he is not aware of the fact that there *is* such a thing as heterosexuality, or that sexuality can be conceptualized in identitarian terms more generally. Secondly, Patrick does not understand the normative status of heterosexuality when calling heterosexual behaviour “weird”. Patrick’s monologue is a moment in which the normative hierarchy of homosexuality/heterosexuality is turned around in the text. Thus, the text’s heteronormative underpinnings are subverted by the introduction of Patrick’s blissful ignorance. Thirdly, Patrick furthermore does not understand why, as a woman, s/he experiences objectification, while as a man, he doesn’t. Therefore, his unawareness is not only directed at heterosexism but also at sexism.

SpongeBob and Patrick are also not aware of the negative reactions they get from other characters for their “queer” behaviour. SpongeBob’s reaction to Mr Krab’s intended offense that he looks “like a girl” in *One Krab’s Trash* provides a good example for how the main characters of the show deal with the norms of a heterosexual matrix. Instead of being offended by the intended insult, SpongeBob reacts flattered. A nearby mailman overhears the conversation and reacts in a very suspicious way over Mr. Krabs telling SpongeBob, he is “beautiful”. Mr. Krabs realizes the suspicious look and his facial impression looks as if he feels caught. SpongeBob however does not recognize or does not care about the mailman’s reaction. Thus, it is not only his gender performance, which is interesting, but also his unawareness of the mailman’s hostile – possibly homophobic – reaction. SpongeBob is not aware of the fact that his behaviour is not consistent with the possibilities a heterosexual matrix provides for him as a masculine subject and thus, does not recognize that his behaviour is met with hostility – he only laughs about it. While Mr Krabs is embarrassed for being caught calling another male “beautiful”, SpongeBob is not aware that the homoerotic component of their conversation “violates” the rules of a heteronormative framework. Similarly, in *Money Talks* SpongeBob and Patrick do not understand why Mr Krabs (who often functions as a representative of the

normative force of the heterosexual matrix as an adult, clearly gendered male) reacts embarrassed upon being “caught” in a princess fairy costume and call his behaviour “weird”.

The element of “ignorance” furthermore also allows Patrick and SpongeBob them a close and affectionate relationship, since they are not aware that this is deemed “inappropriate” from a heteronormative perspective. In *That’s No Lady*, while the other male characters are shocked upon the discovery that they have been attracted to another male, the relationship between SpongeBob and Patrick is not changed by Patrick’s gender identification. The episode *That’s No Lady* also associates queerness with an unawareness of norms in another way. As pointed out above, in the episode, even characters, who usually and much more consistently than SpongeBob and Patrick conform to heteronormativity display and explicitly articulate queer desire. However, they only do so as a result of their unawareness that the behaviour they engage in is not heterosexual. They only express queer desire, because they are unaware of the fact that Patricia is Patrick in drag. Only their unknowingness makes room for queer desire and behaviour. In *Patrick SmartPants*, Patrick tells SpongeBob: “Knowledge can never replace friendship! I prefer to be an idiot!” and SpongeBob answers: “You’re not just an idiot, Patrick, you’re also my pal! (*Patrick SmartPants*)

The aspect of the characters’ non-awareness of norms can be interpreted on various levels. What, from a hegemonic and heteronormative perspective might be judged and dismissed as “ignorance” and failure, can be interpreted as a textual element opening up room for possibilities of subversion from a queer perspective. The texts’ usage of “stupid” and unaware main characters implies the reworking of norms to an extent which makes it inclusive of queer behaviours and practices (such as display of same-sex desire/love, cross-dressing, non-normative and non-binarc performances of gender). In short, the characters’ blissful unawareness of norms allows them behaviours that would be deemed inappropriate and unacceptable by a heteronormative society. Because of their childishness *and* their non-understanding and non-awareness of the norms governing gender and sexuality, they defy the disciplinary force of a heteronormative gender-regime.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined depictions of sex, gender, desire and identity in *SpongeBob SquarePants* in the light of queer theory. Other than already existing analyses of the text (Brownlee 2011, Dennis 2003a, 2003b; Halberstam 2005, 2011; Johnson 2010; Pillar 2011) it combined both episodes from the series and *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* for a more comprehensive understanding of the text’s treatment of the aforementioned aspects. Furthermore, despite the fact that some existing readings of *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Halberstam 2005, 2011) are rooted in queer theory, none of the existing analyses applies Butlerian theoretical articulations as methodological tools. However, her theoretical work, is, as pointed out in the analysis, of particular interest in connection with the text. Therefore, my queer reading of *SpongeBob SquarePants* applied Butler’s theorizations on the performative production of (gender and sexual) identities in the heterosexual matrix, as well as her notion of coherence, intelligibility and subversion for analytical purposes, pointing out, how the series and the film undermine what she describes as heterosexual matrix; how the texts challenge heteronormativity and the discursive binaric arrangement of gender and sex inherent in this framework. Furthermore, in my thesis, I reworked Butler’s theorizations, adding humour as a criterion for the subversiveness of a text, as well as, for the purpose of analysing the text’s non-normative, transgressive and subversive depictions of masculinity, Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, which, in the context of my analysis, is treated as the privileged type of heterosexual subjecthood in a heteronormative framework. In my thesis, I focussed on moments of ambiguity, incongruence, incoherence, transgression, or, in other words, moments of *queerness* in the text.

