

MEDIA AND THE "SPONGEBOB" CARTOON: PRODUCTIONS OF MEANING ABOUT CHILDHOOD AND ITS SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

MÍDIA E O DESENHO ANIMADO "BOB ESPONJA": PRODUÇÕES DE SENTIDO SOBRE A INFÂNCIA E SUAS REPRESENTAÇÕES SOCIAIS

LOS MEDIOS Y EL DIBUJO ANIMADO "BOB ESPONJA": PRODUCCIONES DE SIGNIFICADO SOBRE LA INFANCIA Y SUS REPRESENTACIONES SOCIALES

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ABSTRACT: The main objective of this essay is to reflect on media culture and the cartoon "SpongeBob" in contemporary childhood. In a specific way, analyze some episodes of SpongeBob Squarepants and the meaning productions about childhood and its representations and social relationships. The study proposal is related to the Research Project - "Semi-formation and Education in the context of the Damaged Society: beyond the demarcated territory" of the State University of Londrina. The methodology is bibliographic in the light of the foundations of critical theory and authors who dialogue with this theoretical basis. In this sense, by self-reflection in the thresholds of Adorno and Horkheimer, it is possible to analyze the effects of media culture and its design on the formative and representative process of childhood in the current scenario, as well as to raise the gaze to the possibility of the use of cartoons in favor of a more critical, diversified, participatory and emancipatory childhood culture.

KEYWORDS: Media. Cartoon. Childhood. Consumption.

RESUMO: *Esse ensaio tem por objetivo principal refletir sobre a cultura midiática e o desenho animado "Bob Esponja" na infância contemporânea. De modo específico, analisar alguns episódios de Bob Esponja Calça Quadrada e as produções de sentido sobre a infância e suas representações e relações sociais. A proposta de estudo está relacionada ao Projeto de Pesquisa – "Semiformação e Educação no contexto da Sociedade Danificada: para além do território demarcado" da Universidade Estadual de Londrina. A metodologia é de cunho bibliográfico à luz dos fundamentos da Teoria Crítica e de autores que dialogam com essa base teórica. Nesse sentido, pela autorreflexão nos limiares de Adorno e Horkheimer, é possível analisar os efeitos da cultura midiática e do respectivo desenho no processo formativo e representativo da infância no cenário atual, bem como elevar o olhar para a possibilidade do uso do desenho animado em prol de uma cultura da infância mais crítica, diversificada, participativa e emancipatória.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Mídia. Desenho animado. Infância. Consumo.*

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RESUMEN: *El objetivo principal de este ensayo es reflexionar sobre la cultura mediática y la caricatura "Bob Esponja" en la infancia contemporánea. De manera específica, analizar algunos episodios de Bob Esponja y las producciones de significado sobre la infancia y sus representaciones y relaciones sociales. La propuesta de estudio está relacionada con el Proyecto de Investigación - "Semiformación y Educación en el contexto de la Sociedad Dañada: más allá del territorio demarcado" de la Universidad Estatal de Londrina. La metodología es bibliográfica a la luz de los fundamentos de la teoría crítica y de los autores que dialogan con esta base teórica. En este sentido, mediante la autorreflexión en los umbrales de Adorno y Horkheimer, es posible analizar los efectos de la cultura mediática y su diseño sobre el proceso formativo y representativo de la infancia en el escenario actual, así como levantar la gasa a la posibilidad del uso de dibujos animados a favor de una cultura infantil más crítica, diversificada, participativa y emancipadora.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Medios. Dibujos animados. Infancia. Consumo.*

Introduction

Historically, cartoons have established themselves in the global imaginary as a narrative genre aimed at children, (re)signifying issues that seem pertinent to them, straining the culture and disseminating conceptions of the world. This playful, dynamic, and interactive process between the child (its conceptions) allows the child to recreate through the process of fantasy and imagination.

From this, other studios began to produce their animated films, following the path opened by Disney, from the 1940s. Since then, cartoons have been produced in a massive, agglutinated, and pulverized way, through television, cinema, and internet, and have been addressed to all children everywhere in the world. This beginning of the history of animation has been deeply remarkable for the delineation of children's imaginary through the stories and characters displayed by the media and choreographic culture.

