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Masculinity Between Animation and Live Action, or, SpongeBob v. Hasselhoff

SpongeBob SquarePants is known as a visually appealing, scurrilous entertainment for children, and an escapist, psychedelic pleasure for adults.[1] The big-eyed yellow sponge (voiced by Tom Kenny) who lives on the ocean-floor beaches of Bikini Bottom has charmed audiences since Nickelodeon first aired the programme in 1999. The 2004 *SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* is also a valuable theoretical text, as it contrasts live action with animation meaningfully in its narrative and ideology as well as its aesthetics. The contrast of medium primarily corresponds to the film's investigation of gender and age difference: grotesque, adult hypermasculinity is associated with live action, while animation is associated with ambiguously gendered, polymorphously perverse childhood. Ultimately, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* represents a victory of childhood over adulthood and, *in the same move*, of animation over live action.

The tension between animation and live action – and related forms such as motion capture and rotoscoping – is a complicated tangle with a rich history. At the 2010 Society for Animation Studies Annual Conference, Harvey Deneroff and Victoria Deneroff (2010) argued, through social practice theory, that strain arises between animators and motion capture artists in part because each group is accustomed to different ways of working. At the same conference, Lisa Bode (2010) analysed how the marketing and reception of motion capture often emphasizes actors' work while it marginalizes the work of animators. These conference papers contended that status, power and financial compensation are at stake in the tensions between animators and other film artists.

For a viewer unfamiliar with such industrial and artistic practices, these tensions may still be glimpsed in ancillary materials such as DVD Special Features. For example, in an interview on the DVD of *Waltz With Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), director of animation Yoni Goodman states: 'There's something a bit diminishing when you do an animation and people tell you, "Oh, you did it in rotoscoping"'. He holds up his finger and slows his voice to make his point clear: 'No rotoscoping in this movie. None.' Film texts are, then, contested territories in which differences amongst frame-by-frame animation, live action, motion capture and rotoscoping are embedded in artistic and corporate cultures, and in marketing and reception practices. Indeed, for many viewers, film texts themselves may offer the most accessible point of entry into debates around animated and live action-based forms. A film text such as *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, which explicitly works through such differences, consequently has theoretical, ideological and even pedagogical dimensions.

'Kids' v. 'Men'

SpongeBob SquarePants seems at first an unlikely figure for an investigation of masculinity at the crossroads of live action and animation because his sexuality, gender identity and even his age are very fluid. On one hand, SpongeBob and his best friend, the pink sea star, Patrick (Bill Fagerbakke), have been interpreted as a gay couple. Not only does the show have a camp sensibility, but SpongeBob and Patrick are 'paired with arguably erotic intensity' (Dennis, 2003, p.137), and occasionally even as a reproductive couple (Hendershot, 2004, p.197). The television

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[1] See Hendershot (2004) for an analysis of the show's cross-generational appeal, and Rice (2009) for details about demographics of the audience.

programme has a large queer following (Halberstam, 2005; London, 2005; Musto, 2005), and has been virulently, publicly attacked by right-wing Focus on the Family founder James Dobson for implicitly advocating (male) homosexuality (Keser, 2005; Parker 2009). On the other hand, SpongeBob and Patrick are 'not consistently coded as romantic partners' (Dennis, 2003, p.137), and series creator and feature film director Stephen Hillenberg has denied that SpongeBob is either gay or straight, stating that he is, rather, 'asexual' (London, 2005; Silverman, 2005). While the *SpongeBob SquarePants* television programme and the feature film both leave plenty of room for queer interpretation, neither commits explicitly to erotic same-sex desire, and allusions to adult, genital sexuality are confined to double entendres. More overtly and consistently, *SpongeBob* is characterized by infantile polymorphous perversity (Hendershot, 2004, p.200). In the feature film's most orgiastic scene, for example, SpongeBob and Patrick overdose on enormous ice-cream sundaes in a frenzy of childish oral sexuality. The hangovers they experience the next morning (SpongeBob even sports stubble) encapsulate the way in which *SpongeBob* is overdetermined by both gleeful, 'innocent' childish excess and adult meanings and experiences.