SpongeBob SquarePants portrays characters, who frequently transgress the binary male/female or masculine/feminine. SpongeBob and Sandy are two protagonists, who are portrayed in very ambiguous ways with regard to their gender identities. However, even those characters usually depicted as intelligible subjects are subjected to the deconstruction of their identitarian coherence in the course of individual episodes– they also experience moments of *queerness*. In those cases, the text often depicts their shock and embarrassment at being “caught” engaging in *queer* practices and behaviours, thus on the one hand re-establishing them as coherent and intelligible

subjects compliant to a heteronormative regime of gendering, but on the other hand also illustrating the disciplinary force of the heterosexual matrix that they have to conform to in order to be acceptable *as* subjects.

Furthermore, the text repeatedly uses cross-dressing and drag as a means of subverting the gender-binary. Drag is conceptualized as a potentially subversive bodily practice by Butler (1990, 1993, 2004). However, she argues that not all non-hegemonic, incoherent, unintelligible, *queer* gender performances can be classified as subversive but might even perpetuate heterosexist repudiations of queerness by presenting it as ridiculous. Only those instances of transgressive and non-normative gender performance, which reveal the constructedness, non-naturalness, contingency, fluidity and instability of *all* (even norm-conforming) gender performances and (gender) identity *per se* are conceptualized as subversive by Butler. Due to the fact that she does not identify criteria, which would be necessary for assessing the “subversive” content of a given text in the context of an analysis, I suggested humour as one possible criterion for determining processes of normalization and subversion in texts. The direction of humour a given text might be indicative of the normative framework it is embedded in.

While remaining a heteronormative text most of the time, *SpongeBob SquarePants* repeatedly deconstructs asymmetrical and hierarchizing binaries by poking fun at what is societally legitimized as “normal”. In *SpongeBob SquarePants* humour is used as a means of deconstructing norms by on the one hand reversing a normative and normalizing hierarchy and presenting as normal what would be a (laughable) deviation in a heteronormative context and on the other hand by making fun of and ridiculing (hetero)normative, gender-binarc performances of identity (often also by means of exaggeration and gender parody). As Johnson argues, *SpongeBob SquarePants* invites viewers „to laugh *with*, not *at*, the queer character.” (Johnson 2012: 270). Thus, it is not only, as usual, gender-nonconformism, but also conformism, which is frequently the target of gender/sexuality-related humour in *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Often, the series directs laughter at both normative and non-normative performances of sex/gender/desire. It often does so by portraying characters who engage in behaviour considered inappropriate from a heteronormative perspective (this perspective is usually embodied by a character, who polices

queerness in the text) and therefore creating moments of irritation (with comic effects) by turning the viewers’ expectations around. Those funny moments of irritation and unsettlement bear the potential of making audiences aware of their own unquestioned assumptions imposed on them by a heteronormative framework by depicting and *staging* those assumptions and therefore making them *visible* as norms, while they usually remain invisible and unquestioned. Due to the fact that norms depend on their own invisibility in order to take effect as unquestioned and taken for granted framework, depictions which uncover them are potentially destabilizing. Additionally, *SpongeBob SquarePants* also presents its audiences with alternatives – presenting its audience with non-normative visions of (gender and sexual) identity and community. Humour is therefore an essential part of *SpongeBob SquarePants*’s deconstruction of the heterosexual matrix. In this context, *SpongeBob SquarePants* can also be described as what Giffney (2009) calls “new queer cartoon”, a type of cartoon in which

