

The section - The Fairly Odd Parents (mid p. 205 - mid p. 209) - is optional

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IS NICK FOR KIDS? IRONY, CAMP, AND ANIMATION IN THE NICKELODEON BRAND

● Animation is the intrinsic language of metamorphosis, and
● the literal illustration of change and progress.
● —PAUL WELLS, *ANIMATION AND AMERICA*

● Go SpongeBob! Go SpongeBob! Go Self!
● —*SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

● He's not very masculine for a male character. And he's soft.
● —ALFRED FUNG

● It's really funny, and it's really unrealistic, and all the char-
● acters are sort of weird and funny. And so when they're all
● put together it makes a fun show.
● —M., AN ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD BOY

● In the year 2002 Nickelodeon profited from over \$500 million of
● merchandise themed with characters from the wildly popular ani-
● mated program *SpongeBob SquarePants*. *SpongeBob SquarePants* fea-
● tures the eponymous wacky sea sponge as well as a foolish but affable
● starfish named Patrick; Squidward, a cranky squid; a pet snail named
● Gary; and Sandy, an effervescent muscular female squirrel, all liv-
● ing under the sea in a village called Bikini Bottom. The *SpongeBob*
● *SquarePants*-themed merchandise includes the usual suspects: lunch-
● boxes, plush dolls, key chains, kids clothing, school supplies, and even
● macaroni and cheese with SpongeBob-shaped pasta. But it also in-
● cludes items obviously geared for a more mature audience: Bikini
● Bottom thong underwear, men's boxers, neckties, men's t-shirts that
● say "SpongeBob NudiePants" and "SpongeBob PartyPants." In 2004,
● Paramount Pictures produced *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*,

which had some critics claiming that with its kitschy humor and campy references (David Hasselhoff plays a “life-guardian angel,” for example, who runs on the beach *Baywatch* style, with muscles gleaming and in slow motion), the movie was intended more for the eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-old audience than for children. *SpongeBob* has recently come under fire by conservative Christian groups, where one Christian website warned families about the *SpongeBob* movie, claiming that the film contained “cartoon rear male nudity, repeatedly,” “pinching of banner staff between nude buttocks,” and “suggestion of sadomasochism in transvestitism.”¹ In January 2005, Dr. James Dobson, founder of the conservative Christian foundation Focus on the Family, claimed that the cartoon was used to legitimize a “group that will corrupt children with a homosexual agenda” when *SpongeBob* was featured in a video made for grade schools by the We Are Family Foundation, in which the foundation makes a pledge of tolerance and respect for all people, including those with sexual identities different from one’s own.²

Clearly, *SpongeBob SquarePants* is not *just* for kids. The show is the most watched program currently broadcast on Nickelodeon, but aside from the usual kid-friendly daytime hours, the program is also aired at 11:30 p.m. on Nickelodeon, and at 11:00 p.m. on the network’s sister station, MTV. And while the show’s creator, Stephen Hillenber, insists that the program is designed to appeal to children between two and eleven years old, current Nielsen Media research has demonstrated that, like the audience for the movie, 22 percent of the show’s regular audience is between eighteen and forty-nine. Yet another indication of an adult fan base is recent attention to the ostensible sexual politics of the program. The show’s appeal has made current headlines in the popular press because of the apparent sexuality of the main character; an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2002 set off a predictable media frenzy when it claimed that there was “something about *SpongeBob* that whispers gay.”³

The adult following of *SpongeBob SquarePants* calls several elements of children’s media into question, especially on a network like Nickelodeon. Nickelodeon has built much of its successful marketing campaign around the idea that “Nick is for kids!,” featuring programming and narratives that base their appeal precisely on the idea that adults find them difficult to decode. As discussed in earlier chapters, the idea that “adults just don’t get it” has cultural currency not only within programming but with advertisements on the network and its ancillary products, such as the Nickelodeon website. The channel’s divisive generational strategy has been one of its most effective strategies to address kids as citizens—Nickelodeon is a network for children where kids are authorized in particular sorts of ways. As I’ve argued throughout this book, however, this generational divide often masks the channel’s transgenerational address. In fact,

as Heather Hendershot has shown, the broader transgenerational appeal of Nickelodeon taps into a desire on the part of adults to “be” a kid, thus deliberately playing with the boundary between adult and child. As Hendershot puts it, “according to the Nickelodeon logic, if adults are sometimes not stuffy, just as children are sometimes not innocent and naïve, it proves (or disproves) nothing about the ‘essential nature’ of adulthood or childhood; it proves only that adults and kids can play at being each other.”⁴ Supporting this kind of play is an important factor in the Nickelodeon brand, and the network has been efficient in creating its widely acclaimed original animated series (such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*) to deliberately make boundaries between adult and child indistinct.

Another way that the current generation of U.S. youth is hailed as citizens is through a particular kind of comedic address. Irony is a dominant trope within contemporary television, and it assumes a smart, media-savvy audience. Nickelodeon animation (and its appeal to both adults and children) is central to the network’s brand identity of ironic humor and irreverence. The slippery quality of Nickelodeon’s address and its openness to multiple readings by different audiences is particular to the contemporary media economy. This economy, alternately cheered and lampooned as kitschy and ironic, and in fact distinguished by the dominance of the brand and ironic consumption, demands a product that resembles subversive popular culture. As I’ve argued, the present cultural context of “cool” nourishes popular culture which critiques the mainstream and dominant material conditions through a kind of rebellious social commentary. Yet, despite this rebel feel, contemporary popular culture is shaped and framed by market imperatives—indeed, the rebel feel that is so important to Nickelodeon’s brand identity *is* a market strategy. In this chapter, I argue that Nickelodeon’s animation style—particularly the use of parody and irony—is yet another way the channel imagines its audience as consumer citizens. To demonstrate how this marks Nickelodeon as a “different” network in the competitive world of children’s television, I trace the history of television animation within this media economy, contrasting Nickelodeon animation (Nicktoons) with earlier forms of television cartoons. Nicktoons stand out in the television landscape because they are double-edged in meaning, appealing to different generations by employing an ironic social commentary. Yet the critical edge of this commentary needs to be read against the context of the postmodern media economy, where a kind of cool subversion is not so much social critique as a crucial part of a dominant market address.

Within this frame, I examine in this chapter three of Nickelodeon’s original Nicktoons, *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991–92), *SpongeBob SquarePants* (2000–), and *The Fairly OddParents* (2003–), as emblematic of the double-coded pro-

gram, one that functions most effectively through the network's aesthetic theme of animated irony and commodified kitsch. These shows, to some degree, illustrate the various ways in which animation can stretch the boundaries and limitations of representation. This "stretching" becomes a signature of the network and its particular kind of humor. Specifically, the irony and kitsch that characterize these shows become part of the Nickelodeon brand itself—a distinct way in which the network recognizes itself as well as a clear signifier for its audience. Nicktoons are notable in the children's television context where so many cartoons are produced based on licensed toy characters and function almost entirely to sell ancillary products. Nickelodeon cartoons, in contrast, often critique the very context in which they are aired, poking fun at toy gimmicks and consumer culture.

In order to contextualize the multiple codes of meaning within Nickelodeon animated programs, specifically in the ways that kitsch, irony, and camp characterize the network's cartoons, it is necessary to first examine the more general dynamic of animation itself as it functions within the Nickelodeon universe. The differences (and lack thereof) between creator-driven animated shows and toy-based programs, the targeted audience for cartoons and debates about the theory of "double-coding" within animation, and the inclusion of irony and camp to make "smart" cartoons as signatures for Nickelodeon are all important to consider when trying to make sense of the appeal of shows such as *Ren & Stimpy*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *The Fairly OddParents*. Nickelodeon went from edgy irony in *Ren & Stimpy*, a show that seemed designed more for a particular subculture of "animatophiles" than children or adults, to a more straightforward slapstick, camp humor in *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *The Fairly OddParents*, whose fan base is more mainstream. This trajectory in the style and substance of Nickelodeon animation corresponds to a similar trajectory of the market that evolved over the 1990s, where the emergence of brand culture appropriated (and contained) the language of irony and camp as important ways to sell products to young consumers. The theory of double coding, where a program has at least two levels of "code" to its logic so that it appeals to different audiences, such as adults and children, or heterosexuals and gay people, has significance for this argument, although I ultimately argue that the assumptions structuring the theory of double coding in media texts are destabilized in the current economic environment. The multiple meanings of visual culture surely still exist, such as "gay window dressing" where, as Danae Clark, Katherine Sender, and others have argued, one motif in a television show or an advertisement appeals to a mainstream audience, while another attracts a gay "reading." Yet the distinctions between the multiple audiences are both more ambiguous and less ambiguous in

the current market environment, depending on the marketing strategy.⁵ I locate a camp style in children's television programming but also want to re-situate camp within a particular kind of consumer context, as a specific way to address children as consumer citizens. Camp children's shows, like "girl power" programs and Nickelodeon's use of diverse imagery and narratives, harness a political ideology—gay identity politics, queer theory—and commodify it as an aesthetic practice. As with other cultural forms, Nickelodeon's campy style is about contradiction—the contradictions that similarly function as the logic for consumer citizenship.

ANIMATION: FROM CREATOR-DRIVEN TO TOY-BASED AND BACK AGAIN

In the 1980s, Nickelodeon created a name for itself in cable television through its live-action shows. A typical programming schedule in 1987 might include programs such as *Pinwheel* (1979–89), *You Can't Do That on Television* (1981–93), *DoubleDare* (1986–93), and *Mr. Wizard's World* (1983–2000). These shows all used live actors, and most incorporated Nickelodeon's philosophy of "Us versus Them" as part of their thematic logic. *You Can't Do That on Television*, for example, introduced green slime to the Nickelodeon audience (it was poured over the head of anyone who said "I don't know"), and *Mr. Wizard's World* was a science show where a teacher, Mr. Wizard (played by Don Herbert), taught kids scientific tricks and experiments using household materials without condescending to kids or sounding too "teachery." The network carried some animated programs, but because it did not own an animation studio at that time, these shows were primarily imported from non-U.S. studios: *Belle and Sebastian* (1984–87) was French, as was *The Little Prince* (1983–88); *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* (1983–) was a Japanese/French production, and *The Adventures of Little Koala* (1987–92) was a Japanese anime import. These shows, since they were created outside Nickelodeon, were not explicitly designed to contain brand narratives and the aesthetic style of Us versus Them that characterized the network. In 1991, however, Nickelodeon launched its own animation package, Nicktoons, which consisted of three original programs, *Doug*, *Rugrats*, and *The Ren & Stimpy Show*. The success of these programs motivated Viacom to continue to fund animation studios, and Nickelodeon has since become as well known for its creator-driven cartoons as its live-action comedy sketches.⁶

Of course, there is a long history of early-twentieth-century cinematic animation in the United States that predates the advent of televisual animation and the association of animation with children and children's culture. While there are unmistakable influences in television animation of this cinematic history, my

concern here is with the trajectory of television animation, specifically in the cultural distinctions that are drawn between auteur-based animation and toy- and license-driven animation. However, it is necessary to note that early cinematic animation was created for an adult audience and was often seen as cutting social commentary.⁷ Because of the flexibility of the form of animation, where creators are not bound to the physical boundaries of human representation, the fantasy and imaginative worlds of animated programs routinely provide a social critique of the “reality” of material life.

