

Kristian Chung

Mary Schmitt

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Bojack Horseman: A Cynic's Hollywood

We live in an era of self-criticism. The public has discovered that beyond the silver screen lies something sinister and toxic. Hollywood has become the symbol of the toxicity of American pop culture and fame. We've now discovered that perhaps some of the greatest artists that Hollywood has ever encountered in its illustrious history: Alfred Hitchcock, Quentin Tarantino, Stanley Kubrick, and many others, used manipulative and unethical practices in their celebrated works. Actors and veterans of the industry have come out to expose the machiavellian practices that permeate every facet of the industry. Though journalism has played a large part in the rise of this unveiling in the creation of the #MeToo movement, several creators have sought to use Hollywood itself as a medium of introspective criticism. Perhaps the most successful of these works is Netflix's adult animated series *Bojack Horseman* which features a protagonist that embodies the toxicity of the industry and the pitfalls of fame and public attention. But how does *Bojack Horseman* differentiate itself from the crowd? In the words of the series' creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg, "The brighter and sillier and cartoonier that we went, the more the audience was willing to go with us to these melancholy places which maybe in a live-action show would have come off as petty or saccharine." This statement especially rings true when comparing other

shows which have attempted a similar goal. Netflix's *Hollywood*, a live-action series depicting the perilous journey of several young industry workers, succumbed to critical failure due to its heavy-handed and less than subtle messaging. *Bojack Horseman*'s use of Shklovskian Estrangement defamiliarizes the audience to allow them to take in a larger message. Its surreal setting allows for the series' animal characters to become more human whilst maintaining a level of intersectionality and depth. The characters' animal nature does not turn them into living caricatures but rather allows for further levels of personality and wider symbolism within the plot. Comedy, commonly playing off of the show's surreal setting, allows for much needed relief for the audience and an incentive to continue moving with the dark subject matter and philosophy of the series. Additionally, by using established sitcom and animated comedy tropes, the series is able to grab the audience's attention and effectively hijack the narrative by transitioning from an episodic to a serial format. Because characters are thoroughly well established from their childhood to their adulthood, audiences are able to connect further with the corruption of the characters as the series continues. Cinematography and narrative structure allow for the series to make larger social critiques in the form of localized subplots as well as to support the series' subversion of the sitcom genre. By utilizing these elements, *Bojack Horseman* is able to paint a twisted view of modern-day Hollywood and the Hollywood of yesteryear as well as a much needed criticism to a variety of poignant social issues in the contemporary United States.

Due to the recent nature of the television series, *Bojack Horseman* lacks a widespread scholarly discussion. However, with the series' end, I believe that in the coming years it will quickly become recognized as a work worthy of scholarly interpretation. The public discourse on

the series has already grown exponentially. The series has been celebrated by BBC as “the best animation of the 21st century” and by Vox as “one of television’s best shows.” The show has been universally praised as a postmodern work and a genre-defying masterpiece that provides one of the most poignant criticisms of modern popular culture available today. The scholarly discussion on this series primarily is set on establishing *Bojack Horseman* within the timeline of postmodern animation and television. Raul Sanchez Saura in “*Bojack Horseman*, or the Exhaustion of Postmodernism and the Envisioning of a Creative Way Out” argues that *Bojack Horseman* is a postmodern product of American cynicism brought on due to the failure of the American capitalist state as proposed by Francis Fukuyama in “The End of History and the Last Man.” Scholars have also been analyzing Bojack Horseman, the protagonist, from a psychoanalytic lens. Shreyashee Roy proposes that Bojack’s alcohol dependency is reflective of the general tendency in contemporary society to utilize alcohol as a substitute for psychiatric treatment. “Bojack’s drinking becomes a maladaptive response to his depression.” (Roy 1). Visual analysis and film studies have also entered the conversation through studying *Bojack’s* genre-bending through cinematography. Alissa Chater explores how *Bojack Horseman* is able to subvert expectations through changing how scenes early in the show are structured and by contrasting the cinematography within *Horsin’ Around* (the fictional sitcom within the show) with the actual show, as both are cut back to and fro in order to establish the show’s departure from the traditional sitcom format typical of the adult-animated genre. Ultimately, the scholarly discussion provides elements as to how *Bojack Horseman* has been able to resonate with audiences through its six year run.