[...] the joke is on the norm rather than the outsider; postmodernism is the guiding philosophy, camp is the structuring aesthetic while intertextuality and pastiche are its organizing principles. New queer cartoons expose cultural scripts for the constructions they are, subverting them by directly referencing norms governing sexuality and gender, and are littered with sexual innuendo and jokes about gender. They are often aimed more at adults than children so that there are multiple narratives operating simultaneously and in layers. Anthropomorphism, a staple of the animated feature, is again employed in new queer cartoons but is turned in on itself so that the analogy with humans becomes a critical lens through which societal norms are exposed to scrutiny and with the potential for change. [...] New queer cartoons are concerned with making visible and making fun of heteronormativity. (Giffney 367-368)

Partly as a result of the characters’ ambiguity with regard to gender, the series main characters, particularly SpongeBob and Patrick, are frequently portrayed as sexually ambiguous. The text often combines moments of same-sex and opposite-sex desire and romance in *one* text, usually even in *one* character. Therefore, sexuality is treated in strikingly queer ways in the series: not as a matter of identity, not as a stable inner core but as an incoherent mesh of desires and practices. Besides its frequent depiction of desire in non-identitarian terms, *SpongeBob SquarePants* also challenges and criticizes heterosexuality as a societal institution. It depicts heterosexual marriage as asymmetrical arrangement and therefore unfair and unsuccessful model; it denaturalizes heterosexuality; and it *queers* those

arrangements by exposing its non-originality and replicate status. Furthermore, the ambiguity created in the aforementioned moments of incoherent vestimentary gender performance also serve to deconstruct the heterosexual matrix by confusing the binaric organization of sexuality into homosexuality and heterosexuality and destabilizing the very notion of sexual identity. In those moments, *SpongeBob SquarePants* disarranges and *queers* heterosexual desire. Therefore, the normative and hegemonic status of heterosexuality is questioned and challenged.

SpongeBob SquarePants furthermore repeatedly reveals the performative nature of *all* impersonations of gender. It denaturalizes and de-essentializes gender by depicting it as a doing rather than an a priori state-of being; as something which *needs* to be achieved, and by stylizing the repetitive failure inscribed in the assignment of heterosexual gendering that both Butler and Connell describe. Even those performances, which are coherent from a heteronormative perspective, are often depicted as fabricated, non-natural and non-original in the text. Brownlee therefore concludes, that “[...] SpongeBob offers more than a queer or queer-friendly narrative. It offers a genuine challenge to the perceived naturalness of gender and of sexed bodies.” (Brownlee 47). In this context, the texts’ treatment of masculinities is particularly striking. Many episodes and the film thematically explore the issue of heterosexual gendering and masculinity. While hegemonic masculinity, the privileged and dominant variety of gender identity in a heterosexual matrix, is usually set up as an ideal in the beginning, SpongeBob and Patrick reject that mode of being eventually. In the course of those episodes hegemonic masculinity is deconstructed and denaturalized via parodic exaggeration and ridicule. There are many instances in the texts, which can be categorized as what Butler calls subversive bodily acts, while gender parody is usually directed at hegemonic masculinity (sometimes but less frequently also at normative impersonations of femininity). Therefore, its aura of authenticity and authority is destabilized. Gender is thus usually treated as an assignment in the texts, however, an assignment, that SpongeBob and Patrick never carry out successfully. They always fail.

In this context, the aspect of childishness on the one hand and the aspect of “ignorance” or “non-awareness” on the other are important. SpongeBob and Patrick are characters, who do not adhere to the normative ideal of rational and adult subjecthood. Despite the fact that they are the heroes of the stories, they do not show

mastery or self-mastery. Often, they are allowed behave in non-normative ways, precisely because they are either perceived as “kids” or as indeterminate with regard to their age and/or because they are depicted as “stupid” characters, who do not know better. Thus, various levels of transgression (such as the transgression of the boundary male/female and child/adult) are intertwined in the text and presuppose each other, while childishness and “stupidity” open up a queer space of possibilities in which the disciplinary force of heteronormativity does not or not thoroughly take effect. Furthermore, their failure to conform to the norms that govern subjecthood in a heterosexual matrix is also depicted as a strategy of *resistance* in the text. (Coherent) identity is not only “missing”, but actively rejected as a repressive norm. SpongeBob and Patrick often actively *defy* rational, mature, adult, masculine and intelligible subjecthood and instead celebrate their immature, ambiguous and queer non-identity as a more creative, interesting and worthwhile way of being.