Yet the economic structure of broadcast television, and the imperative to target specific audiences to sell to advertisers, represents a shift in the cultural position of animation and a force of containment on its imaginative and critical potential. The flexibility of animation in early film culture was limited within television so as not to offend audiences and affect ratings.⁸ In the later 1950s and early 1960s, cartoons were eventually relegated to what Jason Mittell calls the “great Saturday morning exile.”⁹ Part of this change has to do with the institutional structure of television compared to film: during this time, television had clearly been recognized as a powerful symbolic force that needed to be regulated in order to be a true broadcast medium. As William Boddy and Lynn Spigel have argued, increased commercial censorship of television programming in the late 1950s and early 1960s had to do with several factors, including the increasing reliance on advertiser sponsorship, the quiz-show scandals, the conservative political climate of postwar United States, and a progressively more volatile cultural climate that paid a new kind of attention to racial and ethnic stereotypes in televisual representation.¹⁰ The resulting television programming from this contextual mix was primarily shows intended to appeal to “most of the people, most of the time,” mediocre programming that prompted 1961 FCC chairman Newton Minow’s “vast wasteland” speech (in which he refers to cartoons as one of the worst offenders).¹¹

It also resulted in recreating the definition of the function of animation; once considered to have a transgenerational appeal, television cartoons were relegated to the least attractive time slot on television, Saturday morning. Because the Saturday morning audience was children, and the industry assumptions about children were that they were both an uncritical audience and that they enjoyed watching repeats, this time spot became a financially lucrative one for broadcasters. Advertisers were just beginning to understand the economic value of reaching the children’s audience, and as Mittell argues, “As the genre continued to be dominated by theatrical rereads and prime time failures, production costs were negligible for most Saturday morning cartoons—networks and producers could maximize returns on their productions by endlessly rerunning one season

of a program like *Top Cat* or *The Alvin Show* making the generic time slot a comparatively low-risk venture with high potential for long-term profits.”¹² Cartoons were consequently “harmless entertainment” and the media content was shaped to fit the audience.¹³ The form that animation eventually took within television was based (at least in large part) on an economic imperative to attract the appropriate audiences for advertisers.

Animation was generally separated into distinct categories—cartoons for kids were safe and nonoffensive, while cartoons for adults retained the edge, the social commentary that characterized cinematic cartoons. These two categories did occasionally intersect in particular cartoons, such as in some Warner Brothers cartoons (*Bugs Bunny* and *Road Runner*, for instance), as interesting, trans-generational forms that include commentary about the Cold War, gender relations, and corporate culture. The overall association of animation with children, however, accomplished a number of things: it firmly established animation as a genre for children, and thus specifically *not* for adults; it debased animation as a “quality” genre precisely because it was thought to be for children; and it did not garner the economic backing that other television shows received because, at that time, the children’s audience as a market had not reached the kind of three-in-one potential it enjoys today.¹⁴ Mittell points out that “the ways in which these texts, both recycled and original, were situated through scheduling and cultural circulation, demonstrate how these practices came to link the genre to a set of shared assumptions that have remained associated with the cartoon genre to this day.”¹⁵ The various ways in which the television industry censored cartoons to make them appropriate fare for children constituted the foundation for the cartoon genre for years to come, and contemporary cultural and political debates over sexuality and violence in cartoons directly relate to this history of defining this genre as one that is as “innocent” as its intended audience.

As a way to guarantee that cartoons would remain formulaic (and thus appealing to children), the production process of animation shifted from one that was primarily creator-driven to one that was simply put through the “cartoon mills,” where a team of people could cheaply and quickly put together a cartoon based on prescribed ideas and normative representations.¹⁶ This overtly commercial context of animation, where cartoons made explicitly for children were created according to market logic, was intensified in the 1980s. With the loosened regulatory environment of the Reagan FCC, toy-based cartoons began to characterize the television animation landscape. Indeed, the 1980s are often characterized by critics as the worst moment in animation history because of the influx of toy-based programs, and by the television industry as a great marker of the development of the kid market, also because of the enormous boom in licensed

characters in the toy industry.¹⁷ With deregulation, old rules about limiting the number of minutes spent on commercials within children's programming blocks no longer shaped the structure of kid cartoons, and programs that could be characterized as "30-minute commercials" came to dominate children's television. For these shows, characters were designed as toys first with the TV program to follow as a seamless way to sell toys to the kid audience.¹⁸ Because these programs were generally perceived by critics to be entirely commercially based (as opposed to artistically, or creator, based) they continued the association of cartoons with low cultural legitimacy and capital.¹⁹

ANIMATION AT NICKELODEON

As I detailed in chapter 2, Gerry Laybourne (president of Nickelodeon from 1989 to 1996) was particularly passionate about her dislike for toy-based programs in children's television. Her decision to support creator-driven cartoons at Nickelodeon was a crucial move for the network's overall signature and philosophy. Indeed, given the network's insistence that it was a "different" network, it is not surprising that Nickelodeon had a specific philosophy regarding animation as part of its brand identity.²⁰ Linda Simensky, in charge of the animation department at Nickelodeon for seven years, discusses Nickelodeon's reputation in the industry as being very committed to rejecting toy-based properties: "Even when they had these properties, they still had the reputation as the place where they can't make them take your toy-based properties. Toy companies came to Cartoon Network and said if you don't run our shows we're not going to advertise on your network, and they basically bullied them into running *He-man* and *Transformers* and stuff like that. You couldn't do that with Nick—you couldn't walk in there and tell them that."²¹ According to Simensky, Nickelodeon committed itself early on to rejecting animated shows produced by a "cookie cutter process" and thus made the decision to support creator-driven animated shows, with new and original characters and storylines.²² Although clearly this was in the interest of attracting an audience to the Nickelodeon brand, the network's rhetoric framed its philosophy on creator-driven animation as part of its claim to "respect kids." As with so many other market strategies deployed by Nickelodeon, the channel's stance on creator-driven animation felt like a rebellious, anti-establishment move within the children's television industry. By insisting on creator-driven animation in the licensed-toy environment, Nickelodeon was seen as "bucking the system," thus highlighting the ethos of empowerment championed by the channel at a historical and commercial moment where rebellious upstart companies were quickly gaining cultural capital. In this way, the channel's

commitment to creator-driven cartoons was as much a part of its claim to “respect” kids and treat them like citizens as was Nickelodeon’s promise of positive gender and racial representation. These stylistic and narrative strategies that came to characterize not only Nickelodeon programming but the channel’s overall brand identity are reflective of a cultural economy in which children are situated as significant consumer citizens.

Nickelodeon was only able to be perceived as bucking convention because of the particular institutional structure in which it was embedded. The cable network had the luxury of trying out these animated programs as *experiments*—which meant that they could fail. As I detailed in chapter 2, because the cable industry was still so new, and relatively unregulated, *everything* Nickelodeon did was new and different. Simensky states that, in typical Us versus Them fashion, Nickelodeon “would do the opposite of what conventional wisdom dictated” in making new animated shows, which went through a pilot program (quite unusual for animated programs, when networks tended to just buy blocks of episodes without trying them out before an audience first).²³ Thus, Nickelodeon could afford to “dismiss” conventional wisdom regarding creator-driven animation; indeed, the whole concept of a television channel dedicated to children’s programming flew in the face of conventional ideas of what could succeed on television. Again, this philosophical—and moral—stance ostensibly taken by Nickelodeon was part of constructing children as consumer citizens: appearing to *refuse* to submit to the whims of the market was both a real refusal and a way to construct a *new* market inhabited by an “empowered” audience. As Simensky said regarding this issue, “The whole adults versus kids, Us versus Them thing, really did pervade everything, every aspect of the network. In the course of development, one of the things I would look for was: did the show have a certain Us versus Them quality to it—there was branding in the shows, it wasn’t just in between the shows, the shows had to feel like Nickelodeon shows.”²⁴ The “Nickelodeon shows” required a Nickelodeon audience—one that responded with savvy and sophistication to animated shows that were intelligent and ironic.

Yet it was not only that the cable industry provided a kind of freedom to *experiment* that shaped Nickelodeon’s decisions about original animation. Although the current landscape of televisual animation remains primarily characterized by “process-driven” animation rather than creator-driven, in the early 1990s the cartoon began to slowly move out from its Saturday morning exile and loosen its connection with merchandising and toys, thus attracting more of an adult audience. More specifically, the lines drawn between adult cartoons as edgy and interesting, and kid cartoons as bland and formulaic, began to appear more ambiguous. The 1990s witnessed a revival in interest in cartoons for adults, as well

as a renewed commitment on the part of media studios to create both films and television that had a transgenerational appeal. In the film world, for example, Disney was creating animated films that, for the first time in decades, enjoyed box-office success, critical acclaim, and a multigenerational audience. The company's 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast* was the first animated film ever nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, and the other films produced during this time—*The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and later Pixar's *Toy Story*—firmly reestablished Disney as a powerhouse in animation. On the television screen, the animated shorts shown during *The Tracy Ullman Show* on HBO became the Fox network's *The Simpsons*, the first prime time animated series since *The Flintstones* in the 1960s. Since that time, Fox has also produced *King of the Hill* and *Futurama*; Nickelodeon's corporate sibling MTV has produced successful animated programs for young adults such as *Beavis and Butthead* and *Daria*; the variety program *Saturday Night Live* often includes "adult" cartoons such as *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*; and the raunchy, edgy, and intensely ironic *South Park* has become an important source of revenue for Comedy Central. And Cartoon Network has recently launched a late-night programming block of adult cartoons, called Adult Swim, featuring edgier, more politically oriented cartoons, as well as nostalgic fare. These examples demonstrate a shift in the landscape of television animation—a shift that not only acknowledges the double meaning in cartoons for kids and adults but also indicates a shift in how child audiences were imagined. The kids who were understood in terms of "innocence"—an innocence that corresponded with the bland formulaic quality of most cartoons—were reconsidered in terms of citizenship and empowerment within the context of brand culture.