Alongside the ambiguity of their sexual desire is the difficulty of SpongeBob and Patrick's gender construction, which is profoundly inflected by the indeterminacy of their ages. Heather Hendershot states that Hillenberg describes SpongeBob 'as a man-child. He works, like an adult, but plays like a child' (Hendershot, 2004, p.188). Both Patrick and SpongeBob lead grown-up lives insofar as each dwells alone, and SpongeBob has a job as a fry cook at a diner. However, the feature film begins with SpongeBob's employer (Clancy Brown) passing him over for a promotion at work because he is just a kid, while to be a manager, his employer tells him, 'you have to be a man'. The opposition between the potentially gender neutral 'kid' and the explicitly gendered 'man' is thus of paramount importance, and is central to the film. However, as Hendershot points out, SpongeBob's status as an *animated* character means that, unlike Paul Reubens as Pee-Wee Herman, SpongeBob 'will never tip his hand about whether he is "really" a boy or man' (2004, p.189); there is no adult male body 'propping up' (Hendershot, 2004, p.189) SpongeBob's performance of childhood *or* adulthood. In other cases, the voice actor might prop up the character's age more clearly. In this case, though, while Tom Kenny, SpongeBob's voice, presumably identifies as a man, the character's 'high, nasal', seemingly helium-induced tones (Breznican, 2004) do not immediately evoke adult masculinity. Signifiers of SpongeBob's age conflict with one another.

The terms 'kid/man' elide the categories of 'boy', 'girl' and 'woman'; however, it is difficult to know how these latter classifications may be relevant. Since both SpongeBob and Patrick are called 'he', the use of the word 'kid' might be seen as an instance of unmarked masculinization of the general category. In her discussion of the feature film, Judith Halberstam (2005) exposes its elision of girlhood by consistently referring to SpongeBob and Patrick as 'boys'. However, the word 'boys' does not appear anywhere in the film, and several factors trouble any easy correspondence between 'kids' and 'boys'. First, the contrast between SpongeBob's piercing soprano and Patrick's thick baritone destabilizes at least one of the common signifiers used to differentiate adult masculinity from adult femininity, girlhood and boyhood. Second, the apparently gender neutral terms 'goofballs' and 'goofy goobers' are used interchangeably with 'kids'.[2] Finally, the climactic musical number which affirms the power of childhood over that of adult masculinity features a glammy SpongeBob singing an adaptation of big-haired, androgynous

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[2] This does not necessarily apply outside of English. In the Québécois dub, for example, SpongeBob refers to himself and Patrick as 'gamins', a masculine noun, rather than 'kids'. Similarly, 'goofy goober' is translated as 'glouton barjo', also a masculine noun.

Twisted Sister's 'I Wanna Rock', while pink Patrick makes an appearance in stilettos and fishnets. Although SpongeBob and Patrick are both 'kids', they are not kids in the same way, and they are certainly not 'boys' in the same or any normative way.

If sexuality and gender identities in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* can be difficult to pin down, its aesthetic construction appears relatively straight-forward. With his minimally humanoid, squash-and-stretch body, the titular protagonist seems to be a quintessentially animated character. However, a 'live' or photographic SpongeBob appeared on television as early as 2000,[3] and Hillenburg has cited live-action sources of inspiration for the show, including Charlie Chaplin, Pee-Wee Herman (Zeller, 2001) and Jerry Lewis (Hendershot, 2004, p.185). Hillenburg has also specifically stated (Breznican, 2004) that the narrative of *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* is inspired by Pee-Wee Herman's first feature film, directed by Tim Burton in 1985. Thus, SpongeBob has live action in his DNA, and this surfaces as one of the 2004 feature film's main preoccupations.

The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie is predominantly composed of 2D, cel-style animation, but it expands a motif of the TV show by framing the animated action with the story of a live-action group of pirates who open the film by singing the *SpongeBob* theme song.[4] The framing narrative contains a few hand-drawn touches, such as the glow of what we expect to be gold but turns out, much to the pirates' delight, to be tickets to *The SpongeBob Movie*. However, on the whole, the live-action world is identified with burly though campy adult men who exhibit a childlike excitement about going to the movies, and who become the audience's screen surrogate as they make their way to the cinema and settle in for the show. The framing function of live action is further emphasized by the end credit sequences: first, the hand-drawn underwater scenery gives way to the photographic indexicality of rolling waves; then, when the credits are finished, an impatient cinema employee throws the pirates out of the cinema. The framing narrative thus sets up duplicitous identification between the audience and child*like* but adult-*looking* characters in a live-action world that is never far from the animated one.