According to Odinino (2009, p. 105, our translation), the children's environment was consecrated by the “exaltation of its aspects, such as fantasy, encouraged by Disney, and comical, already established in the fictional imaginary through silent movies, with Chaplin as an exponent”. Productions such as Woody Woodpecker, by Walter Lantz, Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Tweety Bird, Road Runner, from Warner Bros studios, Tom & Jerry, by Hanna and Barbera, are some of the successful characters of this period. Since then, the language and format of cartoons are deeply marked by the type of production of these two countries: United States and Japan (ODININO, 2009).

Along with these changes in the world of cartoons, the cultural industry and the media have been driving a kind of institutionalization in the identity development and social

relations of children. Nevertheless, to understand the domains of cartoons in mass culture, it is necessary to unfold the concept of culture and what is the specificity of mass culture; how it is interposed in the capitalist society through the cultural industry and media (ADORNO, 2002). The media through the communication of cartoons inaugurates its technological expansion, disseminates visions and models of the world and of being human.

The problem is: How have cartoons and the media been constituted as producers of meaning in childhood and its representations? Given this concern, it is urgent to think about media culture and children's drawings as carriers of meanings and conceptions about childhood and its social representations, specifically in the current context.

When it comes to the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*, it is an audiovisual and audio production that involves several languages. The visual system includes written verbal language, in English, imagery, scenography, gestures, and fashion. And the sound system is woven by the oral verbal language, in Portuguese, by music, and by noise. The cartoon has become a global phenomenon because it is a cartoon of great interest to children and adults, and has a high audience rating, especially among children. Still, it denotes a production of meanings regarding children's representations and issues related to the discussion about gender (masculinity and femininity).

The main character, SpongeBob is a sea sponge. Sponge is a sea animal, but it can also mean a porous and light substance used for cleaning objects or personal hygiene. The character is figurativized as a square-shaped, yellow sponge wearing short pants, shirt and tie, black shoes, and more up to his knees. He is always optimistic about what happens to him.

His best friends are Patrick Star, a pink starfish, who wears green shorts printed with purple flowers, and Sandy Cheeks, a squirrel who, because she is a land animal, wears a diver's outfit to live at the bottom of the sea (RIGOTTI, 2019). Bob has other friends, such as Squidward Tentacles, an octopus who is generally grumpy, and Mr. Krabs, a greedy owner of Krusty Krab fast food restaurant, where Bob and Squidward work making hamburgers called Krabby Patty. The others that appear in the episode are fish that live in the city. They all dress like humans, with pants, shirt or dress, and necklace.

Therefore, the **main purpose** of this essay is to reflect on media culture and the cartoon “SpongeBob” in contemporary childhood. The study is the result of reflections related to the Research Project – “Semi-formation and Education in the context of the Damaged Society: beyond the demarcated territory” at the State University of Londrina and the activities developed in the Scientific Initiation Capes/CNPq scholarship.

The methodology is a bibliographical study in the light of critical foundations of education and of readings that dialogue with this theoretical perspective, and an analysis of cartoons and the imbrications generated by the influence of media culture in the constitution of children's imaginary and in the formation of children's thinking.

Therefore, it is important to discuss media and mass culture in the process of constitution of childhood and its identities, genders, and representations. It is a pertinent and challenging theme, considering the dialectic involved in the public and receiver relationship through the production and media dissemination of cartoons. In it there is an endless number of mediations, which actively participate in the constitution of what we call the production of meaning through this media and cinematographic resource.

SpongeBob: weaving reflections to think about childhood

The globalization era is supported by economic and technological advances, signaling changes in behavioral and cultural relations, where the media and information provide a symbolic space emphasizing utopian identities. In this sense, the media are tied to the product, taking the place of the traditional artifacts of children's culture.

In this way, children become the most targeted viewers in the consumer society, which consequently teaches them to quickly discard and superficially replace things to satisfy their impulses and desires. Under the view of the mass industries, the subjects are mere objects in the society of the spectacle, since the formation of identity and personality are marked by this culture, where it will determine what is good or not, which design is fashionable, the food that should be tried, and so on. Leveraging a lifestyle.