IRONY AND CAMP: DOUBLE CODING IN POSTMODERN ANIMATION

Paul Wells has argued that the cinematic animation of the early twentieth century characterized modern American tastes, social mores, and cultural values. Additionally, he argues that the artistry of the animated form served as a point of entry for critiquing these same tastes, mores, and values.²⁵ The renaissance in prime time animation is similarly symbolic of the current cultural climate in the United States. Rather than intensely modernist, however, animated programs such as *The Simpsons* and Nickelodeon's animated programs are more postmodernist in both form and content. Indeed, an important element of the artistry of cartoons involves the genre's ability to be self-reflexive; in an era of postmodern visual culture, reflexivity takes "the form in postmodern style of referencing context or framing in order to rethink the viewer's relationship to an image or narrative. One postmodern narrative style is to refuse viewers the opportunity to

become absorbed in the narrative and lose themselves, to forget their role as viewers.”²⁶ Cartoons seem especially capable of appropriating this visual style, in that the representational form itself is so flexible.²⁷

Because of the changing aesthetic landscape, as well as shifting conceptions of the audience, the fixed status of television animation as a children’s genre is destabilized within the current culture. The boundaries of media audiences for programs such as cartoons are no longer (if they ever really were) easily divisible by generation. What assumptions are made once “double coding” (appealing to both adults and children, but in different ways) is an *explicit* part of animated programming? This question is significant in theorizing children as consumer citizens, as part of this definition has been the fundamental difference between adults and children. The idea of the double code generally assumes that particular aesthetic styles such as irony and camp that are present in cartoons appeals to adults, and that more straightforward visuals and sound effects are attractive to the less sophisticated audience of children.²⁸ This strategy has functioned effectively to attract a wider audience for a variety of media, so that divisions and stylistic differences that seem to be generational often appeal on a transgenerational level.²⁹ As the Nickelodeon executive John Hardman commented about Nickelodeon’s very deliberate use of this strategy: “We’ve always tried to play to a large audience. We try to develop programs that get the parents to watch as well. Our programs have different levels for kids and adults. Now everyone else is trying to create programs with different levels so families watch together.”³⁰ Indeed, an effective approach for many television programs has been to not only address adult audiences as children but also to address children as mature adults. This kind of dual strategy, as Kinder puts it, “provide[s] an illusory sense of empowerment both for kids who want to accelerate their growth by buying into consumerist culture and for adults who want to retain their youth by keeping up with pop culture’s latest fads.”³¹ This is clearly part of the contemporary market logic of cool, working *rhetorically* by stressing the generational difference between audiences, and functioning *actually* to increase the breadth of the potential market.

This dual strategy constitutes a media environment of consumer citizenship, where empowerment is defined within the confines of the market. This appeal functions effectively as a marketing strategy so that Nickelodeon attracts two audiences by appealing precisely to the divisions between them. Indeed, the contemporary commercial context of television has also made divisions between audiences based on generation much less distinct, as thematic issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation have become much less controversial and much

more lucrative as marketing ploys for different generations. Specifically, the contemporary young consumer citizen is characterized, at least in part, by a finely honed sense of irony. It is not simply that the current youth generation is perceived to be disaffected or cynical about culture, however, but also that irony has a particular logic within the overall narratives of commercial popular culture. As marketing becomes more and more sophisticated, irony becomes its own marketing niche, reflecting its savvy audience. Films such as *Reality Bites* set the tone in the early 1990s for an ironic pop culture, as did television ads for “youth” products such as Sprite, which deliberately used celebrities to endorse products, while pointing to the fact that celebrities were selling products.³² Increasingly jaded and cynical young characters found their way into films such as *Cruel Intentions* and *Murder by Numbers*, and recent television shows such as *One Tree Hill* and *The O.C.* portray high-schoolers as sophisticated and contemptuous.

Irony is an important part of the identity of contemporary youth culture and is a key element in the current environment of consumer citizenship. In fact, Naomi Klein characterizes the presence of irony in the current context as “ironic consumption”: “Not only were [youth audiences] making a subversive statement about a culture they could not physically escape, they were rejecting the doctrinaire Puritanism of seventies feminism, the earnestness of the sixties quest for authenticity and the ‘literal’ readings of so many cultural critics. Welcome to ironic consumption.”³³ Klein’s cynicism about the use of irony as an effective marketing tool can in part be related to the notion that irony as politics is a much more personal kind of politics than a more activist, public politics. Within the cultural economy of consumer citizenship, citizens flourish, find voice, and are “empowered” through these individualistic, consumer-based practices. “Empowered” consumer citizens are those who are defined by power relations within the confines of consumer culture. The consumer culture that Klein characterizes as “ironic consumption” seems to evacuate politics from the landscape in one sense because of the intense focus on personal identity and consumption habits. Yet, in another important sense, as Jeffrey Sconce reminds us, “All irony may confuse issues of tone and perspective, but no form of irony is truly disengaged from its material.”³⁴ Indeed, the notion that media texts are split into different meanings for different audiences, where irony and camp are strategically used to “conceal” meanings from the mainstream, has been noted as an important part of audience identification in gay communities. This is what is implied with the “double code,” a strategy defined by Sender as implicit advertising appeals that, “through the use of coded representations which appear innocuous to heterosexual readers . . . can be interpreted as ‘gay’ by bisexual, lesbian and gay readers.”³⁵

The key here, however, is that the messages are in fact *hidden*; what happens when historically concealed messages—concealed precisely because of the rejection of gay identities by dominant culture—are made into commodities, an integral part of the mainstream? Sender discusses the dynamic of gay visibility within consumer culture, positing that when commodity culture is overtly involved in the construction of the double code, “it has the effect of depoliticizing the radical tendencies of [queer] activism.”³⁶ The issue here revolves around who is “getting” the message—if it is *everyone*, straight or gay, youth or adult—can it still be a “double” code? Nickelodeon banks on the idea that it can be, but a double code that is inherently about a broader market, signaling consumer citizenship rather than access to a politicized subjectivity. Indeed, the brand identity of the network revolves around this precise notion—that there are some (Nick kids) who get it, and others (adults) who do not.

Part of the Nickelodeon brand, then, entails an appreciation on the part of the audience for a unique “Nickelodeon humor” that is specifically crafted as a double code. This was evident in almost all of the interviews I conducted with kids who watch Nickelodeon shows—especially those fans of *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *The Fairly OddParents*. For instance, one eleven-year-old boy said, “*SpongeBob* has some humor that’s like adult humor. But not inappropriate humor, just humor that adults think is funny, too.”³⁷ Another eleven-year-old girl made the point to me that Nickelodeon was different from the Disney channel, because of the humor contained in the programming: “I think Nickelodeon is a bit better . . . They have more stuff for like adults and grownups, and more humorous things.”³⁸ One other nine-year-old fan confirmed this notion that the appeal of Nickelodeon is in part due to the fact that the programs contain humor for both adults and children: “[The main point of *SpongeBob* is] to be funny for grownups and kids . . . Like one reason is that kids get it, grownups get it, they start laughing.”³⁹ In the contemporary context, part of attracting Nickelodeon’s youth audience meant to incorporate this sense of irony into its animated programming. The trick is figuring out how to incorporate the strategy of irony to have a rebellious feel, without letting on that this particular kind of rebellion is precisely what is being sold through the brand. Commenting on the presence of irony in cartoons, Simensky had this to say: “I think it’s a cartoon way of life . . . It comes from a creator and a team of people with a similar sense of humor being able to make the jokes they want to make—not having their shows go through a factory process where everything gets blended. It’s being able to tell the jokes you want to tell. Irony is a big part of cartoons, where you expect this . . . and wham! This other thing happens and that’s where the surprise comes from . . . And a good cartoon is about surprise—it is about the unexpected.”⁴⁰ However, the

unexpected, as it is referenced in irony and camp, has become an important part of *mainstream* popular and consumer culture. A campy, ironic style has emerged in media culture as the dominant, rather than a subversive, address. In 1993, David Bergman wrote that although camp is quite difficult to define, most scholars writing on the subject agree on four different points: one, camp is a style that is predominantly about artifice and exaggeration; two, camp exists in tension, not in agreement, with consumer (or mainstream) culture; three, people who interpret things as campy are people outside the mainstream; and four, camp is affiliated with homosexual culture.⁴¹ While I think that there are certainly moments of contemporary camp that share these four elements, it is also the case that the cultural and historical context in which Bergman was writing has changed. Bergman argues that there was an intellectual hostility to camp in the 1970s that gave way to a scholarly embrace of the subject in the 1980s, due to a variety of factors, including the rise of queer theory and poststructuralism in the academy, the increasingly visible presence of gay activists, and the escalating knowledge about AIDS in mainstream culture.⁴² Predictably, the cultural context of the 1990s and early twenty-first century has shifted yet again, and new economic, political, and social factors affect the way in which camp is both produced and interpreted. Indeed, as I have argued, this new cultural and political-economic context was fundamental in not only shaping the particular self-identity of Nickelodeon but also in providing a means through which youth consumer citizenship could be articulated.