The fact that this thesis focussed on moments of incongruence and ambiguity – in short – on the *queerness* of *SpongeBob SquarePants* does not mean that the text/s do not depict, or do not predominantly depict normative gender performances, normative desire or that they are not embedded in a heteronormative framework. It rather aimed at showing, how the heterosexual matrix the text is embedded in is challenged by the text’s queer subtext, pointing out the moments, in which heteronormativity fails its own disciplinary task, in which it is rendered inconsistent and incongruent, in which its heterosexual economy of signs is queered. Heterosexuality and queerness are not contradictive, they are not opposites and it would be erroneous to conceptualize them in a binaric logic. Rather, my queer reading focussed on the queerness of a text, which is predominantly heteronormative, precisely to point out the queerness *of* heterosexuality. With Butler, queerness is never outside of the heterosexual economy – the other is already and has always been a part of the self. Just as a coherent subject in Butler’s heterosexual matrix needs to defend her/himself against queerness for the sake *of* his/her own coherence and viability and yet is always haunted by the queerness it aims at repudiating, mainstream texts are haunted by the queerness they must and can never fully eradicate. Thus, even in mainstream texts such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, queerness (ambiguity, non-conformity, illogic) keeps surfacing, undermining the text’s own heteronormative logic. My thesis therefore did

not aim at showing that *SpongeBob SquarePants*, as a queer text does not include heterosexual/romantic or even heteronormative elements or that the queer elements annihilate the heteronormative ones, but that queerness is something that has been there in heteronormative mainstream culture and its artefacts all along.

**SpongeBob: “I can't understand what we're
doing wrong.” Patrick:” I can't understand
anything.” (*Chocolate With Nuts*)**

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APPENDIX

DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht Darstellungen von Geschlecht, Identität und Sexualität in der TV-Serie *SpongeBob SquarePants* (*SpongeBob Schwammkopf*) und dem dazugehörigen Kinofilm *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (*Der SpongeBob Schwammkopf Film*) vor dem Hintergrund einer queertheoretischen analytischen Perspektive. Judith Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) Performanztheorie, sowie ihr Konzept der heterosexuellen Matrix im Zusammenhang mit ihren Artikulationen zu intelligibler Geschlechtsidentität und Subversion dienen als analytisches Werkzeug in meinem queer reading der genannten Texte. Die Arbeit geht der Frage nach, inwiefern und mit welchen Mitteln *SpongeBob SquarePants* mit heteronormativen und binären Darstellungen von Geschlecht und Sexualität bricht, inwiefern der Text als „subversiv“ im Butler'schen Sinne, zu verstehen ist. Hierzu wird Butlers theoretisches Werk um zwei Aspekte erweitert um es für eine Analyse der genannten Texte fruchtbar zu machen: zum einen wird Humor als ein Faktor definiert anhand welchem der subversive Gehalt des Textes evaluiert werden kann, da die Struktur desselbigen Aufschluss darüber gibt, auf welchen normativen Grundlagen der Text aufbaut, bzw. ob Gelächter auf (hetero)normative oder transgressive/subversive Darstellungen abzielt. Weiters wird Connells (1987) Konzept der hegemonialen Männlichkeit im Kontext Butler'scher Theorie als privilegierte und dominante Varietät von Geschlechtlichkeit im Rahmen der heterosexuellen Matrix behandelt. Vor diesem Hintergrund untersucht die Arbeit Momente der Ambiguität, Inkohärenz, Transgression und Subversion, oder, in anderen Worten, der *Queerness* in *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

Einerseits beinhaltet der Text Figuren, welche weder einer binären Identitätslogik, noch einer heteronormativen Konzeption von Sexualität entsprechen. Hierbei sind vor allem die Hauptfiguren von besonderem Interesse. SpongeBob's Geschlechtsperformanz ist – aus einer heteronormativen Perspektive – inkonsistent, seine Identität nicht intelligibel, da sie entweder weder eindeutig als „männlich“, noch eindeutig als „weiblich“ zu lesen ist und/oder *gender* nicht als kausale und kohärente Folge von *sex* darstellt. Ein wesentliches Mittel zur Subversion der Geschlechterbinarität in *SpongeBob SquarePants* ist „cross-dressing“. Obwohl

