How BoJack Horseman Got Too Real: Audience Engagement and a Critique of Capitalism

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How BoJack Horseman Got Too Real: Audience Engagement and a Critique of Capitalism

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B.A. in Anglophone Studies (2017)
M.A. in Anglophone Studies (2019)

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ABSTRACT

What can a cartoon tell us about the state of capitalist societies? This study examines the case of Netflix adult animated TV show BoJack Horseman (2014-2020) with the aim of understanding the mechanisms at play in the formation of the critique of capitalism. It investigates the narrative and cinematographic devices employed by the show to construct a realistic portrayal of American capitalist system and its harmful consequences on individuals and society in general.

Through the analysis of realism, self-referentiality and intertextuality, the star system, and processes of subsumption and commodification, this work comes to the conclusion that BoJack Horseman ‘got real’ and manages to convey its powerful message with the help of two main strategies. First, it establishes an oscillation between on the one hand a constant appeal to the viewer’s senses, emotions, and empathy, and on the other hand, Brechtian-like codes of breaking of the fourth wall and audience’s active and playful engagement. Second, it puts its fingers on specific aspects of capitalism and manages to integrate them in a compelling narrative that heavily relies on temporal continuity, making BoJack Horseman a unique production in the landscape of animation.
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Introduction

The emergence and rapid development for the past decade of popular streaming platforms such as Netflix has continued to pave the way for an increasingly diverse offer of cultural entertainment, a process already well engaged by television networks when they started to present asynchronous alternatives to audiences to watch their programs. Contemporary content creators can make the most of the opportunity provided by online entertainment services to produce unusual content that otherwise might have been rejected by classic network channels for various reasons going from the fear of losing a target audience, to the limited availability of time slots, or the influence of advertisers (Lotz 5). Through a platform such as Netflix, film and TV show creators have the possibility to reach diverse audiences without having to submit to questions of censorship or political correctness as much as they would have had to on network television.

When he came up with the idea of BoJack Horseman, Raphael Bob-Waksberg knew that it would not be easy to sell such an atypical show to distributors. After having been rebuffed by a few networks, he and his team turned to Netflix who accepted to air the show without conditions (McDonnell “How BoJack Horseman Got Made”). Thanks to the more generous complacency of the online platform, the show was able to be presented to audiences as it was originally intended. BoJack Horseman rapidly became a huge success for the platform and has indisputably made a mark on the landscape of animation. It has been a critical success throughout its six seasons and has won numerous awards including four Critics’ Choice Television Awards for Best Animated Series, three Annie Awards and two Writers Guild of America Awards. In September 2020, the popular film and television
review website IndieWire has declared *BoJack Horseman* “the Best Animated Series of All Time,” praising the show for its capacity to engage with and affect its audience (IndieWire 2020). The particular connection it establishes with the viewer is one of the reasons that makes the show unique, along with its acerbic tragicomic portrayal of Hollywood and American society in general, and the distinctiveness of its animated style.

*BoJack Horseman* is an adult animated series that mixes the genres of comedy and drama to perfection, making it a hybrid entity within a world of adult animation that predominantly leans towards post-modernist comedy, as illustrated by shows such as *The Simpsons, South Park, or Family Guy.* BoJack Horseman’s story takes place in a world populated with anthropomorphic animals and humans and follows the life of BoJack, a half-human half-horse washed-up 90s celebrity who tries to revive his career and popularity in 2010 Hollywood. BoJack is a self-centered character, suffering from depression and addiction to drugs and alcohol. His agent, the pink cat Princess Carolyn, tries her best to find acting jobs for BoJack, but his auto-destructive tendencies often ruin his attempts to re-make a name for himself in the film and TV industry. He hires a ghost-writer, Diane, to write his memoirs in the hope that it will help him regain popularity in the eyes of the public. He also shares his Hollywood mansion with Todd, a young man who, despite his laziness and apparent difficulty to find a definite path in life, seems to be a grounding figure for the other characters who tend to behave in toxic ways. In addition to BoJack’s struggles, one can name Diane’s tendency to set ridiculously high expectations for herself and for people around her resulting in her constant disappointment and heightened pessimism, Princess Carolyn’s consuming relationship with work, or more

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1 Chapter I and II in particular will explore some aspects of *BoJack Horseman*’s relationship to postmodernism in comparison to similar animated shows.
generally the greediness and selfishness of people working in the film industry. Mr. Peanutbutter, BoJack’s “friend” and former sitcom rival, is the only seemingly happy person around BoJack, although it is later revealed that even he is not always shielded from indulging in a nihilistic view of the world from time to time.