Despite the vagaries of both culture and camp, Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" continues to be acknowledged—albeit often as a point of critique—as a crucial narrative outlining the slippery theoretical definition of camp.⁴³ In this essay, Sontag situates camp primarily as an aesthetic style, evacuated of politics, functioning culturally as frivolity and superficiality. Camp, for Sontag, is about artifice, and artifice in turn about an almost child-like sense of make-believe: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre."⁴⁴ As Gilad Padva, David Bergman, and Andrew Ross, as well as numerous others, have pointed out, Sontag misses the political complexity of the quotation mark and that which it represents; Bergman notes that it is precisely the constructed nature of camp (a construction that is signified by quotation marks) that contains its politics: "as a style of exaggeration and artifice that brought to bear the artificiality of all those categories that we are so deeply invested in as 'normal': gender, femininity, masculinity."⁴⁵ It is within the incongruities of camp, the contradictions and the missing narratives, that its poli-

tics is found. Camp is most associated with sexual identity because, in part, the contradiction most exploited by a camp style is that of gender, between the masculine and the feminine. As Jack Babuscio argues, “Irony is the subject matter of camp, and refers here to any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association. The most common of incongruous contrasts is that of masculine/feminine.”⁴⁶ Camp thus has been the mechanism to reveal the constructed—and often ironic—nature of the categories we invest in as “normal,” such as sexuality or gender. An exaggerated representation of masculinity in a film, for example, would appeal to a heterosexual man invested in the “normalcy” of his own gender, as well as to a gay man invested in the artificiality of hegemonic masculinity—for the gay audience, the representation of masculinity is the “wink” in the show’s message.⁴⁷

The semiotic openness of cartoons, the sheer artificiality of this representational form, destabilizes the fixity of the double code and exploits its potential for camp irony. However, the complex nuances of the media seem to characterize the current landscape more accurately than a theory of the double code, precisely because of the political-economic context I’ve discussed.⁴⁸ Theorizing the ironic or camp quality of cartoons allows for a side-stepping of the rigidity of the double code, because irony and camp refuse to be considered as either only style or politics but are rather always both. This is one problem with Sontag’s formulation with camp; in her focus on this identification of camp with style, Sontag collapses the two without acknowledging how style is *politically* informed by camp.⁴⁹

Camp is both activist and consumerist; these two categories are not mutually exclusive but rather inform and shape each other constantly. To locate a camp style in children’s programming is not to empty camp of its political and/or erotic meaning but to resituate it within a particular kind of consumer context. The change in the pattern of youth consumption also changes the aesthetic, reflecting a kind of consumerist politics that, like “girl power,” harnesses a political ideology. Camp and irony historically have signaled a subversive, and political, practice. But like postfeminism and the use of diversity, in this historical moment where brand culture is the primary means through which subjectivity and citizenship are understood and experienced, camp and irony become practices of consumer citizenship. In the current manifestation, these aesthetic styles encourage a focus on individualism and consumption habits as political activity. Situating camp and irony as key markers of consumer citizenship within the context of Nickelodeon doesn’t depoliticize *SpongeBob SquarePants*, but it is a different kind of camp from, say, gay camp novels, or drag queens.⁵⁰ In contemporary consumer culture, where subversive identity positions are commodified

as niche markets, the distinction between the two positions engaged by the double code is less sharply drawn. A viewer's recognition of the distinction itself becomes not a marker of marginalized identity but rather an indicator of one's commitment to brand culture.

Indeed, a common theme of current branding strategies is to incorporate irony into their presentation, so that the pitch of companies often includes a kind of self-mocking, a reflection of the ironic viewer they are trying to cultivate. It certainly is true that irony has become, because of brand culture, the signature emotion for a youth generation, but the commodification of irony also occasionally results in an interesting social commentary. What happens to the edginess of irony when it is used as a crucial part of a brand? When a corporation plays on the crassness and obvious commercialism of marketing as a way to market a product, what does that do to irony as a powerful form of counterhegemonic critique? I argue that both formulations of irony—as social critique and as slick marketing tool—exist simultaneously in a similar way as consumer citizenship, which forms its logic on both the power of a demographic market and the construction of political subjectivity within that market.

NICKELODEON'S CREATION AND CONTROVERSY: *REN & STIMPY*

In 1991, the animator John Kricfalusi's *The Ren & Stimpy Show* was included in the first original Nickelodeon animation block, Nicktoons. *Ren & Stimpy* is a cartoon about an asthmatic, mean-spirited Chihuahua named Ren Hoek and a friendly-but-stupid cat named Stimpy. Initially, *Ren & Stimpy*'s irreverent style, nostalgic aesthetic feel (a flat background, and few "special effects"), and use of irony seemed to fit ideally with the brand identity of Nickelodeon. The very premise of the show was self-reflexive; *Ren & Stimpy* "looked back to the subversive aspects of cartooning, not merely to express personal perspectives but to critique the conservatism of made-for-television cartoons."⁵¹ The program took full advantage of animation's representational flexibility, so that it was just as likely to feature Ren's bloodshot eyes literally falling out of his head as it was to see a living fart on the show. This kind of "disruptive play" appealed to both kids and adults and thus embodied the double code that challenged Nickelodeon's Us versus Them philosophy—both "us" and "them" were addressed in the show. Yet, contradictorily, the program validated the Us versus Them brand identity by positioning itself as different from other kids programs. As Rebecca Farley notes, *Ren & Stimpy* creates this disruptive play by playing with the animation itself, through the "grossness and vulgarity" of the characters themselves (which stood out in bold relief in comparison to the broadcast networks' toy-based animation,



20. Ren and Stimpy,
from *The Ren & Stimpy
Show*, 1991.

featuring creatures such as *The Care Bears*). As Farley puts it: “If . . . Disney’s ‘relentless striving for cuteness’ helped create and nurture the ‘family’ audience, the look of *Ren & Stimpy* literally signified its active disinterest in such an audience.”⁵² The visual appearance of *Ren & Stimpy* challenged the smooth cuteness of other televised animation—the characters were, as Farley puts it, “spectacularly ugly.” Kricfalusi disrupted other conventions of television animation as well: the figures of Ren and Stimpy were continuously distorted and disfigured, and the two characters (Ren especially) generally mistreated each other as a plot of each episode.

For example, in one episode of *Ren & Stimpy*, “Stimpy’s Invention,” Stimpy tries out a number of different inventions on Ren, including a phone made out of cheese, a remote-control razor that he uses to shave off Ren’s fur, and “stay put socks,” which are socks full of glue so that they do not fall down. Ren becomes incensed at being used as a guinea pig for Stimpy’s silly inventions and shouts “You filthy swine! I will kill you!”—not exactly a line one might find in *The Care Bears* or *Strawberry Shortcake*. Stimpy decides to invent something to make Ren happy (and tries out many experiments along the way, using animals such as a duck and a beaver as subjects, clearly playing off of the politically progressive “no testing on animals” caveat that accompanies so many contemporary products) and invents a “happy helmet.” The helmet, placed on Ren’s head, comes with a remote control, with a dial to control how happy Ren will be. Stimpy gleefully turns it way up, while all the while Ren is furiously resisting being happy. Kricfalusi here exaggerates the forced smile on Ren’s face, the bloodshot eyes as he tries to resist happiness, and finally his capitulation, as he mumbles “no . . . got . . . to . . . fight . . . it” until he loses the battle: “Stimpy, I’m so happy . . . must



21. Ren and his “happy helmet,” 1991.

22. Stimpy’s “Happy Happy Joy Joy” album, 1991.



go do nice things.” Ren is then shown cheerfully ironing Stimpy’s underwear and cleaning steaming excrement from Stimpy’s cat box, all the while saying things such as “I must do wonderful things for my best friend Stimpy.” The episode culminates in Stimpy dancing with Ren to Stimpy’s favorite record, “Happy Happy Joy Joy,” where the voice on the record says, in a threatening voice, “I don’t think you’re happy enough. I’ll teach you to be happy. I’ll teach your grandmother to suck eggs.”

The transgressing of boundaries of taste and convention in *Ren & Stimpy* is playful; “Stimpy’s Invention” consciously mocks the authenticity of “being happy,” so that the unofficial anthem of *Ren & Stimpy*, “Happy Happy Joy Joy” is provocatively ironic. Indeed, the mocking of the earnestness of both a conventional sense of happiness and, more obliquely, children’s television shows is



23. Mock advertisement for “log” on the *Ren & Stimpy Show*, 1991.

24. The simplistic “motto” for log pokes fun at tv ads directed to children, 1991.



clearly evident in this episode. The contemptuous scorn of children’s television that was such a part of *Ren & Stimpy* was both its brilliance and ultimate downfall on a network like Nickelodeon: despite the network’s self-conscious construction as a rebel and an upstart within the world of children’s television, the reality was that Nickelodeon was the leader in children’s television, and it was not in the network’s best commercial interests to expose *this* particular irony. The failure of *Ren & Stimpy* reflects a central contradiction within consumer citizenship: since the definition of this kind of citizenship only makes sense within the market, too much critique of this market (and the social and economic conditions from which it emerges) is a form of symbolic annihilation—within this scenario, the consumer citizen that Nickelodeon celebrates no longer is sustainable.

One of the most innovative characteristics of *Ren & Stimpy* is its self-reflexivity;

not only are the characters themselves reflexive but the show constantly remarks upon the structures and constraints of television, especially children's television. The show regularly critiqued children's television as part of the narrative and featured, on every episode, some kind of satiric in-house advertisement. For instance, Ren or Stimpy is depicted mocking the gimmickry of children's ads with "Breakfast Tips," which derides the ridiculousness of including toy prizes in children's sugar-based cereals, or the series of ads marketing a toy log, which was really just a log. As Farley points out, this kind of reflexivity within the show "was an especially daring transgression, mocking the long and heated debate over advertising in children's programming."⁵³ Again, the idea that the show was mocking conventions, while aired on a network that was firmly ensconced in a corporate media environment, owned by one of the largest media conglomerates, was the biggest irony—and one that ultimately Nickelodeon could not incorporate as part of its brand identity. Rather, the audience for *Ren & Stimpy* was not the mass audience appealed to by major media corporations but was more of a cult following, including not so much the adolescent audience that tunes in to Nickelodeon but a more specialized subculture of what Mark Langer calls "animatophiles."⁵⁴

THE CREATOR: JOHN KRICFALUSI

Once Nickelodeon committed to a much larger budget for original animation and sought to find the right programs for its irreverent message and its Us versus Them ideology, the next step was finding the right artists to create the programming. Kricfalusi had an impressive track record, working with Ralph Bakshi and Jim Hyde on *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures* and then opening up his own animation studio, Spumco. As Langer notes, given Kricfalusi's experience, it was not difficult to understand why Nickelodeon thought he was a good match for the "Nickelodeon feel"—he was ironic, irreverent, and seemed to revel in challenging the system—all the same things for which Nickelodeon was known.⁵⁵ However, the various ways in which Nickelodeon defied the system were not exactly counterhegemonic; in other words, Nickelodeon produced a different kind of programming in a television landscape that was bland and formulaic, but the network remained a corporate entity—the ways in which it was a "different" network only registered as different within the context of corporate culture. Kricfalusi, on the other hand, was not interested in being a corporate player. As Langer points out, "Kricfalusi constantly made reference to the detritus of American culture and deliberately violated norms of good taste. While some 'gross-out' comedy is not unusual in children's broadcasting, a company like Nickel-

odeon has to engage in a difficult balancing act in which it is necessary to please children without offending parents. Kricfalusi was not similarly inclined.”⁵⁶ Kricfalusi, after a series of disputes with the network over program deadlines, was eventually fired after the first year of production in a well-publicized conflict. Using the same rhetoric Nickelodeon uses about adult culture, Kricfalusi claimed that the network “just didn’t get it,” and the conflict is often read as a battle between the individual artist and the corporate entity.