The pilot episode of *Bojack Horseman*, appropriately named *The Bojack Horseman Story: Chapter One*, introduces the protagonist through a Charlie Rose-style interview sequence. It is here that the audience is immediately introduced to Bojack's crude and decadent nature as he parks in a handicapped parking spot and shows up to the interview drunk. When asked about his ongoing projects, Bojack has nothing to say except a long, drawn out "um.." The episode is centered around Bojack's struggle to write his book and introduces several main characters. However, the episode also is the beginning of the series' rhetorical strategy. The episode is focused primarily upon comedy and utilizing fast cutaway gags in order to keep the audience's attention as the large cast of characters unfolds. A conversation in which Princess Carolyn, Bojack's long time on and off lover, explains to Bojack about how he's afraid of commitment immediately cuts away to a scene of Bojack stealing a car and driving away after Princess Carolyn makes the suggestion that they should have a child. Almost every scene has a cutaway gag in this vein. The episode also uses the typical television three-act-structure. Act one establishes the problem: Bojack needs to write his novel. Act two features the character's reaction to the problem: Bojack throws a party to meet Diane, his ghostwriter. Act three is the resolution of the story which results in Bojack actually meeting Diane. The first half of the season appears to follow the three act structure with each episode having a concrete ending and issue that the characters need to solve. However, the formula begins to show cracks in episode 3 when Sarah Lynn, Bojack's co-star on *Horsin' Around*, sets fire to a couch in Bojack's living room. In the remaining scenes and for the remainder of the season, the couch remains unchanged in its destroyed state in the background. Subtle background details like this provide an early clue to the audience that *Bojack Horseman* isn't an ordinary sitcom like the fictionalized *Horsin'*

Around. Actions do have consequences and these consequences will make themselves known as the series progresses.

Bojack Horseman's A-B plot format is a major element as to how it makes the bulk of its one-off social critiques. Whilst *Bojack Horseman* provides a macro-critique of the toxicity of Hollywood, it provides smaller, localized social critiques in the form of subplots. Oftentimes, Bojack will drive the narrative forward by progressing the story and his own characterization whilst side characters, such as Todd or Diane, will explore other aspects of the world unrelated to the main storyline. *Yes And* (Season 2 Episode 10) of the series serves as an excellent example of this dynamic. In the episode, Bojack has to deal with the destruction of his life-long dream. The production of *Secretariat* has been hijacked as focus groups find the movie's dark, realistic tone unsettling. Therefore, a new director, Abe D'Catfish, has taken over. Abe is the epitome of the career blockbuster director. He doesn't care about the subject material and is focused on making the film as public-friendly as possible. Bojack criticizes Abe for this and Abe ultimately makes Bojack's life hell, demanding an excessive amount of retakes to punish Bojack for stepping out of line. This is the A-plot of the episode. The A-Plot serves as a critique for Hollywood as a whole. In this case, the art and realism has been taken out of the movie for the sake of profit. They are dragging Bojack's hero and role model, *Secretariat's*, name through the mud. Meanwhile as all of this is happening, Todd has been fired from his job in network television and is taken in by Improv, a cult-like organization headed by the mysterious Copernicus. Several allusions are made to Scientology throughout the episode. Before Todd finds Improv, he passes a poster for the Church of Scientology. Later, when Diane confronts Todd about joining a cult, Todd responds, "Improv is not a cult. It's just a dogmatic school of thought taught by a for-profit