*BoJack Horseman’s* first season starts off in a light, pleasant mood, making fun of the Hollywood film industry and celebrities’ lifestyle, before rapidly taking a much more serious tone—although still infused with comedy. Only a few episodes in, the show does not hesitate to get its hands dirty to denounce the dangerous fallouts of the capitalist system on individuals and society in general. It operates as a magnifying glass upon the darkest quirk of American culture, taking Hollywood and the star system as a convenient microcosm suffering from all the harmful symptoms of unrestrained capitalism. As the show progresses and deals with topical issues such as depression, addiction, feminism and sexism, gun violence, star system, abortion, etc., the overall tone becomes increasingly dark, yet without ever losing its comic potential.

*BoJack Horseman* is a surprisingly new and challenging animated adult show in a landscape that has largely been dominated by shows such as e.g. *The Simpsons, Family Guy*, or *South Park*. BoJack’s creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg in fact argues that it is a show like no one has seen before, although at first it tricked a lot of people into thinking that this was going to be another typical funny animated adult show before realizing that it is much more than that (“BoJack Horseman Oral History Part I” 06:50-09:00). In part because of the gap between its goofy, colorful animation style and the profound intensity of its subject matter, *BoJack Horseman* plays with audience’s expectations in a refreshing manner, and in doing so stands out as a particularly unique production worthy of remark.
It is precisely because of this singularity that BoJack Horseman is worth an in-depth analysis that can positively contribute to the field of Animation Studies.

Not much has been written about BoJack Horseman as its final season was aired only last year, and I believe it is necessary to have a comprehensive view of all seasons to understand the trajectory of the show. However, there still exist a few very valuable studies about it, and some of them will be particularly helpful for this analysis. Laurel Schmuck, in her essay “Wild Animation: From the Looney Tunes to BoJack Horseman in Cartoon Los Angeles,” is concerned with the concept of animetaphor and understands the effects of animation as projections of the cultural memory of Los Angeles’ cinematic history. In “From Real Housewives to The Brady Bunch: BoJack Horseman Finds Its Place,” Alissa Chater explores the show’s parodic relationship to the sitcom genre. The theme of depression is treated at length in Kevin Pabst’s “Why the Long Face? Narratives of Depression in Netflix's BoJack Horseman,” while the show’s intention to depart from the habitual absence of character development in other popular animated TV shows is the topic of an essay by Raúl Sánchez Saura called “BoJack Horseman, or the Exhaustion of Postmodernism and the Envisioning of a Creative Way Out”. The majority of these works are content-oriented—for very legitimate reasons considering the complex richness of BoJack Horseman’s plot and the variety of topics it tackles.

In contrast, this analysis turns towards BoJack Horseman’s audience to understand the uniqueness and popularity of the show as well as the ways it communicates its strong political stance against the excesses of capitalism. I will examine the principal tools that the show employs to effectively convey its message, namely the establishment of a powerful relationship with its viewers in order to foster audience engagement, and the
bright accuracy and realism with which it approaches meaningful issues. It is specifically through its very particular approach to realism—especially in the context of animation—that *BoJack Horseman* manages to leave a mark on the minds of its audience. Instead of simply hammering home to the viewer that capitalism is an unsustainable system that is heading for ruin, the show cleverly uses formal devices that enable the viewer to *feel* it. Equally important, it features a narrative that nails the essence of this issue almost to perfection through an accurate and realistic depiction of the capitalist microcosm that Hollywood represents.

As the title of this thesis indicates, a general consensus seems to exist regarding the show’s remarkable realism. As a response, I argue that *BoJack Horseman* “got too real” because it makes its viewer feel in a palpable manner the distress of having to live in a capitalist system that gives no value to individuals beyond their ability to work and consume commodities. In parallel, the show also provides a fairly incontestable depiction of the capitalist mechanisms operating in today’s society. The veracity of this portrayal resonates deeply with what any individual can observe if they simply pay attention to what is happening around them culturally, politically and economically.

This discussion is an important one to have because it is concerned with the argument of animation as a serious tool having the potential to instigate valuable reflections in the audience. Although the use of animation as a political tool is certainly not a new concept, what seems to be unique with *BoJack Horseman* is the fact that its political implications are carefully interwoven in a fairly unprecedented tragicomic format that quickly gained popularity in the eyes of the public. Identifying the mechanisms and effects of the relationship between *BoJack Horseman* and its audience as well as how it manages
to make the viewers possibly rethink their approach to the world around them might allow for more room for creativity and ways to tackle serious topics that are different from what previous animated adult TV shows have been doing. Similar to them, BoJack Horseman is without any doubt a satirical critique of American society. Understanding how it accomplishes this in such a refreshing manner can be a beneficial addition to the field of Animation Studies.

The next four chapters will attempt to dissect BoJack Horseman’s capacity to construct an honest denunciation of capitalism. The elements enabling this critique operate either at a formal level, can be content-oriented, or both, but always function to some degree in relation to the audience. Each of these chapters offer evidence as to how the show builds and conveys its legitimate stance on dominant capitalist ideologies, whether it is through its narrative, through audiovisual techniques or through the use of self-reflexive and intertextual strategies.