Of course, the strategic use of “they just don’t get it” clearly resonates within this context when so much of the appeal of *Ren & Stimpy* was in its “smart sensibility” where some audiences “got it,” and others did not. The fact that Kricfalusi believed that his corporate bosses at Nickelodeon also “didn’t get it” clearly gains him cultural capital within a certain audience.⁵⁷ Kricfalusi and Nickelodeon both imagined a different kind of citizen as audience. The “creative differences,” then, cited as the reason for firing Kricfalusi was not simply a predictable alibi for something deeper and more insidious: the difference between the two really was about a kind of creative product—but more importantly, for whom that creative product was intended.

Interestingly, *Ren & Stimpy* remains the Nickelodeon program that receives the most scholarly attention. Although the network and its programming certainly receive its fair share of mainstream press coverage, the amount of scholarly interest in the network has been (until recently) minimal, except for work analyzing *The Ren & Stimpy Show*.⁵⁸ The “high art” status of *Ren & Stimpy* seems to be produced from a number of different angles: adults nostalgic for an animation feel of earlier cinematic cartoons; the way in which *Ren & Stimpy* deliberately dismissed the “kids only” rhetoric of Nickelodeon by including many “adult” references; the cult following of the program; and perhaps most importantly, the rejection of the show by Nickelodeon, a move that revealed the corporate ideology of the channel as not quite as rebellious as it claimed to be. Nickelodeon wants to be hip, but not that hip; while dedicated to “respecting” and empowering its audience, the channel defines respect and empowerment within the terms of the general market. Nickelodeon wanted anything but the narrow cult following sought after by Kricfalusi; rather, it sought to be ubiquitous in American households, with not a detached audience but an engaged one—and one that, importantly, believes in the “system” so that the notion of “empowerment” has a particular kind of hegemonic (as opposed to counterhegemonic) logic.

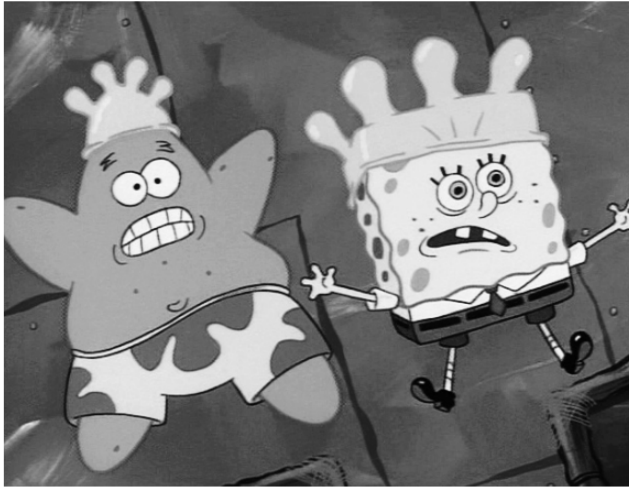
This does not mean that the programming on the network cannot contain irony or camp as part of the textual address. The irony in Nickelodeon programs cannot mock the network (or for that matter, children’s television) so derisively, because this challenges the way the channel defines consumer citizen-

ship. Within the corporate environment of the network, the self-mocking of Nickelodeon programs is conducted in a more earnest and playful, rather than an intensely critical, way (and thus works as part of its marketing). Since *Ren & Stimpy*, a number of cultural factors have shifted and changed, so that the tropic qualities of the show—irony, camp, self-reflexivity—are still part of Nickelodeon’s brand identity, but the political economy of brand culture has appropriated these techniques as part of commodity culture. Thus, the discourses of irony and camp are more in the vein of self-reflexive marketing, so that the brand identity of Nickelodeon as cool and irreverent is both further established and made more mainstream.

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS

The highly publicized battle between Nickelodeon and John Kricfalusi referenced, among other things, a kind of “selling out”—or, as his followers insist, a refusal to sell out, on the part of Kricfalusi, to the safe corporate politics of the network. For the animatophile subculture, Kricfalusi represented a kind of artistic authenticity in the face of the slick commercialism of Viacom’s channel; he was unmistakably the activist David to the network’s commercial Goliath. The way that this program appealed to different political groups, rather than groups assumed to have naturalized, essential boundaries (such as child/adult or gay/straight), forces a different reading from one that insists on a simple double code. The struggle between creator and network was interpreted in several different ways: a fight between the atomistic individual and the greedy corporate entity; as an aesthetic issue, as Langer points out, where Kricfalusi is creating for a particular audience of animatophiles that doesn’t happen to be Nickelodeon’s audience; and as a cultural shift, where the political economy and social standards of the time authorize the mainstreaming and commodification of a camp aesthetic.⁵⁹

Less than a decade later after *Ren & Stimpy* debuted, the network had slightly shifted its aesthetic frame of camp and found a much more suitably (for the network, at least) campy program: *SpongeBob SquarePants*. This program clearly connected more meaningfully to a contemporary audience of young consumer citizens and allowed Nickelodeon to retain an “edgy” feel while not alienating the channel’s demographic (or their parents). *SpongeBob* has come under some of the same public critiques as *Ren & Stimpy* did almost ten years earlier: the humor was seen to be illogical, the characters unrealistic, and, most visibly, the main characters of the show, SpongeBob and the starfish Patrick, were interpreted by some as involved in a homosexual relationship—just as Ren and Stimpy were often read as involved sexually. The animation of the show is clever and



25. SpongeBob SquarePants and his best friend Patrick the Starfish, from *SpongeBob SquarePants*, 2003.

sophisticated, with the program taking place in Bikini Bottom, with a kitsch landscape complete with houses made out of pineapples and Tiki heads reminiscent of Easter Island. Because of the way that animation already stretches “real” representation, the character of SpongeBob is even more flexible in its performance: although he is a sea sponge, he resembles the typical domestic sink sponge—yet he can transform his shape into anything that makes sense at the time: the state of Texas, the letter S, a flower. Perhaps most importantly, SpongeBob exists in a liminal generational stage—neither child nor adult, he performs a kind of playful act on the show, camping it up at every opportunity.⁶⁰ As Simensky says about SpongeBob, “He’s kid-like in that way that kids might have that innocent naïve thing going on and a kid might say something that’s completely honest and funny, and sort of ironic for the situation. *SpongeBob* has a certain quality to it—and the people making it—that’s their sense of humor. Because it is so creator-driven and so creative-driven, you can’t separate the people behind it from the cartoon. So that goes a little bit beyond creator-driven into this idea that people working on the show have a whole lot to say in the humor of the show.”⁶¹

The adult fan base of *SpongeBob*, as well as the campy, kitschy nature of the program, has resulted in a semiotic reading, by some, of the show as a “gay show.” SpongeBob is sometimes pictured holding hands with his best friend, the pink starfish Patrick, “he is flamboyant, defiantly cheery, emotional, gregarious, and sometimes break[s] out in song with his male companion Patrick and muscular female friend Sandy Squirrel.”⁶² The show’s curmudgeon, Squidward, is a squid who enjoys bubble baths and listening to classical music (and in fact, Planet Out.com, a website targeted to a gay male audience, remained equivocal about



26. SpongeBob and Patrick, 2003.

SpongeBob's sexuality but claimed "his neighbor Squidward, a fussy queen who plays the clarinet, is another matter entirely").⁶³ Patrick and SpongeBob watch a favorite superhero television show on the program, "The Adventures of Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy," which is reminiscent of other male buddy programs that are popularly recognized as either camp or containing a gay aesthetic, from *Batman and Robin* to *Saturday Night Live's* "The Ambiguously Gay Duo" (a spoof on the apparent gay coding of superhero programs).

Unlike Jerry Falwell's homophobic diatribe against another children's television character that was often read as gay, Tinky Winky from the *BBC's Teletubbies*, the media attention currently garnered by *SpongeBob SquarePants* seems more generously spirited. Falwell's outrage over "innocent children" being subjected to the gay identity of Tinky Winky of course begs the fundamental question: if children were so innocent in the first place, how would they be able to "read" a character as gay *or* straight? In keeping with Nickelodeon's method of addressing its audience as active, politically engaged citizens, the creators of *SpongeBob SquarePants* don't make this assumption about the innocence of their audience and instead admit to the campy quality of the show. For instance, Tom Kenny, who voices SpongeBob, was interviewed on a late-night talk show (already an indication of the show's transgenerational appeal) and was asked about the sexuality of the show's main character. He denied that SpongeBob was created as a gay character but did say that "all the main characters are hiding horrible secrets of their own."⁶⁴ The mainstream media have generally reported the "story" of SpongeBob's sexuality with good humor. As Heather Hendershot has argued, the show "parodies masculinity and features the most 'out' gay character on children's television" but does so in an "innocent," playful manner;

she continues, “*SpongeBob* is loved by adults for its ‘childlike’ naivete, but the show is also quite ‘childlike’ in its playful interest in bums (tits are of less interest) and, more generally, in the performance of gender.”⁶⁵

SpongeBob “performs” gender in a way characteristic of the cultural and media context in which the program emerged. More specifically, by 1999, camp and irony was not a marginalized, subversive rhetoric that was contained in a “wink wink nudge nudge” kind of style, where certain audiences would “get it,” and others wouldn’t. Rather, by this moment, everyone “got it” and camp and irony was normalized within media consumer culture. Ellen DeGeneres came out, both publicly and on her television sitcom, in 1997; *Will and Grace*, a sitcom that features two openly gay men as lead characters, was a huge success; the “lesbian episode” was talked about as a particularly common rite of passage among young college women; and ironic, jaded female heroines such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and MTV’s *Daria* populated the television landscape as exemplars of savvy, postfeminist chic. *SpongeBob* was quite different from *Ren & Stimpy*. It is not mean-spirited or sharply sardonic and critical but rather sweet and playful. However, it is also campy, and occasionally ironic.⁶⁶ The sexual nature of *SpongeBob*’s and Patrick’s relationship is not always contained and hidden, and the other characters on the show also generate an ironic reading: *SpongeBob*’s pet snail named Gary (who meows); the boss, Squidward, who is more stereotypically figured as a “queen”; and the primary female character, Sandy, who is definitely more an example of lesbian style than hegemonic femininity. The visual and stylistic characteristics of *SpongeBob* are reflective of the arguments I’ve made throughout this book about consumer citizenship: a particular knowledge base of the audience is assumed, a sophistication (both economically and sexually) is relied upon.