organization with the promise of social and professional opportunities.” Bojack affirms that it’s a cult because he learned about cults during his stint as a Scientologist. This is because coincidentally during that time he read a book about cults. Bojack then affirms that Scientology is definitively *not* a cult. The camera cuts to a close up of Bojack’s face as if he’s addressing the audience. He states, “I want to be clear, this is about Improv.” This fourth wall break is in reference to the Church of Scientology’s tendency to pursue legal action against any criticism against their school of thought. Bojack faces the camera to address the audience in order to prevent any such legal action. This is the B-plot run by Todd, a side-character. Improv is put in the place of Scientology in order to provide a critique of its abusive practices without directly attacking the religious organization. Improv is an exploitative organization which preys on young people in need of direction, leeching what little money they have with the promise of achieving enlightenment in the form of levels in the organization. Dissenters are sent to the *Giggleship* in which they are forced to work for no pay in order to pad Copernicus’s pocket. This closely mirrors the structure by which Scientology operates. Members must pay for all literature and classes at a prohibitive cost in order to advance in the organization in the form of Thetan levels. The *Giggleship* is reminiscent of Sea Org, a branch of the Church of Scientology in which members are pledged for life and sent to live either on the main Scientology campus or formerly on *Freewinds*, a cruise ship in which OTVIII (Operating Thetan Level 8) are sent to train. Copernicus, the elusive leader of Improv, represents David Miscavige, the de-facto leader of Scientology, who has been accused of imprisoning dissidents and harassing former members with the use of private investigators and slander campaigns. By using the AB plot structure,

Bojack Horseman creates layered social critiques simultaneously without resorting to an episodic format.

Animals within *Bojack Horseman* have several key uses in the rhetorical strategy of the series. The first is as symbolism for the main characters. Bojack Horseman is figuratively and metaphorically a horse past its prime. Horses are animals that have been domesticated and dominated by humans for centuries as both an animal known for its wide variety of uses but also as a symbol of status. However, a horse is only useful in its youth, which is why the phrase “sending a horse to the glue factory” exists in modern nomenclature. When a horse was past its prime, it was sent to the glue factory to be made into animal glue. The very last bit of use was squeezed out of the animal for human use. Bojack is the perfect embodiment of the workhorse of Hollywood and thus is able to wholly encapsulate the corruption that can be inflicted on an individual by the entertainment industry. Whilst being on the sitcom *Horsin’ Around*, Bojack is faced with the clear choice of selling out Herb Kazzaz, his best friend and the creator of *Horsin’ Around*, in order to preserve his shot at the upcoming *Secretariat* role. The decision eats at Bojack before a network executive by the name of Angela convinces him to abandon Herb in order to preserve a shot at his dream role. Hollywood has directly manipulated Bojack into his longtime decline. This is where Bojack begins to truly spiral into his self-destructive state. After the show ends and the network has determined that Bojack has outlived his use, he is abandoned, left to wallow in his own misery. Just like the horse that he is, Bojack was used for the benefit of Hollywood and eventually abandoned for the sake of further profit. This is further emphasized as the audience is introduced to the story of *Secretariat*, another celebrity horse (a triple-crown winner) who was cast aside by the mainstream media after being accused of illegally betting on

his own races. Secretariat was also forced to give up a close loved one (his brother) in order to save himself and continue running. Like Bojack, he gave up his own ideals and sold out in the pursuit of fame.

The second usage of animal representations is in order to support the show's use of Shklovskian Estrangement. Shklovskian Estrangement originates from Freud's study of the uncanny as a rhetorical device. Freud believed that the uncanny was "the idea of being robbed of one's own eyes" (Freud 7). By making something unrecognizable and presenting it as an unfamiliar object, it can bring out the true properties of the object. (Schmuck 10). According to Shklovsky, "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 349). In the case of *Bojack Horseman*, the anthropomorphized animals are the uncanny objects. They add to a surrealist atmosphere that forces viewers to abandon over-automatization. By utilizing animal representations in *Bojack Horseman* in the place of humans, Bob-Waksberg is able to make clear social critiques on a variety of issues that would ordinarily be ignored. Audiences do not like being lectured and will do anything to avoid it. However, if they don't know that they're being lectured to, then the issue can be avoided altogether.