The live-action frame, dominated by adult masculinity, intrudes only once – and very significantly, as we will see – in the middle of the animated feature; however, the bulk of the action thematically investigates the concept of manhood, and what kinds of heroism are open to kids *as such*. Like Pee-Wee Herman's search for his stolen bicycle in *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* tells the story of SpongeBob and Patrick on a quest, in this case for King Neptune's stolen crown. The crown is a symbol of power and royalty, but Neptune (Jeffrey Tambor) wants it most urgently because it covers his bald spot; this is just one of many instances in which adult masculinity is signified, albeit facetiously, in relation to hair and

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[3] In the first season, episodes such as 'Plankton!' and 'Mermaidman and Barnacleboy' feature live action elements. The 2000 Christmas Special also features extensive sequences with Patchy the Pirate (Tom Kenny), and even briefly anticipates the feature film by presenting 'live action' versions of SpongeBob and Patrick: a regular kitchen sponge with trousers and an inked-on face, and a dried pink sea star with googly eyes. As I discuss below, these 'live action' versions of the protagonists will return much more uncannily in the feature film. Hendershot argues that the show's combination of live action and animated elements is indebted to the Fleischer Brothers' Koko the Clown cartoons of the 1920's (2004, p.195-196).

[4] This is introduced as early as the pilot episode, 'Reef Blower', which begins with a photographic shot of a painting of a pirate. A live action mouth is superimposed onto the painting, which calls, 'Are you ready, kids?' 'Aye aye, captain', offscreen children reply. The pirate begins to sing the show's theme song, as the camera cuts first to a photographically rendered model of a small island with a palm tree and then descends through animated water to SpongeBob's pineapple house.

hairiness.[5] The connection between adult masculinity and hairiness is developed in an important scene at the film's midpoint, when Neptune's daughter (Scarlett Johansson) finds SpongeBob and Patrick faltering in their mission and urges them on by telling them that Bikini Bottom has been enslaved by the evil Plankton (Doug Lawrence) while her father is 'too distracted by his bald spot to do anything'. Lack of confidence reduces them to puddles of tears, so Neptune's daughter tricks them into persevering by sticking seaweed moustaches on their upper lips and persuading them that she has transformed them into men. The moustaches do indeed give SpongeBob and Patrick the confidence to continue, until Plankton's minion, Dennis the Hit Man (Alec Baldwin), tears the weeds off and, to rub salt in the wound, instantaneously sprouts a bushy upper lip through sheer willpower. The significance of this sequence is underlined by a song in the closing credits that begins: 'Patrick, you see I'm growing a moustache / and though I know I must ask you / does it really make me look like a man?' Faintly ludicrous and smacking of uncertainty, these lines typify how the film characterizes a kid's (or boy's?) preoccupation with manhood.

Live Action v. Deathly Inaction

The moustache sequence leads thematically into a more extensive presentation and, ultimately, a deflation of the concept of hairy adult masculinity established throughout the film. This later sequence, though not precisely the climax, is the film's most important psychological turning point. It affirms SpongeBob and Patrick's friendship, their ability to take on the film's villains, and their identities as *kids* rather than *men*. It also theorizes the relation between animation and live action as SpongeBob and Patrick find themselves in a live-action world for the better part of 15 minutes, and the framing narrative featuring the live-action pirates interrupts the story.

The film mutates into live action gradually. First the heavy, live-action foot of an antique diver's costume thuds into the animated environment. SpongeBob and Patrick are scooped up by the diver and wake up in a photographically rendered fish bowl. Patrick's first words, 'Are we dead?', ironically characterize this live-action environment as a place of death, and as they look around, the two protagonists are appalled to find themselves surrounded by dried-up marine life. They watch in horror as the diver laughs villainously and glues googly eyes onto a clam shell to make a tacky, touristy knick-knack. SpongeBob and Patrick appear to be bound for a similar fate as the diver puts them under a heat lamp to dry before he himself pops off to the loo. Languishing under the hot light, SpongeBob and Patrick bemoan their inability to save both Bikini Bottom and themselves – 'a couple of kids in way over their heads' – until they catch a glimpse of Neptune's crown with a price tag on it, and realize that they fulfilled their quest and 'did all right for a couple of goofballs'. Even as they shrivel in the heat, tears of joy well up in their eyes and they sing their pride in being goofy goobers. As their tears run together in a single heart-shaped drop at their feet, they morph into faceless, photographic images of a dried-up sea star and an ordinary, artificial kitchen sponge.