This approximation between fantasy and reality goes beyond the screen, since nowadays animations can be materialized in several instruments, such as toys, school materials, accessories, etc. Children bring their favorite characters into their context, and as a result, media culture and cartoons can produce both beneficial and harmful meanings in the formation of the child's humanity and in their subjective way of “seeing and touching” the world through the social relations established among peers. Although the cartoons are easy to understand and are permeated by playfulness, everything that surrounds children's lives, such as playing, is surrounded by the cultural industry and the logic of commodification of life and children's relationships.

Children's exposure to content transmitted by screens has a strong influence on their education, consciously or not. Through these resources, children have access to a series of

subjects that are not necessarily part of their daily lives. Without a mediating action of social filter on what we offer to children, it can generate issues to be thought about with more dedication. The absence of an adult in this process can generate a development subordinated to the media world in a way that is harmful to the child, especially when we refer to the excessive exposure time to movies in childhood, and when it is the child's only leisure option restricted to this type of experience.

To reflect on the relationship between media and childhood is to dialogue amidst the problem situations that may arise from the process of internalization and externalization in relation to the child's perceptive process in relation to cartoons. Understanding the changes that occur in contemporary society, as well as in the development process of the cinematographic culture, raises a (re)thinking about the way we are building the educational and formative process of children.

Audiovisual productions enable viewers to immerse themselves in each storyline and have some opinion about the characters, and even act out the lessons learned on the screen. It becomes a source of inspiration in the organization of children's symbolic activity. Therefore, it is necessary to build a critical and refined look at the filmic narratives revealed by the cartoons, so that, as authorities (whether parental or pedagogical) we can mediate ways of perception of these contents by the child.

To dive into fantasy is to weave a critical look at reality. Thus, we will analyze the cartoon “*SpongeBob SquarePants*” (Figure 1), to understand the image of childhood as well as its representativeness. The best-known face of our protagonist with the famous square pants came from “doodles” of Stephen Hillenburg, an American biologist with a passion for marine life.

Figure 1 – SpongeBob SquarePants



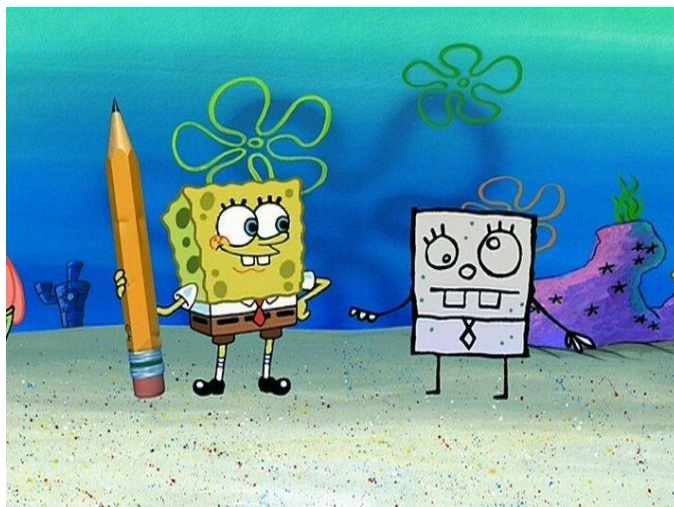
Source: Appleaily (2020)

In the 1990s, the first episodes began to be shown on the Nickelodeon channel, becoming an audience phenomenon translated into more than 60 languages. The scenes show the adventures of the main character and the other characters in the Bikini Bottom. These maritime figures resemble human characteristics by sharing feelings, sensations, and thoughts.

Episode 34 of the second season, known as “*Franken doodle*”. A human artist is dinghy, and accidentally drops his pencil into the sea. The narrator says that he has learned his first lesson in seeking inspiration on the high seas, never carry just a graphite pencil. While, SpongeBob and Patrick Star were playing rock, paper and scissors with soap bubbles, the pencil falls in front of them both. At first, they are both startled, but soon they begin to draw on the ground a jellyfish that quickly swims across the ocean. In view of this event, they believe that the pencil is magical because it brings the drawings to life.