The power of Shklovskian Estrangement as a rhetorical device can be clearly seen in *Feel Good Story* (Season 6 Episode 2). In the episode, Diane and her cameraman Guy are told by their network to produce more "feel-good stories." However, Diane's network *Girl Croosh* gets acquired by Whitewhale Consolidated Interests in their latest purchase of Phillip

Morris-Disney-Fox-AT&T-AOL-Time Warner-PepsiCo-Halliburton-Skynet-Toyota-Trader Joe's. Diane and Guy are welcomed into the Whitewhale building in which they're presented with a video in which Vert (Vertical Integration) and Oli (Oligopoly) present how Whitewhale Consolidated Interests grew their empire. Ezekiel Whitewhale, the founder of Whitewhale, vertically integrated his oil refinery in order to cut down on costs and corner the market. This effectively led to a monopoly as he bought out the remainder of the competition. Jeremiah Whitewhale, the current CEO, then began making massive purchases of other industries including telecommunications, entertainment, and journalism. Whenever a newspaper would arise that challenged him, he would simply buy them up. After the presentation, Diane and Guy are given massive books filled with subsidiaries that they're not permitted to make videos on. Diane and Guy then decide to go out with one last story: an exposé on Whitewhale Consolidated Interests. Diane and Guy discover that Matt Minnowman, a worker attempting to get out the word about the unethical working conditions at a Whitewhale factory, has been found dead in a workplace related accident. Jeremiah Whitewhale quickly catches wind of their project and invites them to meet him in the Chicago Whitewhale building. Whitewhale tells them that he doesn't mind that they're making an exposé. He states, "See, when you put out stories about us being evil or callous people think that our business is uncompromised by morality and our stock goes up." When Diane confronts him about Matt Minnowman's death, Whitewhale openly admits to his murder. He was murdered because "he took too many bathroom breaks and was encouraging the other workers to take bathroom breaks as well." Whitewhale then points out that Congress had passed a bill allowing billionaires to murder that morning. The entire episode is a criticism of the late-stage capitalism that the United States has fallen into. Billionaires are able to

lobby for the bills that they want passed and corporations will continue to grow larger and larger as the average worker's wellbeing is sacrificed for the sake of profit. Whitewhale's purchase of a newspaper is reminiscent of modern-day billionaire Peter Thiel's bankrupting and attempted purchase of Gawker due to the publishing of an article on him that he disliked. The warehouse anecdote also brings attention to how Amazon warehouse workers are treated in the real world. They're paid pennies on the dollar and are discouraged from taking bathroom breaks in order to make even more profit for the richest man in the world. Whitewhale, on a symbolic level, represents American capitalism as a whole and takes elements of some of the most financially successful businessmen in the history of the United States. Criticizing America's capitalist system has always been a touchy subject to the American public. The Red Scares that dominated American political debate throughout history suffice to prove this point. Those even slightly sympathetic to the socialist rhetoric were jailed, slandered, and scorned in the public eye. *Bojack Horseman* is able to create a successful critique due to Shklovskian Estrangement. The audience does not like to be critiqued. However, by removing them a step from the critique through defamiliarization, you're able to have them subconsciously absorb a message without the threat of automatic rejection.

The third use of animal representations is as a critique of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the idea of human supremacy. *Bojack Horseman* doesn't feature just humans or just animals. Rather, humans and animals live on the same level as equals. By presenting this axiom as the reality of the world of *Bojack Horseman*, the show's creators are able to create a forced perspective upon the viewer. It provides the implicit question of, "Why are animals not considered as our equals?" The best example of the challenge that *Bojack*

Horseman presents to anthropocentrism is Season 2 Episode 5 of *Bojack Horseman* which is appropriately titled “Chickens.” The episode begins with Bojack trying to get the approval of his director Kelsey during the filming of the movie *Secretariat*. He consistently pursues her throughout the episode trying to gain her favor, much to her annoyance. Meanwhile, Todd encounters a chicken that was en route to a Chicken 4 Dayz factory before she escaped. Chicken 4 Dayz is a Kentucky Fried Chicken styled fast food restaurant that uses factory farming to produce its chicken. However, an interesting moral dilemma is posed to the viewer. The chickens that are eaten by the characters in the series are biologically the same as the “friend chickens,” as the show puts it. The only difference between the two is that the “food chickens” have been chemically lobotomized and fed hormones whilst “friend chickens” have the same rights as humans and every other animal. Todd, with the help of Diane Nguyen and Kelsey’s daughter, is able to bring the chicken to Gentle Farms, a family-owned business in which chickens are free-range and organically produced. The farm is run by “friend chickens” who cannibalize their own kind. Realizing that even the best case scenario in farming is unethical, Todd and Diane free all of the chickens from Gentle Farms.