This morph is emphasized and estranged as the camera pulls back to encompass the pirates in the cinema weeping on each other's shoulders. At the same time as the animated heroes are reduced to live action (or rather deathly inaction), we see our screen surrogates watching the film. The self-referentiality is accentuated by the fact that a parrot, voiced by the film's director, urges us to 'shut up and keep watching the screen'. At this, the film cuts back to SpongeBob's world, where the heart-shaped tear drop trickles down a wire and creates a puff of smoke that sets off

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[5] As Hendershot points out, this is also elaborated in a television episode in which Patrick teaches SpongeBob, who is embarrassed at being called a baby, to be an adult. In this case, '"the icing on the maturity cake … [is] sideburns"' (Hendershot, 2004, p.188).

the sprinkler system. As the water streams onto the dried sea star and sponge, Patrick and SpongeBob pop up, animated once again. 'We're alive!' SpongeBob gasps, and the pirates in the audience cheer. All around the diver's workshop, dried-up sea creatures come back to 'life' by snapping from photographic into cel animated images. When the diver emerges from the washroom, a mob of angry sea creatures armed with glue and googly eyes overwhelms him; thus, animation dominates and subdues live action.

This sequence contains, in the shot of the protagonists' corpses, one of the most uncanny images in the film. As Andrew Osmond writes in *Sight and Sound,* 'A freak-out sequence has SpongeBob and Patrick being agonisingly dehydrated, turning into a real starfish and sponge as they "die", which is both sick-funny and distressing enough for the film to cut to a meta-cinema audience reassuring kids that things are OK' (2005). Nonetheless, the pirates cannot fully dispel the uncanniness. Alan Cholodenko's investigations of the uncanny in what he calls the animatic apparatus of the cinema resonate immediately with this sequence in *SpongeBob*. Cholodenko argues that death and stillness haunt cinema because the apparatus creates the *illusion* of life and motion rather than life and motion themselves; in the animation of film frames during projection, 'the inanimate becomes not merely animate but "animate inanimate"' (2004, p.109). Animation has a privileged status in the animatic apparatus because film frames generated one by one foreground and estrange the stillness that clings to the cinema in a way that frames photographed 24 per second do not. The sequence depicting SpongeBob and Patrick's deaths dramatizes animation's privileged status: it estranges the medium of live action by using photographic indexicality to signify *not* liveliness, action or even realness, but rather death, inertia, and the alienating fact that the hero of this story is a sponge, and an artificial one at that.

The underlying argument of this sequence – and of the whole film – is that animation is not only more childish, but also more loving and even more 'natural' than live action. As the diver's foot stomps into the animated environment, live action literally intrudes into animation as a villainous force of predatory adult masculinity, and the diver's over-the-top melodramatic gestures emphasize the falsity of this persona. By contrast, SpongeBob and Patrick's reactions ring with authenticity. Live action is not a default or 'normal' mode from which animated film departs, but rather an eerily unnatural medium most clearly estranged in the image of the protagonists' dried-up, photographically rendered corpses.

This unnaturalness is driven home by the image's single exception to photographic indexicality; namely, the heart-shaped tear drop. On a straightforward narrative level, the tear simply helps SpongeBob and Patrick out of a tight corner. On another level, however, the persistence of the drawn *medium* demonstrates that even when SpongeBob and Patrick are rendered lifeless by 'reality', a remnant of them remains animated, and saves them by virtue of the fact that it *is* animated and still capable of movement. This animated remnant is, furthermore, in a shape that symbolizes love, however much the show's creators may officially deny intentional queerness. It is also explicitly unmanly, which the moustache scene with Neptune's daughter establishes: she finds the protagonists rolling on the ground in tears, in direct contrast to the 'men' she convinces them they become. Thus the tear in this image helps to cement the equation of childishness on a narrative level with both same-sex erotics and the aesthetic strategies of cel animation. The double significance of the teardrop as same-sex desire and unmanliness may, of course, be seen to be contradictory and even objectionable; though open to a gay reading, *SpongeBob* is not without its ideological conflicts. However, this hand-drawn stain on the live-action canvas does bind together anti-normative images of masculinity and sexuality.