SpongeBob decides to draw a picture of himself, called Doodle, with the intention of playing a trick on Squidward Tentacles, to see how he would react when he answered the door and found the drawn figure, according to Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Franken doodle episode



Source: Franken doodle (2002)

When Squidward answered the door, Doodle started beating on him and SpongeBob was terrified, but Patrick kept laughing. Doodle took the pencil from both of them and ran out. So that Bob couldn't get the object back, Doodle drew several traps, and Patrick ends up getting hit in most of them. However, the figure gets distracted and in that time, they manage to get the object back, and erase the image of themselves with the eraser on the other side of the pencil. However, he forgot to erase an arm of his, in which he went crawling and then

starting to walk through his fingers to SpongeBob's house, the Doodle drew the rest of his body on his own. Upon seeing him, SpongeBob was shocked, and the figure chased him around every corner of the house, intending to erase him with the eraser of that magic pencil, subsequently erasing half of SpongeBob's body and laughing at him.

Bob got the graphite part while Doodle got the eraser, then used his mouth as a sharpener, and the graphite tip came out. Bob lost his pencil part by accidentally throwing it out the window. And without the magic pencil, he was trapped and leaned against a bookcase, as the figure was going towards him, he stepped on a piece of paper and his foot got stuck, and so the protagonist closed the book on Doodle, where it was drawn on some page. Before the episode ends, Bob and Patrick invent a way to return the pencil out of the sea, arriving at the artist's boat, the man was surprised, just as he was about to use the pencil, the tip broke off and the narrator gives the second most important rule for the sea artist, always bring a sharpener.

In this episode it is evident that SpongeBob and Patrick elucidate the world of children by bringing light issues that refer to childhood, such as play, expression and make-believe. After all, drawing is the way to construct thought when trying to solve conflicts that may be in everyday life and even ground reality, bringing another perspective. The ability to reinvent freeing oneself from appearance and to reproduce the thing as it is. In the animation this trait is very present when SpongeBob brings his figures to life, especially the one he made of himself using the pencil and the "floor" as support. This reminds us that every child draws, whether with pencil and paper or with a brick shard on the wall. Acting with a scribbler on a support is something she learns by imitation.

Despite the character created, he wanted to take SpongeBob 's place forever, so much so that he drew obstacles so as not to be destroyed. Bob and his friend get into a comic adventure when trying to erase the Scribble, it also shows a certain internal conflict for the fact that the protagonist resembles the drawn figure. During approximately 10 minutes of the shown scene, the characters give free rein to their imagination without regard to aesthetics in order to try to solve the problem situations. the analysis of the episode, there is a possibility to think about the relationship between SpongeBob and Patrick, which is sometimes marked by a childish action of adult life, and sometimes by an adultized action of childish life.

One can think that this oscillation can be a criticism of our contemporary society, and dealing with the episode "Franken doodle", where aesthetics is left in the background, while representation and imagination stand out. It shows that the cultural industry and the aesthetics of merchandise cause us to immediately shine in the universe of things that, little by little,

lose their charm, when the uniqueness and specificity of use value walk in the same proportion with which our true essence is dissolved, reducing it to the productive and market process and, consequently, revealing the symptoms of the collapse of cultural formation in this social time. (OLIVEIRA; PESTANA, 2001, p. 160).

This represents that childhood is not yet petrified in this society that is at the service of the spectacle, showing that not everything is there to obey us and to be fitted in, that things escape us and that it is possible to think that there is something other than instrumental reason and, therefore, a possibility of another relationship with things; one that is not guided by totalitarianism in thought and by utility.