The fourth use of animal representations is comic relief. Having a large menagerie of animals at your disposal opens up all sorts of opportunities for cheap gags and puns. When Bojack threatens to attempt suicide with a shoddily constructed autoerotic asphyxiation contraption in Season 2 Episode 13, Wanda (his girlfriend at the time) asks if she can talk about the elephant in the room. An elephant, working on the contraption out of sight, then emerges and complains about the insensitivity of people to his species. A similar pun is made in the pilot episode when Bojack meets the head of Penguin publishing, Pinky Penguin. Bojack says that

he'll deliver a book that will "knock his ass back to the South Pole." Pinky, offended by Bojack's statement, says that he's from Cincinnati. Comic relief is essential in *Bojack Horseman* to keep the audience going even through the darkest periods of Bojack's life. The sillier and funnier the show became, the more the audience was willing to accept the more melancholy moments.

Bojack Horseman is a character-driven show. The characters themselves play a central role in the series' larger criticism of Hollywood. Bojack is an embodiment of the corruption of Hollywood. He's self-destructive and drags down everyone he touches with him. This becomes especially apparent at the turning point of the series in Season 2 Episode 23: Escape from L.A. After abandoning his dream of playing Secretariat, Bojack escapes to New Mexico to meet with Charlotte Carson, a friend from his pre-fame days. He quickly develops a bond with the family and seems to abandon his self-indulgent lifestyle in favor of his temporary fantasy of having a family. Though Bojack has left Hollywood on a physical level, he's still unable to leave behind his glory days in *Horsin' Around*. He uses the family dynamic in order to return to his famous past rather than as an escape from the perils of fame. Bojack ends up living with Charlotte's family for six months. Eventually, Penny's (Charlotte's daughter) prom arrives but she's unable to find a date. Bojack, mirroring an episode of *Horsin' Around*, offers to be her date for the prom. He takes the place of her father and drives her friends to the prom, pushing them to drink hard liquor. One of Penny's friends develops alcohol poisoning and Bojack drops them off at a hospital. Before leaving, Bojack silences Pete, telling him to not tell anyone that he was there or that he provided them with the alcohol. When Bojack and Penny return home, she attempts to seduce Bojack. Bojack has effectively groomed a 17-year-old girl after getting her and her

classmates drunk. He denies her advances. His fantasy has gone dark. It hasn't turned out the way that it would on television. There is no clear-cut resolution with a credits scroll. Charlotte walks in and catches them both in a compromising position and threatens to kill Bojack if he ever attempts to contact her or her family ever again. Bojack has lost his "escape from L.A." The montage begins with a dissolve from Bojack's broken expression into the blue sky, signalling a new day. Bojack's theme begins playing simultaneously, signalling that he is making a return to his prior decadent lifestyle. The camera then pans onto Bojack's face. He's adorned with sunglasses, smoking a cigarette, and drinking a beer, once again pointing to a return to his Hollywood-tainted self. The camera then shifts back to reveal that Bojack's on his yacht then moves in sync with the music to reveal that the yacht is being driven by a truck. The words *Escape From L.A.* printed on the side of the yacht creates a sort of irony as the truck makes its way back to California. Bojack can't escape the corruption of Hollywood. The scene then cuts to a close-up of Bojack from the front as the photorealistic background changes behind him with time. Eventually, night comes and shrouds the entirety of the truck in shadow. The shadow plays a key symbolic role as the tar that Charlotte mentions in Bojack's pre-fame youth. "Hollywood's a real pretty town that's smack on top of all that black tar. By the time you realize you're sinking, it's too late." Charlotte says this in Season 1 Episode 8 in reference to what will happen when Bojack eventually becomes famous. Bojack is being metaphorically sucked back into the tar that is symbolic of the corruption of fame. He has essentially become the tar that lies beneath the facade of Hollywood. Anyone that comes close to him ends up harmed in the series. As Bojack puts it, "You didn't know me. Then you fell in love with me and now you know me." Everyone that meets Bojack eventually suffers from it due to his constant enabling. Sarah Lynn,