Rebecca Farley says about play, “Play can be thought of as a mode of communication emphasizing disruption, imagination, expressivity and (above all) fun.”⁶⁷ For Farley, the way in which prime time animated programs such as *The Flintstones* and *Ren & Stimpy* attract an adult as well as a child audience lies not in a double code built into the programming but rather in how these programs incorporate play as a primary mode of representation.⁶⁸ Because the playfulness of animated shows is present in both the aesthetic form of the programs, in the way that animation stretches the bounds of reality and exaggerates and modifies representation, as well as in the content, where the scripts deliberately play with normative conventions and typical situations (both domestic and public), it challenges an argument about double coding that relies precisely on this kind of separating form from content. As Roger Silverstone notes, play disrupts these kinds of categories altogether: adult from child, as well as form from content. As

Silverstone puts it, “Play brings the child out in the adult; and the adult out in the child. Play enables the exploration of that tissue boundary between fantasy and reality, between the real and the imagined, between the self and the other. In play we have a licence to explore, both our selves and society. In play we investigate culture, but we also create it.”⁶⁹ As Silverstone implies, play involves a kind of transgression, but it is more contained than the edgier, more critical play of a show like *Ren & Stimpy*. Because the current political economy involves commodifying precisely this kind of playful transgression, transforming ironic play into a market *strategy* rather than a *challenge* to the market, popular culture produced within this context similarly incorporates irony and play. The consumer citizen whom engages this playful, ironic text is also part of this market strategy. *SpongeBob* is what Silverstone might call a product of postmodern culture, which is defined by continuous transgression and challenging of social and symbolic boundaries: “In architecture and in literature, but most especially in the hybrid forms of the electronic media, through parody and pastiche, the world becomes real only in its reflections. But the mirrors are fun-fair mirrors. They reflect only to distort . . . In all these and other places the media are playing, playing with each other and playing with us. And we in turn play with them. Their lack of seriousness is serious. Their seriousness is disarming. Their disarming is ironic. Their irony is compulsive, celebratory.”⁷⁰ *SpongeBob SquarePants* is just this disarming, celebratory character who is also serious and ironic. The ideological address of the program is ambiguous; it at times seems sharply critical, but it never feels “anti-establishment.” One sixteen-year-old girl I interviewed was more specific about the playful appeal of *SpongeBob*: “It’s a good show . . . I think it’s partly a trend, but it’s a little bit more. It’s like an escape. If you’re having a rough day you can escape to Bikini Bottom where everything is like good. And you can have a little half an hour of happiness before you get back to your day.” This “little half an hour of happiness” is the celebratory transgression of boundaries to which Silverstone refers; *SpongeBob* thus provides a non-threatening, humorous escape for (at least some of the) audience.⁷¹

In one episode, “Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy II,” the opening scene depicts *SpongeBob* watching television in his pineapple house in Bikini Bottom, waiting for his favorite show, “Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy,” to begin. As he is watching, he is eating Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy cereal and waiting for the Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy toy that comes with the cereal (the Branded Mermaid Munchers). *SpongeBob* wins a prize from a Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy contest and anxiously awaits the mail (which comes almost instantaneously) for its arrival. The scene is a clear ironic—and critical—commentary on the fusion of children audiences, commercial television, and consumption habits

that characterizes the dominant children and media relationship. The Branded Mermaid Munchers take aim at cereal brands (and their indistinctness from each other) and the way networks manipulate and buy their audiences. Like other brands produced during this historical moment, this metanarrative critiquing children's commercial culture also works to *legitimate* children's commercial culture by creating a brand identity that appears to be empowering for its audience of consumer citizens. This episode continues by highlighting the antics of SpongeBob with the real Mermaid Man and Barnacle Boy as they fight crime in Bikini Bottom. The two superheroes, however, are elderly and arthritic—Mermaid Man's back cracks as he strikes a pose to impress SpongeBob—and they both live in a home for the elderly, complete with communal lunch and entertainment room. The episode is filled with campy bits: SpongeBob wears only his underwear, because he wants to give the illusion of tights (since all superheroes wear tights, of course); the sexual relationship between the two elderly superheroes is ambiguous but clearly co-dependent; and the rendering of animated sound effects, while reminiscent of *Batman and Robin's* "Wham!" or "Blammo!," is slightly more self-mocking and tongue in cheek: "Lame!" or "Cardboard!"

In other episodes, the camp qualities are even more apparent. In "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" SpongeBob feels sorry for his friend Squidward, who is fired from his job and ends up homeless. SpongeBob takes him in and ends up becoming his personal servant—he feeds him, bathes him, and reads to him. In one scene, Squidward insists on SpongeBob wearing his "uniform," and SpongeBob returns wearing a typical "French maid" uniform—short black dress, frilly white apron, little hat. When SpongeBob turns around, his underwear is revealed, as the dress has no back. SpongeBob is often seen in drag, like other campy icons ranging from Tony Curtis to Mr. Smithers on *The Simpsons*. Like those other characters, SpongeBob is "performing" gender in the sense that Judith Butler discusses it: rather than simply a role he takes on and off at whim, the cross-dressing of SpongeBob becomes his gender in the sense that it is a constant performative style. His character is obsessed with showing his underwear, a gesture both to the target audience of young males but also to the transgressive sexual politics that is hinted at throughout the show. As Hendershot points out, "SpongeBob's last name might as well be 'Underpants' not 'SquarePants,' since he truly delights in his tights-whities."⁷² The dependability of SpongeBob's underpants is clearly part of the camp element of the show, while it is also a visual reminder of SpongeBob's masculinity. Indeed, SpongeBob's masculinity is often questioned in the show—he is depicted as a wimp, a crybaby, and a nerd, among other decidedly "unmasculine" traits. Sandy the female squirrel is clearly stronger and more muscular than SpongeBob. Hendershot argues that

SpongeBob's ambiguous masculinity demonstrates that "it is fun . . . to be a sissy-boy, and, occasionally, parodically masculine or feminine, and, at other times, seemingly asexual."⁷³ However, the display of his male underpants seem to be there as a reassurance to the audience that the sponge is, in fact, a man. The contradictory nature of the camp style in relation to gender and subversion within *SpongeBob* functions as part of consumer citizenship—the politics of gender subversion that *SpongeBob* references are reframed as a signature of the Nickelodeon brand where everyone is in on the joke—the creators, the audience, and SpongeBob himself.

THE FAIRLY ODDPARENTS

Another recent hit on Nickelodeon is *The Fairly OddParents*. The show continues the network's tradition of being creator-driven. Because of this, the program resembles other Nickelodeon programs: there is little explicit violence, the show revolves around one kid, Timmy, who is quite ordinary, yet everyone around him is crazy, the program is ironic and campy and often contains subtle commentary about contemporary social life. Timmy is reflective of the consumer citizen imagined by Nickelodeon. That is, *Fairly OddParents*, like *SpongeBob SquarePants*, offers an ambiguous ideological message: at times it critiques the corporate conditions within which it is created, but the commentary works ironically to legitimate the show (and thus Nickelodeon) and its narrative. Perhaps the most explicit social commentary is the campy theme of the show itself: the program is about ten-year-old Timmy, whose parents are simply too busy for him—they worry about him and love him but are constantly at work and are obviously neglectful. An illustration of this is in the surprisingly critical opening to each episode, which depicts Timmy's parents as two cardboard cut-out characters, standing in the doorway of a suburban home, smiling and waving. To compensate for their neglect, Timmy's parents hire a babysitter, the evil Vicky, who is not concerned with Timmy's welfare at all. This could clearly be read as a statement about the status of many children in contemporary U.S. society, living in a single-parent or dual-parent, dual-income household, where a babysitter is present more often than a parent. The fact that the babysitter is created as mean-spirited, a young girl who doesn't care about Timmy, could also be read as a commentary about women in the work force, and the "consequences" that are paid by making that "choice." Timmy is not destined, however, to be an ordinary latchkey kid—instead, he has very unusual godparents, the fairies Cosmo and Wanda, who grant him his every wish, so long as he articulates it.

The series was created by Butch Hartman, an animator who had worked on



27. Timmy Turner and one of his “fairly odd parents” from *The Fairly OddParents*, 2005.

Nickelodeon previously. Hartman explicitly credits the success of *SpongeBob* as “opening the door” for something such as *The Fairly OddParents*; in a newspaper interview, he said, “I owe a lot to ‘SpongeBob.’ They paved the way with a really wacky style of comedy.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, *The Ren & Stimpy* show, a show that much more clearly “paved the way” for a wacky style of comedy, is completely erased here. In fact, the article goes on to say, “The playful spirit and escapist fun at the heart of Nickelodeon shows like ‘SpongeBob’ and ‘Fairly Odd Parents’ never lapse into the edgier high jinks of ‘The Simpsons,’ ‘South Park,’ or Cartoon Network’s satirical late night ‘Adult Swim.’”⁷⁵ The creative and economic moment of the early twenty-first century, when both *SpongeBob* and *The Fairly OddParents* are produced, is a moment in which the “wacky style” of humor and animation of these programs has been mainstreamed and no longer attracts a kind of subcultural, or even an animatophile, following. Rather, the fans of these shows are fans of primetime animation in general: these programs are aired to an audience well seasoned by the commodification of irony, the mainstreaming of camp, and the general lack of earnestness (except as parody) in animated shows that appeal to both kids and adults.