The Uncanny 'Hoff'

When this overdetermined tear does its work and SpongeBob and Patrick are reconstituted as animated figures, we might breathe a sigh of relief and settle in for the film's resolution; certainly the pirates' disappearance from the frame allows us to be sutured more completely into the story. However, we cannot return to the fully animated world of Bikini Bottom before one last uncanny, live-action figure appears. SpongeBob and Patrick have achieved their goal of recovering Neptune's crown, but have no way of returning to Bikini Bottom in time to free its enslaved denizens. Fortunately, help is on the way in the person of a hairy, muscled David Hasselhoff in full *Baywatch* regalia. As he runs across the sand, the camera, from SpongeBob and Patrick's POV, tilts as if our protagonists were raking their eyes up his body from feet to head. Homoerotic admiration and parody intersect. 'Who are you?' asks SpongeBob. 'I'm David Hasselhoff', states the apparition woodenly, and SpongeBob and Patrick let out an enthusiastic, childish 'Hooray!' The kids hop on his back and, using his body like a motorized surfboard, Hasselhoff sets out across the ocean. His head bobbles back and forth like that of a garish dashboard ornament, and he grins with smug confidence as he casts up a ferocious spray.

In spite of this list-ditch source of help, however, SpongeBob and Patrick cannot get home so easily. Plankton's minion, Dennis the Hit Man, rises out of the ocean and chases them over Hasselhoff's back, buttocks, and legs in the film's most violent showdown. As Hasselhoff's live-action body becomes a battleground, the camera lingers on his limbs in close-up from myriad angles, his body hair whistling in the breeze. It is another opportunity for double entendres and camp sensibility: when Dennis stabs Hasselhoff's buttock in an attempt to skewer SpongeBob, Hasselhoff winces stiltedly and calls, 'Oo, take it easy back there, fellas'. In the end, Dennis is swept away into the ocean, and the protagonists come to rest on the surface above Bikini Bottom. In an act almost shockingly grotesque, Hasselhoff rears up in the water like an industrial mechanism, his actions accompanied by heavy, clanging sound effects. His pectoral muscles move out from his body as if on tracks, and he places SpongeBob, Patrick, and Neptune's crown between them. Pumping his pecs so that the crown inflates, Hasselhoff gives one last, mighty push with his unnatural chest, and the protagonists burst from between his muscles and career down to the animated world of the ocean floor for their final confrontation with Plankton. In the last shot of Hasselhoff, the *Baywatch* star relaxes on the water after a job well done, only to be seared by a fiery, animated blast from the battle below.

By the time their impromptu boat enters the film, Spongebob and Patrick have already realized that they can be heroes *as kids*, so Hasselhoff is present primarily as a spectacle of the hairy adult hypermasculinity the protagonists have already rejected – a spectacle conjured in order to be exorcised. The grotesqueness of this figure has excited comment. Christy Lemire notes that '[t]he presence of David Hasselhoff, playing himself in full *Baywatch* rescue mode, should be funnier [...]. It's actually kinda awkward and creepy' (2004). Similarly, Roger Ebert states that the cameo is charming but not entirely comfortable: Hasselhoff 'gives SpongeBob and Patrick a high-speed lift back to Bikini Bottom and then propels them to the deeps by placing them between his pectoral muscles and flexing and popping. This is not quite as disgusting as it sounds, but it comes close' (2004). Although Hasselhoff helps SpongeBob and Patrick accomplish their goal, the intensity of his persona and the bizarre, tactile use of his body overshadow any function he performs in the plot, so he appears in sharp contrast to the kids rather than as one of their team. And, like the other live-action adult males in the film, the Hoff is subdued by the animated world, whether by Dennis's knife in his buttock, by the gentler pattering of SpongeBob and Patrick's feet, or by a cartoon fireball crisping his famous body hair.