Chapter I looks at the concept of realism in the context of BoJack Horseman and of animation in general. I first posit that, in terms of formal composition, realism in BoJack Horseman does not really originate in any kind of faithful representation of the reality of the physical world. Instead, the show depends on various formal and plot devices which direct the focus in different ways to establish this overwhelming feeling of realism, such as paying close attention to visual and narrative continuity and appealing to the viewer’s senses. On the other hand, the considerable variety of societal topics BoJack Horseman choreographs so accurately helps to create this reality effect, perhaps in a more straight-forward and visible way than its formal elements. This will be demonstrated in relation to the specific issues of the star system and time in Chapter III and IV.
Chapter II focuses on self-reflexivity and intertextuality as ways to—more or less subtly—foster audience’s reflection on capitalism. In the post-modernist style of its predecessors, but also in certain aspects diverting from it, BoJack Horseman plays with a mine of intertextual references which foster audience engagement at all times. The show’s intertextual potential is enhanced through the infinite possibilities of the medium of animation and its inherent intermedial nature to create and imitate without physical limitations. This creative potential also facilitates self-reflexive ambitions, a deeply essential feature of the show which takes multiple forms in either content or formal compositions. This chapter comes to the conclusion that BoJack Horseman, while remaining “mainstream” enough not to alienate too large a portion of its audience, succeeds in provoking reflection in the viewer in part through a mixture between self-reflexive processes and intertextual strategies that come as a reinforcement for the show’s realistic take on capitalism and the Hollywood film industry.

Chapter III operates as a zoom-in on the star system, one of BoJack Horseman’s main topics. This third chapter functions as a junction between the first two chapters and a bridge to the last one, as it is a concrete example of the way the show realistically tackles complex subjects. In addition, it picks processes of intertextuality up again from the previous chapter and develops them in the context of the star system. Stars and their public images are indeed by definition deeply intertextual and a study of the star system calls for an understanding of the ever-evolving complex interconnectedness between stars, media, texts, and audiences. By highlighting the processes of commodification inherent to the creation and existence of stars, BoJack Horseman paints a very negative portrait of stardom.
as further evidence of the shortcomings of capitalism, although the show also largely benefiting from the star system for its promotion and the quality of its performance.

Finally, Chapter IV comes as a conclusive chapter that assembles together the principal elements explored in the preceding chapters and that are used by the show to create the global critique of capitalism. It focuses on the intense realism of BoJack Horseman’s portrayal of the capitalist phenomena that take place through processes of subsumption and through the commodification of time. It draws conclusions on the show’s ability to establish a deep, well-constructed representation of the subject of time consumption that lies at the center of the dysfunctionality of our modern societies and of American society in particular.

I use a wide theoretical framework, mainly informed by Marxist and neo-Marxists theories in that it always retains the underlying idea that BoJack Horseman is a deeply political show, with the goal to offer a fundamental criticism of the excesses of capitalism. More specifically, each chapter makes use of various approaches and theories pertaining to the larger realm of film studies in order to provide theoretical and methodological background for the particular issues they explore. Chapter I connects different currents of thoughts in relation to realism in film and animation studies to try and find which is most pertinent in the context of BoJack Horseman, with the conclusion that the show can be best comprehended through a Marxist approach of realism. Bertolt Brecht holds a particular importance in this chapter and is also at the center of Chapter II. Brecht’s perspective on entertainment is indeed crucial to understand the show’s relation to its audience through its focus on self-reflexivity as well as on the viewer’s active participation in building a strong critique of capitalism. More straight-forward Marxist and neo-Marxist theories will help
understand the show’s depiction of processes of subsumption and of both stars and time as commodities. Finally, words like ‘feel’, ‘feelings’, or ‘sensations’ will appear regularly in this analysis because they account for a lot of the show’s modus operandi in terms of audience engagement. There could be an entire section dedicated to the task of defining thoroughly their theoretical implications and in the context of a work of larger scope, it would definitely be necessary to clarify this framework further, perhaps with the help of affect theory. For now, what is meant by them is the fundamental appeal to the viewer’s emotions and empathy, the idea that the show, through various strategies that I will determine, manages to trigger emotional reactions in its audience. In other words, on a spectrum evaluating audience engagement ranging from detachment to emotional and sensory experience, *BoJack Horseman* is without a doubt located on the side of the latter and this will be the task of this analysis to explain why and how.

In conclusion, *BoJack Horseman* is able to leave such an imprint on its audience because of the way it brilliantly combines multiple strategies and devices that encourage—sometimes force—the viewers to feel and reflect about the deeply problematic nature of the environment within which capitalist wrongdoings strive and are produced. In the following pages, I will explore these strategies and devices, namely self-reflexivity, intertextuality, the freedom given by the medium, the viewer’s identification, and above all realism in the show’s portrayal of our society.