In **episode 61** of the fourth season, “*Shell of a Man*”, the plot begins in the Krusty Krab restaurant, where SpongeBob works happily making hamburgers, while he is making the snack, Squidward Tentacles asks him if order number 5 is ready. Bob comes up with the password in which it is apparent that it is his order. Upon returning to the kitchen, SpongeBob hears a noise in which someone appears to be throwing small rocks from the door window. So, his boss calls him and pulls him into his lair, a hole under a giant box, where he hides his treasure. SpongeBob is asked to take the trunk back to the office, because his memories from his navy years are all there. SpongeBob then asks why the treasure is being dug up. He then replies that he is going to reunite like old times, his fellow navy members, and he intends to wear his old uniform (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Episode Shell of a Man



Source: Shell of a Man (2005)

And he opens the trunk to remove his uniform and takes the opportunity to show SpongeBob his souvenir items. His first tattoo and a trophy for male courage. Bob wants to know how he won the trophy and says, "By being the toughest of the tough!". SpongeBob points to a picture frame and asks Mr. Krabs who are the ones in the picture. He replies that "The toughest bunch to ever sail the grimey deep", and names them: Ol Iron Eye, Mutton Chop, Me, Torpedo Belly, and Lockjaw Jones. And he questions what his nickname was at that time, "Lockjaw Jones", and especially about his boss's current physique for having put on a few pounds. Not accepting what Sponge Bob said, he tries on the uniform he used to wear, but can't close it and ends up tearing it, leading him to conclude, "Ok, maybe I'm a bit bigger. But I'm still the toughest of the tough. Go ahead, lad, give em a punch".

SpongeBob is startled and asks if the punch is in the belly, and Mr. Krabs corrects by saying it is in the shell, and surprisingly, Bob says his arm has disintegrated. After talking they both get back to work, suddenly SpongeBob hears a scream and quickly goes out to see what's up and comes across Mr. Krabs hiding behind the barrel without his shell. In the scene he can visualize the pink, flaccid and scarred body. Mr. Krabs started to cry and mentions that he has 'molted' and exemplifies this by saying that this is when a Krab is too fat and outgrows its shell and falls off. Bob tries to cheer him up by saying that he is acting as if there is never a man in that shell by whining about what happened and the fact that he cannot attend the meeting. And without realizing it Bob offends his boss and makes him sad and kicks his shell toward the ceiling and falls on SpongeBob and has fun imitating him. Then Mr. Krabs gets the idea of SpongeBob replacing him at the meeting and gets excited when he says he is going to be a sailor.

Entering the saloon, Bob exclaims that he has never seen so many manly sailors, so rough and brave. A muscular fish is seen lying on the floor lifting trunks with a female fish sitting on top. Another muscular fish lifts a wrench with his tongue, while the other two hit one head with the other. The old mates spot him and soon call him over, one of the old Navy buddies says, "Hey Armor Abs, Ol' Iron Eye here has been itching to punch your legendary gut". Bob not only accepts the offer, but also urges his opponent: "Well, if you think you're man enough". Mr. Krabs is worried: "Uh-oh, this could be bad". Bob follows arrogantly: "Fire the torpedos". Then Iron Eye punches SpongeBob in the shell and inside Bob is thrown to all sides. Bob gets dizzy, this is evidenced by the stars that appear spinning on top of his head, and spits three of his teeth on the ground and one of his companions says, "Teeth. Now that's manly". He then spits out his entire skeleton and his companions cheer up to it. Mr. Krabs celebrates the fact: "He did it".

On stage another sailor announces into the microphone: “Alright me swabbys, it's time to award the trophy of manly toughness. To a man who's toughness has stewed the test of time. And that man is: Eugene 'Armor Abs' Krabs. Come up here Krabs”. Bob as he picks up the trophy, speaks up “Me supply of bubble soap was dangerously low. And as I blew my last bubble...” Krabs's former companions find his words strange, “Did he say Jellyfish Fields?” “Blowing bubbles?” “Uhh, what were you doing in Jellyfish Fields?” Bob answers that last question, “Why jellyfishing, of course.” To try to reverse the situation Mr. Krabs shouts from his hiding place, “Phone call for Mr Krabs”. As SpongeBob is leaving the stage with the trophy, Mr. Krabs's old pals stop him, “Where do you think you're going? Everybody knows there's 2 things Ol' Armor Abs Krabs would never do. Number 1, is spend a penny. And the other one is leave without giving Ol' Torpedo Belly one of your world famous steely Philly butts. Haha.” Again Bob is confident: “Let's have it. No holding back. Give it your all”. Torpedo Belly gives him the bellybutt, Bob is thrown into the ceiling, being cushioned by a belt and again hitting Torpedo Belly in the belly.