The Fairly OddParents consciously supports and continues to create the overall mission of Nickelodeon. For instance, Nickelodeon has explicitly avoided animated shows about superheroes because of the violent overtones, the connections with the toy market, and the ways superhero programs (such as *Batman* or *Spiderman*) have historically catered explicitly to boys.⁷⁶ As Cyma Zarghami, then senior vice-president of programming at Nickelodeon, commented, “Historically, when you have superheroes, then the potential for violence comes along with it. We try to stay away from violence. We also celebrate normal kids as



28. Timmy from *The Fairly OddParents*, 2005.

special in their own way. Typically, those programs are also boy driven. That's not to say we will never do a superhero program. But if we do it, we'll do it in a Nickelodeon way." One example of doing superheroes the "Nickelodeon way" is *The Fairly OddParents*, which takes this a step further, explicitly mocking the superhero genre, with a series of episodes that have to do with Timmy's favorite superhero, the Crimson Chin. The Crimson Chin has superpowers in his exaggerated chin, and his voice is performed by the late-night talk show host Jay Leno, who also possesses a famous chin. His body is overmuscled and huge, and he talks only in the "action phrases" that are part of the toy action figure of Crimson Chin. In one episode, "Chin Up!," the program mocks superheroes in general by setting the scene at a comic book expo, where, as Timmy explains, he and his friends can dress up and "prove they're not geeks!" Timmy goes to the expo to meet Crimson Chin, who shows up on stage as an overweight, unshaven, middle-aged man. He trips and falls off the stage, and his crimson outfit, which is too small to begin with, reveals the crack of his butt. Timmy, extremely disappointed with this version of Crimson Chin, wishes that the "real Crimson Chin" would appear. When the "real" superhero arrives, it is only to find out that he is a made-up character, an imaginary being. When this is explained to Crimson Chin, he goes into a deep depression, where he tries to "deal with the fact that I don't exist—that I'm FICTIONAL!" Although Timmy wishes him back into the comic book, as opposed to the "real" world of the comic book expo, Crimson Chin remains in a fetal position, crying for "thirty-six pages." Timmy tries to save him, only to be greeted with "oh you're the 'real' boy who showed me that I'm a big fat lie." The episode continues in a very self-reflexive way, both mocking and praising comic book culture by having the characters in the show move within

the “panels” of the book, deliberately disrupting any kind of narrative trajectory or logic. Timmy mocks superhero culture—at one point, when he calls Spatula Woman’s spatula (apparently her weapon) a “thingy,” he says to himself, “Hmmm . . . I gotta work on my heroic dialogue.” The most evil villain is Bronze Knee Cap, who hurts people by kneeling them in vulnerable places, again critiquing the hypermasculinity and hyperbolic violence of superhero cartoons. The episode involves a storyline about the real and the imaginary, the authentic superhero and the fake superhero—and mocks and satirizes those boundaries even as the actual show, *The Fairly OddParents*, clearly supports them. This episode ends with the Crimson Chin thanking Timmy, saying, “You saved me from myself . . . Man, that was schmaltzy! Who’d you say writes my material?” To which Timmy answers, “Some forty-year-old guy who lives with his mother.”

The series often creates this kind of ironic, self-reflexive dialogue. Another episode, “Channel Chasers,” mocks all forms of animation as Timmy “travels” through different animated genres and morphs into a variety of animated forms, from the Muppets on *Sesame Street* to nostalgic Christmas animated shows such as *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* to 1970s-style characters such as Scooby-Doo to characters resembling Pokémon. In this episode, Timmy runs away from his “home” by traveling through time in television—explicitly commenting on the increasing sophistication of both technologies and audiences. Like the episodes about Crimson Chin, this episode constantly references popular and consumer culture as well as other television shows. One eleven-year-old boy I interviewed went into great detail when I asked him about *The Fairly OddParents*: “It’s so funny . . . yeah, and in one [episode] they have Arnold SchwarzenGerman and he’s this German guy and he talks like Arnold Schwarzenegger and then there’s this other one where they have this guy named Sylvester Calzone, like Sylvester Stallone or whatever.”⁷⁷ In another episode, “Boy Toy,” the show revolves around the relationships between boys and girls and consciously satirizes the toy market that is rigidly segmented into boy toys and girl toys. In this episode, Timmy becomes tired of his Crimson Chin action figure (it is last year’s model) and thus wants to destroy it. The episode is peppered with references to the silliness of action figures, especially focusing on the kind of physical action the dolls can do (a Timmy doll in this episode has “thumb-sucking action”) and action phrases. In fact, as Timmy articulates, one reason why he becomes so bored with his doll is because his “action phrases stink!” The Crimson Chin action figure says things like “I have goats in my pants!” and “Of all of my muscles, my brain is one of them!” The episode ends when Timmy gives his doll to a girl, who happens to be his evil babysitter Vicki’s kid sister. Timmy wishes for the Crimson Chin doll to have twelve thousand I Hate Vicky action phrases, including “Evil Red Heads



29. Timmy, in the episode “Channel Chasers,” is drawn in the style of the animated series *Fat Albert*, 2005.

30. Timmy in a rescripting of the classic Christmas Peanuts special, drawn in the style of the animator Charles Schulz, 2005.



make boy bands say EEEEEUUWWW!” The self-reflexive tone of *The Fairly Odd-Parents*, the way the show mocks television and commercial merchandise, the implicit commentary on the “oppression” of kids living in an adult world—all are part of a definition of consumer citizenship, where political ideologies that critique the political and cultural economy are harnessed to work for Nickelodeon—perhaps the “uber-product” of this same political and cultural economy.⁷⁸

Simensky, while discussing Nickelodeon animation, commented that other networks—especially Disney and Cartoon Network—have consciously imitated Nickelodeon in the general tone of their animation. The “cutting edge” that characterizes so many of Nickelodeon’s programs has been so normalized that many new programs on different channels have that “Nickelodeon feel.” In fact, it

is no longer specific to Nickelodeon; as Simensky says, “[In the early years], Nick had this house style. Some shows now (like *Fairly OddParents*) look like they could be on any of the networks. As successful as they are, I think that Nick has watered down their look some. Imitation, combined with sharing of people, and what you’re getting is less of a clear sensibility for each of these networks.”⁷⁹ The trajectory from *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, which was too risky for the risk-taking Nickelodeon, to *The Fairly OddParents*, which looks remarkably like *The Power Puff Girls* on Cartoon Network or *Recess* on Disney, is not simply one of animation style or aesthetic but also involves a commercial context where irony and camp are normalized and regularly employed as marketing strategies. The question at this point regards the process of interpreting this mainstream style: is the commodification of camp, in Susan Sontag’s words, “the betrayal of camp,” where to talk about it literally means to kill it? Or is Naomi Klein accurate in her cynicism concerning consumer culture, where she maintains a tight distinction between consumerism and citizenship? I argue here that this distinction is disrupted precisely by the creative productions of media outlets such as Nickelodeon, where the line between play and seriousness, irony and earnestness, and consumerism and citizenship is deliberately blurred and therefore made all the easier to interpret from the logic of a consumerism that makes everything saleable.

public and thus less brand-oriented, shows on television made the same strides. Recognizing *Sesame Street* would also undercut Nickelodeon's claims to authenticity as well, as part of what makes them genuine is that they were first and thus not following industry trends. I'm grateful to Heather Hendershot for bringing this to my attention.

- 56 Torres, *Living Color*.
- 57 Hall, "Spectacle."
- 58 Muñoz, "Casting a Wider Net."
- 59 Cabrera, "Adorable Dora."
- 60 Nakamura, *Visual Cultures*.
- 61 Cabrera, "Adorable Dora."
- 62 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*
- 63 This dual function of stereotypes is not unique to *Dora*, of course, but is rather characteristic of stereotyping more generally. For more on this, see Bhabha, "Other Question."
- 64 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 65 Cabrera, "Adorable Dora."
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 Seiter and Mayer, "Diversifying Representation."
- 68 Sender, *Business Not Politics*, 3.
- 69 Bruce Friend, interview by Ellen Seiter and Vicki Mayer, August 1997.
- 70 Hall, "Spectacle."
- 71 Zarghami, interview.
- 72 Klein, *No Logo*.
- 73 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*
- 74 C., interview by author, July 2002.
- 75 R., interview by author, July 2002.
- 76 L., C., K., J., interview by author, July 2002.
- 77 C., interview.
- 78 Holly Ocasio Rizzo. "Just Say Sí." *Hispanic Trends Magazine*, October 2004, <http://www.hispaniconline.com/trends/2004/oct/cover> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 79 *Ibid.*
- 80 *Ibid.*
- 81 Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*
- 82 Richard L. Vazquez, "The Brothers Garcia: A Boy's Show." *LasCulturas.com*. <http://www.lasculturas.com/aa/aa072300a.htm> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 83 This point was made to me in a conversation with Christopher Holmes Smith.
- 84 duCille, "Toy Theory," 264.

6. IS NICK FOR KIDS?

The third epigraph to this chapter, a quotation from Alfred Fung, is taken from Beatty, "Something about 'SpongeBob.'"

- 1 "Nautical Nonsense," editorial, *New York Times*, January 22, 2005.
- 2 *Ibid.*

- 3 Beatty, "Something about 'SpongeBob.'"
- 4 Hendershot, "Nickelodeon's Nautical Nonsense," 184.
- 5 Clark, "Commodity Lesbianism"; and Sender, "Selling Sexual Subjectivities."
- 6 Linda Simensky, interview by author, February 2004.
- 7 Key figures such as Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks (best known as a collaborator with Disney on such classic animated shorts as *Steamboat Willie* (1928), or Otto Messmer of *Felix the Cat* fame, created cinematic animation that was understood as both an artistic and cultural accomplishment. In fact, Paul Wells specifically connects early animation with modernism; in particular, animation represented the ideological characteristic of modernism to exist in a "state of becoming." As Wells puts it: "This readily relates to the dominant characteristic of metamorphosis in animation where all the events depicted in the graphic space are literally 'acts of becoming,' transitory and formative. Animation is the very language of the Modernist principle, often transcending linguistic necessity and enhancing fine art practice by challenging compositional and representational orthodoxies," Wells, *Animation and America*, 24.
- 8 This was a gradual process, however. As Mittell and Wells document, in the 1950s, television animation consisted largely of programs that were recycled from film, and they were scattered throughout the television schedule. The audience (primarily a residual film audience) for animation in the 1950s was considered to be both children and adults, and the television schedule reflected this transgenerational appeal: cartoons such as the *Gerald McBoing Boing Show* (1956–58) were occasionally shown during prime time, and there was no discrete designated time slot to program cartoons. Since much of the early televised animation came from film, and thus already had an adult audience, animation was not considered solely the purview of children. The humor involved in early animation was sophisticated and ironic, and the dialogue and the visuals appealed to many different audiences. Mittell, "Great Saturday Morning Exile"; Wells, *Animation and America*.
- 9 Mittell, "Great Saturday Morning Exile."
- 10 Boddy, *Fifties Television*; and Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.
- 11 Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 237.
- 12 Mittell, "Great Saturday Morning Exile," 49.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 14 The three-in-one market potential, as discussed in other chapters, indicates that children are conceived of by marketers as actually three different markets: a primary market, where children spend their own money on goods; an influential market, where children often influence their parents' purchasing choices; and a future market, where early brand loyalty is often seen as the ticket to a consumer for life. For further discussion of this, see McNeal, *Kids as Customers*.
- 15 Mittell, "Great Saturday Morning Exile," 34–35.
- 16 Simensky, interview.
- 17 Seiter, *Sold Separately*; and Englehardt, "Strawberry Shortcake Strategy."
- 18 Seiter, *Sold Separately*.
- 19 As Seiter points out, toy-based cartoons are not that different from other animated productions, but the assumptions about children needing protection from crass com-