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2 For purposes of economy and clarity, this analysis will use the format (season number – episode number), sometimes in addition to the title of the episode, to refer to particular episodes in the show. For instance, the first episode of the first season would be indicated as (S1-E1).
There have been many attempts to define animation whether it be by focusing on its creative potential, on its differences and similarities with live action, on its unique properties in the construction of the illusion of life and metamorphosis, or by switching the emphasis from formal elements to spectatorship. Among these diversified perspectives, one characteristic in particular stands out as being shared by all forms and techniques of animation and seems to be a point of agreement between scholars within the field of animation studies: the entirely constructed nature of animation. In light of this artificiality, it can seem counterintuitive to think about animation’s relationship with realism; yet, artificial should not be automatically equated with unrealistic, as is very well exemplified in BoJack Horseman. Despite the fact that realism has been an essential component in discussions within cinema studies, there is no absolute consensus as to what it means exactly in relation to live action films, which makes attempts to study realism in animated texts even more challenging—or, perhaps, in fact facilitated. The versatile nature of realism in film is best captured by André Bazin when he says: “There is not one realism, but several realisms. Each period looks for its own, the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality” (Bazin 6). The acknowledgment of the existence of a plurality of realisms is particularly essential for studying animation considering the extensive range of forms and techniques available to this medium. One could look at realism from various perspectives such as visual and aesthetic fidelity to the physical world, or solely in terms of realistic content, but the point of departure of this

3 It is not the point of this chapter to attempt to find a precise definition of animation. For more information on this subject, see Husbands and Ruddell, "Approaching Animation and Animation Studies" in The Animation Studies Reader (2019).
analysis lies in the relationship between the text and the audience, and in the way that BoJack Horseman ‘feels’ real to the viewer. From this particular perspective, it is possible to study both the aesthetics and the contents of the show, and the ways in which these elements contribute to its realistic feeling. The concrete sensory experience offered by the show as well as the processes of reflection that it attempts to trigger in the viewer through its narrative also act as testimonies to its realism.

There are formal and plot devices in BoJack Horseman that could be perceived as obstacles more than accessories to the formation of realism. Judging by the originality of its animation technique based on watercolor drawings and by its unique plot setting in an imaginary Hollywood populated by humans and characters with animal heads on human bodies, it is reasonable to wonder to what extent one can talk of realism in the context of BoJack Horseman. Yet, there is an undeniable realistic sensation emanating from the show, as is evident from audiences’ and media’s reactions and their emphasis on ‘how real it feels’ or ‘how real it gets’.4 For this reason, BoJack Horseman deserves an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms at play in the construction of the reality effect and the way it impacts the audience. This chapter looks at the techniques of animation through the lens of ideological formalism, before delving into a narrative-driven approach in order to shed light on the elements of the plot that contribute to the creation of realism. This part is also concerned with determining the added value brought by animation to the realistic take of the show on issues such as addiction, depression, women’s rights, celebrity, capitalism, etc.

4 No less than 12 different relevant sites show up within the first two pages with the simple google search “BoJack Horseman gets real”.
1. Competing Views of Cinematic Realism

Before looking at realism in the specific context of animation and of BoJack Horseman, it seems necessary to clarify this chapter’s approach to the concept in relation to the moving image more broadly speaking. As a pioneer of film theory and a proponent of realism as the ontology of the cinematographic image, André Bazin’s theories cannot be overlooked. The refreshing interpretations of his theories by several film scholars such as Karen Beckman, Tom Gunning, and Daniel Morgan offer interesting perspectives for this task of clarification. Popular understandings of Bazin’s views on realism often rest on its connection with the index argument which considers the filmic text as “a sign that functions through an actual existential connection to its referent,” i.e. the real physical world (Gunning 30). In this sense, cinematic realism is more or less bound to the way it faithfully ‘photographs’ physical reality. The constructed nature of animation has therefore no place in such a definition that puts the emphasis on photographic realism. However, both Beckman’s and Gunning’s alternative readings of Bazin’s theories provide a way out of these limitations with regards to animation: the former by acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between cinema and animation (Beckman 2), the latter by switching the emphasis from photographic basis to cinematic motion as the essence of realism in cinema and in animation (Gunning 38-9). The capacity to recreate movement—as opposed to the capacity to faithfully reproduce the reality of the physical world—would therefore constitute an interesting point of departure to account for animation’s realistic potential—an argument that this chapter will return to in the following pages. Although he does not mention animation, Morgan’s essay “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics” is also insightful in the way it distinguishes between two possible, cohabiting, ways of
reading Bazin’s theory. One, named direct realism, visually creates an ideal world as faithful as possible to the real world. The other, called perceptual or psychological realism, puts the emphasis on the viewer’s perceptual experiences of the real world and the way they are reproduced in the moving image more than on the visual aspects of the filmic text:

Proponents of perceptual realism do accept the index argument. But, rather than a strict insistence on a correspondence between a film and what was in front of the camera [direct realism], they give a looser and more thematic interpretation. They suggest that, because there is a direct connection between image and world […], a realist film must aim at the “normal” experience of the world. (Morgan 457)

Although it remains unclear what Morgan means exactly by “normal experience”, this reading opens the door onto a view of realism in film as a mode of representation that leaves room for the viewer to project their own experiences of the real world in order to make sense of the world on screen. With this definition, it is possible to start conceiving how realism could be considered within the context of animation because realism is not solely tied to visual fidelity anymore but to authentic renderings of experiences. In this sense, realism would be a matter of perception rather than a matter of reference to the physical reality of the world, which conveniently shifts the emphasis on the viewer. Morgan then provides a third, broader reading of Bazin’s realism as a way of giving meaning to reality, emphasizing that this can be achieved through many different styles (Morgan 461). In this case, the film acts as a kind of showcase where social relations are given a physical reality and unfold in full view of the audience. Overall, the acknowledgment that realism does not have to be understood simply as visual fidelity to the physical world is the principal element to be retained in these three authors’ readings
of Bazin’s theories, because there would be no such thing as a realistic animated text if submitted to a restricted understanding of Bazin’s views on realism. Bazin’s ideas are fairly inescapable in a discussion concerning realism in the moving image, but there are other, perhaps more pertinent, theories to consider in the specific context of animation. For Bertolt Brecht for instance, realistic cinema is supposed to be transgressive. A cultural text is realistic if it contributes to uncovering ideological dominations and is written with the aim of offering solutions to various social issues (Brecht 50). In Brecht’s view, realism is about the medium’s potential to reveal underlying socio-economic mechanisms. In light of this definition, it is possible to contemplate any kind of formal device that could facilitate this process, and this makes way for the artificiality of animated texts. The point then is that the infinite creative potential of animation be used as an advantage over the physical restrictions inherent to live-action. Physical reality can be manipulated at leisure in order to expose concealed societal truths and trigger awareness and response in the viewer. This represents a radical shift from the medium’s role to photograph “what we see because what we see is what is real” towards a vision of the medium as a powerful formal tool to be exploited with the aim of showing hidden realities.

2. Realism and Animation

Brecht’s approach to realism is particularly enlightening in the case of BoJack Horseman because the show’s animation technique, far from Disney’s “hyper-realism” style mimicking the looks of live action (Mihailova 48), is based on production designer Lisa Hanawalt’s inventive personal vision:

The art style came from my personal work, which has a lot of animal heads on human bodies and also combines a sort of high level of details with this surrealism
[...] a lot of patterns and textures and kind of a watercolor look [...]. It is sort of handmade even though we are creating everything on the show on the computer [...]. I like to pick colors that, you know, appeal to me personally, and I put in objects that I like or objects from, you know, the house I grew up in, and I kind of just want to make the whole show feel more personal and more unique and warm.

(Interview with Creative Team 06:14-07:37)

The show works with American animation studio and production company Shadow Machine to create and develop its very recognizable colorful, zine-like visual style. All the animation is created via computer from the watercolor drawings of Hanawalt.5 There are several elements in the show’s visuals that are only remotely connected to a certain conception of physical reality, but its most obvious unrealistic characteristic is, of course, the fact that half the characters have animal heads on human bodies. However, this chapter does not linger on this subject for the simple reason that Laurel Schmuck’s paper “Wild Animation: From the Looney Tunes to BoJack Horseman in Cartoon Los Angeles” already looks at it thoroughly through the lens of psychoanalysis and semiotics. She refers to the concept of animetaphor to account for the obsession that cinema and cartoon animation in particular have with animals and animal movement. She argues that the presence of animals in a show such as BoJack Horseman manifests a collective fear of disappearing and being forgotten—as it has been the case for wild animals—and forces us to “look at animals as ourselves and at ourselves as animals” (Schmuck 2). In parallel, she relegates the presence of animals to the simple, though important, function of comic relief. She explains: “the associations of the fables—turtles are slow and careful, etc.—are reduced to insignificant

5 For more technical details on the animation process, see for instance https://dotandline.net/james-bowman-bojack-horseman-season-4-interview-32e22ebcc6f/
qualities, which [...] rarely contribute to the plot, and certainly don’t express a didactic message” (Schmuck 6). It is possible to dispute this particular element of her claim, and I will attempt later on to examine in more depth the crucial function of animals in the show.