Also like the other live-action men in the film, Hasselhoff is not a straightforward, 'natural' adult male; indeed, like the others, his appearance throws the notion of 'natural' masculinity into question. On one hand, the film appropriates him as a kind of fellow traveller of animation, as the industrial sound effects and the mechanization of his whole body as a motorboat, and especially of his pecs as a launching pad, make him appear cartoonish. However, the uncanniness of this appropriation hinges on the detail with which we see his 'real' body hair and computer-assisted but photographically captured musculature. The boundary between live action and animation is drawn not only to emphasize the age and gender differences between 'kids' and 'men', but also both the contiguity *and* incommensurability of the two media. In Hasselhoff, the film offers a vision of adult masculinity as hairy, risible, vulnerable, uncanny, and ultimately peripheral to the animated exploits of goofy kids. This sequence is the final and most powerful encounter between the protagonists and the world of 'real' or live-action men, and it drives home the film's thesis about the two media as clearly as it pokes fun at a heroic conception of manliness.

SpongeBob and Beyond: Denaturalizing Adult Masculinity

The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie can be seen as a series of rejections of live-action, adult masculinity: the diver disappears beneath a seething, vengeful mass of animated sea creatures; the Hoff disconcerts and repulses the cinema audience and then burns in a ball of animated fire; and the pirates who sing the theme song are ultimately ejected from the cinema. Each mode of masculinity relates to the 'kids' in different ways. The dime-novel villain invisible beneath the heavy diver's costume is purely antagonistic. The pirates' homosocial warmth and easy recourse to tears mirror and affirm the kids' culture and ethos. Finally, Hasselhoff is a figure of *Baywatch* valour set on display as a hairy, muscled cyborg; the helping hand he offers is completely alien to SpongeBob and Patrick's childlike form of heroism, and he is ridiculed as grotesque. This rejection of live-action masculinity does not mean, however, that these men are not integral to the meaning of the film: the affirmation of gleefully antirealist, child-centred animation rests on the spectacles of the men's tears, hair, muscles, strength, and vulnerability.

If it simply rejected adult masculinity, *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* would not have the theoretical weight that it does. It goes a step further, however, by *estranging* adult masculinity and demonstrating how the interface between live action and animation can challenge us to think about concepts of 'naturalness' in gender more broadly. Although the animated bodies do not adhere to rules of verisimilitude, they nonetheless denaturalize live-action screen bodies. The television show explores gender fluidity thematically, but the feature film examines it rigorously, and from a formal perspective. SpongeBob and Patrick's deaths set up the alienating uncanniness of live action, which casts a long shadow over the 'real' flesh of the live-action men. No longer natural, the 'realness' of the men does not appear as an *a priori* birthright, but as a fragile aesthetic construct. By extension, the contrast between animation and live action may even denaturalize 'real' bodies offscreen, so that we see these as discursive constructions as well.

SpongeBob's crisis in the representation of adult masculinity – not only around what constitutes heroism, but around what constitutes 'real' masculinity in an increasingly animated and computer-generated visual landscape – can be placed in relation to a trend in the contemporary superhero genre. Recent blockbusters such as the *Iron Man* movies (Jon Favreau, 2008 and 2010) and *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) contrast the physically disabled 'natural' adult male bodies of the protagonists with bodies that are technologically enhanced within the diegesis, and digitally enhanced within the aesthetics of the films. As computer generated imagery becomes more dominant, I believe that filmmakers and audiences are renegotiating the concepts of the

natural, the believable, and the aesthetically appropriate, particularly in relation to conceptions of adult masculinity. Thus, *SpongeBob* offers more than a queer or queer-friendly narrative. It offers a genuine challenge to the perceived naturalness of gender and of sexed bodies. Reading *SpongeBob* as an instance of denaturalization of masculinity in the encounter between animation and live action does not necessarily imply that masculinity is denaturalized in every such encounter. However, the reciprocal relationship in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* between the estrangement of masculinity and the affirmation of animation can inspire broader questions about how such contrasts of medium allow us to re-imagine grotesque and naturalized forms of gender, and how the denaturalization of gender may be intelligently effected through the tension between animation and live action.

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