Patrick und SpongeBob als männliche Charaktere konzipiert sind, treten sie oft in traditionell weiblich konnotierter Kleidung auf. Während Butler darauf hinweist, dass nicht alle Drag-Performances als subversiv zu werten sind, sondern nur jene subversives Potential besitzen, welche die Konstruiertheit, Nicht-Naturhaftigkeit und Nicht-Originalität *aller* (und damit auch [hetero]normativer) Performanzen von Geschlecht und Sexualität aufdecken, schlage ich in meiner Arbeit vor, Humor als ein Kriterium für den „subversiven Gehalt“ eines Textes zu fassen. In diesem Zusammenhang lässt sich feststellen, dass Humor in *SpongeBob SquarePants* oftmals gleichzeitig auf Normen und die Abweichung derselben abzielt. Durch die Darstellung von Figuren, welche in ihrer Geschlechterperformanz aus einer heteronormativen Logik herausfallen, kreiert der Text Momente komischer Irritation, in welchen Zuschauer_innen ihre unhinterfragten Vorannahmen vor Augen geführt werden. *SpongeBob SquarePants* macht somit das unsichtbare Normgewebe der heterosexuellen Matrix sichtbar, was wiederum eine potentiell normdestabilisierende Wirkung nach sich zieht. Zudem präsentiert der Text alternative Konzeptionen von Geschlecht, Identität und Sexualität. Humor kann also als wesentlicher Teil der Subversivität von *SpongeBob SquarePants* bezeichnet werden.

Neben der nicht-normativen Darstellung von Geschlechtsidentität, behandelt die Serie das Thema Sexualität auf äußerst *queere* Weise. Diese wird nicht in identifikatorischen Begriffen gefasst, sondern vielmehr als ein komplexes Gewebe an Begehren, Identifikationen und Praktiken abgebildet. Die dargestellten Charaktere artikulieren oftmals im selben Text sowohl heteroromantisches/sexuelles als auch homoromantisches/sexuelles Begehren und sind dadurch in einer heteronormativen und binären Logik nicht lesbar, sondern vielmehr als *queere* Figuren zu beschreiben. Das Spiel mit Geschlechtsidentifikationen im Text fügt dieser Darstellung noch eine weitere Ebene hinzu: da in einigen Episoden Figuren weder konsistent als „männlich“ noch als „weiblich“ kategorisierbar sind, kann aus diesen Darstellungen auch keine konsistente sexuelle „Identität“ abgelesen werden.

Weiters dekonstruiert der Text wiederholt hegemoniale Männlichkeit mit parodistischen Mitteln. Heteronormative Geschlechtlichkeit (vor allem Männlichkeit) wird hierzu übersteigert dargestellt, humoristisch verzerrt, und in seiner Fragmentarität, Kontingenz und Instabilität abgebildet. Zudem werden

vergeschlechtlichte Körper denaturalisiert, während die Serie oftmals das Bestreben ihrer Charaktere nach eindeutig geschlechtlichen Körpern nachzeichnet. Dadurch wird „sex“ in seiner Konstruiertheit, Nicht-Naturhaftigkeit und Nicht-Essentialität dargestellt und damit als eine Ausformung von „gender“ behandelt und nicht als materielle Vorbedingung desselbigen. Geschlecht (hierbei vor allem hegemoniale Männlichkeit) wird als eine Aufgabe dargestellt, als Auftrag, welcher nie abgeschlossen und/oder erreicht wird. Der Text zeichnet die Bestrebungen seiner Figuren nach, einem heteronormativen Ideal von Geschlechtlichkeit zu entsprechen und lässt sie scheitern – deckt somit das Scheitern auf, welches, so Butler, heterosexueller Geschlechterperformanz und hegemonialer Männlichkeit inhärent ist. Zudem behandelt der Text dieses Scheitern auch als aktives, widerständiges Zurückweisen und Annehmen einer nicht-eindeutigen, *queeren* Nicht-Identität.

Neben der beschriebenen Transgressivität auf der Ebene der Darstellungen von Geschlecht und Sexualität ist *SpongeBob* auch weder eindeutig als Erwachsener, noch als Kind lesbar. Unreife wird im Text, ebenso wie *Queerness* (im Sinne einer uneindeutigen Geschlechterperformanz) auch als Strategie der Zurückweisung einer heteronormativen Logik von Reifen und Erwachsen-Werden, sowie des Ideals heterosexueller, reifer, rationaler Männlichkeit dargestellt. *SpongeBob's* Unreife, ähnlich wie Patrick's Nichtkenntnis von Normen, eröffnet den Figuren queeren Spielraum. Die Protagonisten sind, bis zu einem gewissen Grad, undisziplinierte Figuren, die sich nicht der binären Logik einer heterosexuellen Matrix unterwerfen und/oder unterwerfen müssen. Ihr Zurückweisen einer rationalen, reifen Subjektposition oder aber auch ihr Scheitern am Erreichen dieses Ideals, führt in den untersuchten Texten immer wieder zu Momenten, in welchen die heterosexuelle Matrix und ihre Disziplinarmacht außer Kraft gesetzt werden.

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