One of the lead members of the creative team describes BoJack Horseman’s animation style as fairly realistic in comparison to a more cartoony genre. According to him, the reason for this aesthetic choice is to provide a grounded environment for the strange world of the show and make it more believable (Interview with Creative Team 08:02-08:22). The abundance of details in the background also adds to the potential of ‘re-watchability’ of the show because with each new viewing, it is possible to discover funny and smart references and elements that had gone unnoticed before because the viewer’s initial focus rests primarily on the characters and the action. Besides just entertaining the audience, these seemingly unimportant details for the progress of the story yet have an essential role in that they contribute to the construction of a plausible world that does not exist in a vacuum but that is connected to a larger socio-economic and cultural context. There exists an entire world around the characters which is made accessible in part through a multitude of visual elements that have a story of their own happening off-screen.

The following section examines the show’s construction of realism by looking at the animation techniques’ potential to reach the audience and provoke sensory reactions in the viewer. It is also interested in the implications of using formal devices that recreate familiar cinema conventions for processes of identification. This chapter has already discussed the argument that realism in film and animation could be based on motion and movement. Michael O’Pray elaborates on this idea when he links Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of plasmaticness in animation to Freud’s notion of omnipotence of thoughts.
Simply put, omnipotence of thoughts is the belief that one can transform or influence the external world through one's thoughts alone. For Eisenstein, plasmaticness is characterized by the ability and the power of the drawn lines in animated texts to transform themselves indefinitely and to resist a static aesthetic state. O’Pray tries to account for the authentic pleasure that the viewer of animation can experience by arguing that a certain process of identification happens at the sight of the animated character’s control of its movements and of the perfection of its forms. Through this particular process, the viewers unconsciously fulfill their own desire to have such control (O’Pray 205). In “The View from Halfway Down” (S6-E15), one of the most acclaimed episodes of BoJack Horseman, the audience witnesses twenty-five minutes of prodigious animation in the form of a dream-like sequence in which a dying BoJack has dinner with the dead people in his life. The dinner ends with a show where the characters each present an artistic rendition of their death. The animation techniques masterfully play with shapes, lines and textures and defy the laws of gravity in a very aesthetically pleasing way which corroborates O’Pray’s argument. In line with the example that the scholar gives of the graceful and elegant choreography of Mickey Mouse in the Silly Symphonies (O’Pray 204), Beatrice Horseman’s or Sarah Lynn’s performances provide the viewer with perfection of forms and precision of movements.
Through the identification with forms, the viewer experiences a feeling of power which enhances the engagement with the episode and with the show in general. Choosing an episode that takes place entirely in BoJack’s mind might seem counterintuitive in an attempt to explain how the show constructs realism, but what this example demonstrates so effectively besides O’Pray’s argument is also the potential of animation to represent authentic feelings and states of mind that contribute to making the show feel so real.

The formal creative potential of animation forms the basis of the next argument of this analysis supported by two articles, one by Andy Darley and the other by Lev Manovich. Darley’s concept of second-order realism is interesting to develop within the context of BoJack Horseman. He defines second-order realism as “[…] an attempt to produce old ways of seeing or representing by other means. […] [T]he new technique of digital imaging does not produce these new forms of image […] by itself. What is being attempted with this new means involves particular kinds of contact with already established aesthetic conventions and forms (Darley 37). He explores this notion of second-order realism in relation to an animated short film with an art style entirely different from BoJack Horseman. However, his insistence on the existence of formal and intertextual references between animation and cinema, mainly in the forms of pastiche, eclecticism and simulation, fits appropriately in the context of this analysis. The structure of an animated text such as BoJack Horseman rests upon the emulation of certain formal techniques such as continuity editing, employed in live-action cinema. These techniques are used to create a realistic experience of time and space and are mixed with the aesthetic possibilities brought by computer animation to enhance and expand this reality in order to convey the

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6 The animated film used by Darley for his analysis is Red’s Dream, directed by John Lasseter and distributed by Pixar in 1987.
show’s messages more effectively, without ever leaving the realistic setting of the story permanently. The result is a post-modernist show, the realism of which is based in part on pastiche and simulation, i.e. on its capacity to recreate artificially cinematic realism, itself constructed through the means of familiar editing and narrative techniques. In other words, the realism in BoJack Horseman is to a certain degree a simulation of a simulation, which would correspond to second-order realism. Darley’s argument is in line with Lev Manovich’s focus on realism being achieved in animation through its ability to simulate the codes of traditional cinematography as well as the properties of real life (Manovich 32). In BoJack Horseman, the focus is not so much on the latter. Indeed, unlike other animated texts involving animals where their potential unrealistic characteristics are explained by specific physical properties or through magic (Mihailova 52), BoJack Horseman does not account consistently for certain improbable features of its characters. A character made up of a bird head on a human body who can fly by using his human arms is not exactly what one would call realistic. The show is full of these inconsistencies without thwarting the general feeling of realism experienced by the viewers who, from the outset, partially accept to suspend their disbelief as they enter a world populated by anthropomorphic animals.
However, this suspension of disbelief is not consistent throughout the show due to its strong self-reflexive nature which points out its own artificiality on repeated occasions, as the next chapter will explain. *BoJack Horseman* does not shy away from the acknowledgment of its artificiality and potential flaws but rather embraces them, contributing to the formation of realism in yet another manner. What is more relevant of Manovich’s argument in relation to *BoJack Horseman* is the way that the show faithfully mimics the work of the camera in a live-action film with the use of continuity editing, close-ups, depth of field, adherence to the 180-degree rule, pan shots, shot-reverse shot, cross-cutting, etc. In doing so, it relies on the viewer’s familiarity with Hollywood conventions and tells the story in a realistic way that respects both temporal and spatial continuity.\(^7\)