his co-star on *Horsin' Around*, is killed after Bojack causes her to relapse into her drug addiction. It is only by cutting Bojack out of their lives that they're able to succeed. Todd is able to become a successful network executive after moving out of Bojack's home. Princess Carolyn gets married and starts a successful management firm. Diane overcomes her depression and marries Guy, her former cameraman. Bojack, himself, is only able to succeed in self-development after he's taken out of the Hollywood bubble. When he's put into rehab, he's finally able to develop himself through therapy and by facing his past mistakes without the numbing that alcohol brings. The only time that Bojack has ever truly felt happy was in the period before he became famous. In *The View From Halfway Down*, he says that the best part of his life was when he was hitting up open mics with his former best friend Herb Kazzaz. Additionally, when Diane questions Bojack when the last time he was happy was, he journeys to New Mexico in order to seek out Charlotte, a pre-fame friend.

Though the show's central critique is that of Hollywood, it does give some concessions. Bojack's substance abuse primarily stems from his early childhood. Alcohol and cigarettes serve as sort of "transitional objects." Transitional objects are typically blankets or stuffed animals that the child attaches onto after the nursing phase of development (Winnicott 2). Though they may not share the typical characteristics, they serve a similar function. In Season 6 Episode 1, a young Bojack is seen after his parents have already fallen asleep due to overzealous alcohol consumption. Bojack steps up to a bottle of vodka on the table and quickly looks around to see if anyone is watching before pouring himself a glass and downing it. Muddy music plays on a loop simultaneously. After Bojack takes a drink, the music clears as he walks towards his mother and is finally able to get the motherly embrace that he desires. He cuddles up against her and falls

asleep. Alcohol fills the void of motherly love that Bojack was never able to experience. His parents both loved alcohol so he made the natural assumption that if he consumed it, then he would be loved. This association fuels Bojack's alcoholism in his later years due to his lack of parental guidance. Bojack's smoking also serves a similar role. When Bojack sees Secretariat smoking on screen, he pilfers a cigarette from his mother's purse. Bojack sees Secretariat as a father figure as can be seen in the penultimate episode, *The View From Halfway Down*. In place of his father, Secretariat appears in Bojack's comatose delusions. In the episode, the two have a cigarette and have a chat, father to son, that they were never able to experience in life. The cigarette is representative of a fatherly connection and by smoking Bojack is able to feel a fatherly connection. However, though substance abuse stems from Bojack's childhood, the allure of Hollywood is what keeps Bojack from developing as a human. As Bojack's director Kelsey states in response to what happens when you become famous, "The age of stagnation is when you stop growing... you're never challenged and then you never change."

Bojack Horseman is an inherently rebellious work. It bites the hand that feeds it by criticizing the institution that birthed it. Hollywood and the cult of personality that develops around celebrities in the modern-day are inherently unsustainable. *Bojack Horseman* is a bad character. He has little to no redeemable qualities and regularly commits what would ordinarily be atrocities were anyone else to commit them. However, through layers and layers of rhetoric, the series is able to make him sympathetic. When he succeeds, the audience can root for him and when he fails it rocks us to our core. Though *Bojack Horseman* is a vision of a cynic's Hollywood, it gives us hope for a better future. No matter how bad life may become, "the arrow of time marches on." Bojack seems immutable as a character but he does develop, even if it is in

the slightest of ways. A bitter hatred for honeydew that persists over the entirety of the series is put aside as Bojack develops an appreciation of the fruit in the final episode. *Bojack Horseman* is first and foremost about finding hope in a hopeless world. The sympathy that Bojack can bring, despite all of his short comics, is a testament to the surrealist atmosphere and rhetoric of the show that permeates every aspect of its production. Cinematography and narrative structure is used to subvert the audience's expectations and gradually take them out of their comfort zones without their knowledge. Characterization is what allows us to sympathize with characters in the most outlandish of situations. Animal representations open the way for social critique by taking a step back from reality. All of these elements are what form the core of *Bojack Horseman*.

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