- mercialism, among other things, framed the critical debates that surrounded this practice at the time. Seiter, *Sold Separately*.
- 20 Although, in the late 1990s, Nickelodeon did take on a few toy-based shows (for instance, *Butt Ugly Martians*), these programs were seen as not a “good fit” for the network and were quickly pulled off the air. As Simensky put it: “[Shows like *Butt Ugly Martians*] didn’t work for them, and Nick gets rid of the shows that don’t work for them. They get rid of them really quickly.” Simensky, interview.
- 21 Simensky, interview.
- 22 Simensky, “Early Days of Nicktoons,” 92.
- 23 Simensky, interview. Out of the original eight pilots, only three shows seemed to capture the “Nickelodeon voice” as well as appeal to kids: *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, *Rugrats*, and *Doug*.
- 24 Simensky, interview.
- 25 Wells, *Animation and America*.
- 26 Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 258; and Wells, *Animation and America*.
- 27 Wells also argues that animation is uniquely recombinant as an art form, another particularly postmodern characteristic. Recombinancy indicates that contemporary animated programs are based on other forms that have already been established in terms of audience and the market—movies, video games, comics. It is not simply that animated programs are intertextual (where other media texts are referenced within the animated text), but also that animation both reinvents and reinterprets other art forms, such as comics or film. The recombinant trend in animation is also indicative of a larger audience than simply children; adults recognize the various other art forms within the aesthetics of animation and often interpret animated programs through a nostalgic frame. Wells, *Animation and America*.
- 28 Farley, “Fred and Wilma,” 151.
- 29 Kinder, “Home Alone,” 75.
- 30 John Hardman, interview by Ellen Seiter and Vicki Mayer, July 1997. While Nickelodeon takes the credit for developing programs that appeal to both children and adults, *Sesame Street* had used this strategy for years. I’m grateful to Heather Hendershot for pointing this out to me.
- 31 Kinder, “Home Alone,” 77.
- 32 Frank, *Conquest of Cool*; Gladwell, “Coolhunt”; Klein, *No Logo*; and Sconce, “Smart Films.”
- 33 Klein, *No Logo*, 78.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Sender, “Selling Sexual Subjectivities,” 172–73.
- 36 Ibid., 175.
- 37 S., interview by author, July 2002.
- 38 A., interview by author, July 2002.
- 39 R., interview by author, July 2002.
- 40 Simensky, interview.
- 41 Bergman, *Camp Grounds*, 5.

- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp.'"
- 44 Ibid., 56.
- 45 Bergman, *Camp Grounds*.
- 46 Babuscio, "Gay Sensibility," 20.
- 47 See Bergman for more on this. The "wink" I am referring to indicates a kind of double code. This is well documented in work on gay advertising, for example Sender, *Business Not Politics*; the double code is also commonly found in transgenerational programming. An adult audience, situated historically, can provide the "missing information" and make sense of the social commentary of the show. The younger audience, on the other hand, sees appeal in this and other cartoons precisely because of the narrative codes that adults "don't get." As Herron ("Homer Simpson's Eyes") says, "Cartoons that become powerful and desirable are ones that create an oppositional space for kids to occupy, based on special knowledge and codes that only they understand." This special knowledge and code is precisely the kind of aesthetic convention that is needed to read a representational form as camp, because it is this which allows for a subtextual reading that would perhaps escape the mainstream, intended audience.
- 48 In other words, as Farley ("Fred and Wilma") points out, the theory of double coding is problematic because it ignores crucial contextual factors. For instance, adults might not like cartoons not because of their child-like character but rather because they are overly familiar. The marketing of cartoons is also rarely directed at adults, so there may also be a simple problem of access and availability. Kids, on the other hand, might like cartoons not because of their inherent naiveté (either their own or the cartoon's) but rather because there are few options for children, or there is a preconceived notion that kids *should* like cartoons.
- 49 As many have noted, Sontag's refusal to acknowledge the politics of camp also dehistoricizes its strategic function and thus disconnects camp from a subversive subjectivity and practice. Andrew Ross ("Uses of Camp") argues for the necessity of the socio/politico/economic context for camp to emerge in the 1960s. Ross's insistence on the political economy of camp is useful for theorizing a new rendering of camp in the twenty-first century in terms of children's television. Discussing the postwar 1960s culture, Ross argues, "Just as the new presence of the masses in the social and cultural purview of the postwar State had required a shift in the balance of containment of popular democracy, so too, the reorganization of the capital bases of the cultural industries, the new media technology and the new modes of distribution that accompanied that shift necessarily changed the aesthetic face of categories of taste." Ross points to the way in which the style of camp both influences and is influenced by new markets within popular consumer culture. To insist that camp can be part of the popular mainstream is to challenge the idea that camp contains within it a simple double code where one audience reads one possible meaning, and another audience a different one. Indeed, one of the primary problems with a theory of doublecoding is that it relies upon a definite distinction between two taste cultures. If we consider animated programs such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* as contemporary versions of a camp aesthetic, this taste culture boundary is even more

disrupted. Thus a more complicated rendering of the theory of doublecoding is needed in order to situate the place of camp and irony within contemporary media culture (for both children and adults).

- 50 For further discussion of female impersonators, see Newton, *Mother Camp*.
- 51 Wells, *Animation and America*.
- 52 Farley, "Fred and Wilma," 157.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 54 Langer, "Ren & Stimpy." The subculture of animatophiles is characterized by a high degree of knowledge about animation and animators, a rejection of the infantilization of animation (in other words, a rejection of the idea that all animation is easy to interpret, formulaic filler for children), and most importantly, a dedication to the notion that author-driven animation (as opposed to factory- or mass-produced animation) is characterized by, among other things, the various ways in which the art form subverts dominant taste norms. As Langer points out, "The specialized knowledge of core animatophiles forms a different kind of cultural capital which is defined by its opposition to, or separateness from, the tastes of mainstream culture." *Ren & Stimpy* was precisely the kind of "subversive" animation that animatophiles loved—it was campy and ironic and thus engendered a sophisticated sense of humor, but it was also crude and distasteful.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 *Ibid.*, 168.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 58 Kinder, "Home Alone"; Langer, "Ren & Stimpy."
- 59 Langer, "Ren & Stimpy."
- 60 For further discussion of SpongeBob's unspecific age, see Hendershot, "Nickelodeon's Nautical Nonsense."
- 61 Simensky, interview.
- 62 Beatty, "Something about 'SpongeBob.'"
- 63 Dylan Swizzler, "There's Something about SpongeBob," Double Take, *Planet Out*, October 25, 2002, <http://www.planetout.com/news/feature.html?sernum=416> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 64 Josh Grossberg, "A 'Sponge'-Worthy Gay Icon?" *E! Online News*, October 8, 2002, <http://www.eonline.com/news/article/index.jsp?uuid=6d615ab2-a11b-47d2-boa2-5b3b6925cb5f> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 65 Hendershot, "Nickelodeon's Nautical Nonsense," 197. Indeed, when I asked young Nickelodeon fans about the relationship between SpongeBob and Squidward, not a single one mentioned that it could potentially be a sexual relationship—rather, kids said things like, "SpongeBob likes Squidward, but Squidward doesn't like SpongeBob," or "They're neighbors usually and Squidward doesn't really like SpongeBob because he's annoying . . . He usually annoys him in most of the shows, but it's kind of like funny that he annoys him." The kids I interviewed did comment on, however, the campy qualities of the show: "[*SpongeBob* is a good show] because it's really funny, and it's really unrealistic, and all the characters are sort of weird and funny. And so when they're all put together it makes a fun show." Another young fan commented on the originality of *SpongeBob*: "It's a newer TV

- series, so people have not run out of—they haven't seen each one like ten times already.” M. and C., interviews by author, July 2002.
- 66 Hendershot argues that *SpongeBob* is one of the least ironic shows on TV; I argue differently, seeing the “straight” earnestness of *SpongeBob* to be its ironic edge.
- 67 Farley, “Fred and Wilma,” 160.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 69 Silverstone, *Why Study the Media?* 64.
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 Another seventeen-year-old girl put it this way: “It’s like different than all the other shows on Nickelodeon. The humor’s a lot different. It’s just really really funny. Some of the time on Nickelodeon, they have shows where the humor is so like for younger people that I’m like, ‘that’s dumb.’ But *SpongeBob*, everybody laughs. I know my brother, he’s nineteen, and he watches *Spongebob*. And he loves that show.” In yet another attempt to define the humor of *SpongeBob*, an eleven-year-old boy put it succinctly, “It’s stupidly funny.” S. and M., interviews by author, July 2002.
- 72 Hendershot, “Nickelodeon’s Nautical Nonsense,” 199.
- 73 *Ibid.*, 200.
- 74 Kendall Lyons, “Interview with Butch Hartman.” *Animation Insider*, July 24, 2006, <http://www.animationinsider.net/article.php?articleID=1088> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 75 *Ibid.*
- 76 Seiter and Mayer, “Diversifying Representation.”
- 77 R., interview by author, July 2004.
- 78 This idea comes from Hendershot, who sees Nickelodeon as the “uber-brand.”
- 79 Simensky, interview.

CONCLUSION

- 1 Charlyn Keating Chisholm, “Nickelodeon Family Suites,” About.com, <http://hotels.about.com/od/orlando/p/mco—nickelodeon.htm> (accessed March 11, 2007).
- 2 “Nick Study Suggests Best Way to Target Kids,” *USA Today*, <http://usatoday.com> (accessed December 2005).
- 3 McDowell, “Pitching to Kids.”
- 4 Uricchio, “Television’s Next Generation.”
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Park, *Consuming Citizenship*, 3.
- 7 Hendershot, *Nickelodeon Nation*.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 10.