3. Realism Through the Senses

Besides its recourse to the elements aforementioned, the show also widely appeals to the body and senses of the viewer in order to create an immersive realistic experience. The links between the digital image and its contributions to the theory of realism in relation to the moving image have been developed by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener in their book *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2010). In their final chapter on digital cinema, they argue that “in the era of digital cinema, the body and the senses are, if anything, even more central for a theoretical understanding of the film experience” (Elsaesser 171). Building on this statement, this part of the analysis contends that the potential to make an audience *feel* is part of what makes a show such as *BoJack Horseman*

\(^7\) In comparison to similar animated shows, *BoJack Horseman* reproduces live actions’ camera work in an exceptionally sophisticated manner, adhering to widespread conventions to an extent that these other shows do not really bother reaching.
realistic. This seems somehow difficult to contemplate in the context of animation since, unlike in a live-action movie, the viewer is presented with drawings put in motion and not with actors they can more easily identify with because of, if nothing else, the simple fact that they are real humans. Yet, BoJack Horseman has demonstrated over and over again his capacity to affect the audience in a very powerful manner. Scenes from last season’s episode called “The New Client” (S6-E2) are especially helpful in explaining the ways in which the show manages to provoke actual sensory reactions in the spectator. In this episode, Princess Carolyn is completely overwhelmed by her role as a mother of a sleepless baby, her work as a celebrity agent and manager of her own company, and her need to stay infallible in the competitive world of Hollywood—the unrealistic myth of the ‘do-it-all’ LA woman. She is at a level of exhaustion and stress that is unprecedented even for her, and this is demonstrated with the help of animation and the use of sound effects. Princess Carolyn’s mind’s disintegration is visually represented by superimposed colorful apparitions of herself. Each apparition tries to complete a specific task, to which a specific color corresponds. The result is a swarm of ghostly bodies in constant motion, resulting in an extremely oppressive atmosphere to which sounds are gradually added: cries of the baby, rattle sounds, noise of a trash opening, phone ringtones, conversations, etc., all mix together to create something resembling background rhythmic cacophony. The unbearable situation builds up to a climactic moment when Princess Carolyn is completely overpowered and falls asleep for two days. After this, like a cat always falling on its feet, she manages to retake some degree of control over her life and puts her priorities straight. The frantic pace of the episode associated with overwhelming visual and sound information does not leave the viewer untroubled. The viewer’s heartbeat accelerates in reaction to what
is happening on the screen, and a sensation of dizziness occurs as the audience feels Princess Carolyn’s exhaustion and stress. In a manner greatly facilitated by the effect on the senses, the viewer cannot help but identify with her, and this is all made possible by the animation techniques employed by the show. Reality is stretched, but this does not diminish the sensation of realism that emerges due to the capacity of animation to make the audience feel concrete, authentic bodily sensations.

There are many other instances that involve this particular process of identification through the senses in the course of the show, associated with different characters such as BoJack, of course, but also with Beatrice, Todd, etc. Each time, the audience is able—or even forced—to feel what the characters feel. Sensations are imposed on the viewer with the help of animation and its potential to create specific atmospheres in a way that live action would perhaps not be able to because of its physical limitations. In a nutshell, *BoJack Horseman* constructs realism through formal elements with the help of three main processes and devices: the viewer’s identification with forms; their sensory identification with the characters rendered possible through the inventive tools of animation; and last but
not least the reproduction of familiar cinematic codes and conventions and the meticulous attention given to temporal and spatial continuity through continuity editing.