With the shock, Bob's shell cracks into several pieces and falls apart. Even without the shell Bob still tries to pass himself off as his boss, trembling with fear he says: “Well, uhh, I guess I'll take my manly toughness trophy and head home now. See you around manville boys, uhh, men”. At this moment Mr. Krabs shouts: “Noo!! He's not Eugene Krabs. I am. Alright lads, take a good look. This is who I am. I've molted me shell and I'm vulnerable... But I'm certainly no bubble-blowing jellyfisher. No offense, Spongebob”. Friendly, Bob replies that he was not offended, and Mr. Krabs invites him back home. But one of his old buddies tells Mr. Krabs that he is forgetting something and hands him the manhood trophy, then says, “Admitting you lost your shell is the toughest thing I've ever seen. And, uhh, I have a confession. These are fake!”. After revealing his secret he rips off his chops. Surprised Sirigueijo asks, “You, too, Torpedo Belly?”. He lifts up his shirt showing a scar on his belly and says, “Actually, I had my torpedo removed. Long ago”. One by one, the sailors reveal their weaknesses. One removes his dentures: “And these aren't the same chompers that I had in the navy”, while another assumes that his glass eye is actually made of formika. Everyone finds it very funny and laughs together.

This episode emphasizes homogeneous masculinity and its contradictions in a comical way. Although, the cartoon is accused by some of being silly, its narrative brings a deconstruction of reality as a form of contestation, creating its own logic enriched with new meanings. At the moment that the characters belonging to a virile masculinity are shown, expressions are used by the characters that reinforce a hegemonic masculinity, which is only

allowed for masculine men, they are: navy companions, ship tattoo, scar, hair, trophy of male courage, old sea wolf, manly, rude, brave, intelligent, man enough, firmness. On the other hand, the characters that do not belong to the hegemonic masculinity are associated in the episode with the words and expressions: pink, soft, not manly, not firm. About the theme under discussion, we understand the social role as a behavior expectation to be performed by the individual, and masculinity as a metaphor of strength and repression of feelings. Just like the shell of Mr. Krabappel.

According to Nader and Caminoti (2014, s/p, our translation)

We can make an analogy with a play, where men and women are actors that express themselves, according to a pre-established script, to an audience that evaluates their performance. Social role can also be understood as the set of rights and duties that determines the status, that is, the position that the individual occupies in society.

Aesthetics would be another issue to be raised, for wanting uniform bodies to be accepted in society. The eternal youth. This is noticeable now that Mr. Krabs confesses that he is feeling vulnerable without his shell and the other sailors are exposing their weaknesses, showing their teeth, chops, scars and glass eye and in the end wins a trophy for being considered the bravest among the sailors for showing their sensitivity and/ or vulnerability.

Final considerations

In SpongeBob, if there is a critical mediation, it is possible to exponentially narrow the participation of the child in its production and reading, in the sense of valuing and contemplating by the child and adults, the richness, creativity, and cultural diversity on a global scale.

Thus, we estimate the repercussion of this study and research regarding the mediating action of parental and pedagogical authorities in mediating children's perceptions about the world around them, specifically, about what they see, hear, and feel through cartoons and, in this case, SpongeBob.

The technical-scientific impact is in the possibilities of participation in events and conferences in the educational and related areas with oral and written productions of the studies, reflections, and analyses developed on the object in question. Through reflection and criticism, it is possible to transcend the immediate, resisting the reconciliation of the opposing elements, and to reflect on the media artifacts and children's cartoons disseminated by the cultural industry and the "ideology that enslaves them" (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 1985,

p. 110, our translation). Therefore, it is necessary to tension the ways of being, thinking and acting of adult mediators of childhood, to establish a critical relationship between the media, cartoons, and their productions of meaning about childhood and its representations.

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