**4. Realism Through Narrative**

The second part of this chapter concerns the examination of *BoJack Horseman*’s narrative structure—and, to a lesser extent, plot—in order to demonstrate how these elements participate in the formation of realism. First, the show has a linear story expressed in the form a serialized narrative, i.e. each episode is the continuation of the previous one, emphasizing past events through the intervention of flashbacks. This format is fairly unprecedented in the realm of adult animated TV shows as Raphael Bob-Waksberg, *BoJack Horseman*’s creator, explains:

I pitched it as a show that is gonna start very fun and goofy like most adult animated shows, but by the end of its first season it's gonna turn into more of a dramady along the lines of a live action show like *Girls* or even *Madman*, I think were the examples I used at the time, which felt a little more unprecedented in the world of animation to indulge that much in seriousness and emotion, but that was the idea that we were gonna trick people by making people think it was a typical animated sitcom but actually by the end of the season they'd be going "Oh my god, why do I have feelings? Where did this come from?" I think in my plan, I always assumed the audience will join us on this ride and go from "Oh this is fun, this is silly" to "Oh my god, I have feelings". ("BoJack Horseman Oral History Part I” 06:48-07:34)

In this regard, *BoJack Horseman* distinguishes itself from comparable shows like *The Simpsons*, *South Park* or *Family Guy* in that its plot and the way that the story is told involve the viewer in a very active manner, similarly to sophisticated live-action TV shows.
This is evidenced by the existence of a narrative arch, significant character development, and more specifically by the narrative adhering to the permanence of death. Simply put, a character who dies in BoJack Horseman remains dead, as opposed to the apparent invincibility of some lead characters in the shows mentioned above. A blatant example of this invincibility would be Kenny who dies at the end of almost every episode of South Park, before coming back without any explanation at the beginning of the next episode.\(^8\) There is no special survival ability or a character who comes back to life in BoJack Horseman. Sarah Lynn dies of a heroin overdose in season 3, Herb Kazzaz dies, not from his cancer, but from a peanut allergy in season 2, and Beatrice Horseman succumbs to old age and complications of her dementia in season 5. These characters are only seen again through flashbacks, hallucinations, or in dreams. In the same way, characters in BoJack Horseman grow old, when the Simpsons or the Griffins families remain unaffected by time, as if eternally frozen in the same patterns of personality and behavior.\(^9\) BoJack Horseman’s realistic take on life’s most universal characteristics, namely the permanence of death and the inexorability of time,\(^10\) is crucial for the way the viewer interacts with the general events of the plot. Humor may well be one of the show’s main components, the world BoJack lives in is a serious one where words and actions have consequences. This is exemplified at a material level by the way that damage is depicted as permanent. The windshield of BoJack’s car is cracked after he collides with a deer in S2-E4 and stays broken up to E11

\(^8\) In the same way, there are innumerable examples of Homer Simpson surviving injuries, attacks, or incidents in a very unrealistic way. For instance, his rounded belly protects him from bullets. He can also survive being ran over by a truck. Peter in Family Guy regularly suffers from accidents that should leave him dead, such as the time he is beheaded by a frisbee (Season 3, Episode 2).

\(^9\) The fact that characters in The Simpsons or Family Guy do not grow old can also be read as a metaphor for the impossibility of change, reinforcing the nihilistic perspective of these shows. In contrast, BoJack Horseman, although at times very nihilistic itself, nevertheless gives the possibility to grow and therefore change to his characters.

\(^10\) Chapter IV will explore the concept of time and its holds on the characters at length.
when he travels to New Mexico. Objects stay damaged until someone fixes them, not until the next episode as if there were a reset button. At character level, the equivalent of material damage is trauma, an essential topic in the show. Characters like BoJack keep suffering from past traumatic events which have a concrete impact on the way they behave as well as in their relationships and interactions with people. This manifests itself even in minor characters such as Penny Carson whom we meet at the end of season 4. Her encounter with BoJack marks her psychologically and when the viewer sees her again in the last season, it is evident that she is still struggling with this experience. It is also true on BoJack’s end. His guilt eats him up and is added to the pile of bad decisions and experiences that determine his character. However, and this constitutes another difference from most adult animated TV shows, characters in BoJack Horseman can and do grow. Any attentive viewer can notice this psychological progression in the main characters from the beginning to the end of the show. Princess Carolyn goes from being competent but insecure, and completely at BoJack’s mercy, to being a well-balanced woman, thriving at both personal and professional levels. Diane seems to find some stability away from Los Angeles through her relationship with Guy, even though she still struggles with depression. Todd stops sleeping on his friends’ couches and finds purpose in the daycare company he develops. Even BoJack, after six seasons of repeating the same destructive patterns, seems to have

11 Penny is the teenage daughter of BoJack’s friend Charlotte. In S2-E11, they become friends while BoJack escapes from LA and stays with Charlotte’s family in Santa Fe. He takes Penny and her friends to prom and gives them alcohol, resulting in one of Penny’s friends ending up in the hospital. Penny tries to kiss BoJack who pushes her away. He then goes to her mother, Charlotte, and declares his love for her but she rejects him. BoJack goes back to his boat and finds Penny in his bedroom. Before anything happens, they are caught by Charlotte who, furious, sends BoJack away and promises to call the cops if he ever contacts them again. BoJack will later say that part of him knows nothing would have happened, but another part of him knows this is a lie. This event will come back to haunt him throughout the last season.
come to the realization that he does have the power to change his behavior. He comes a long way from this scene in season 1 when he distorts Diane’s words:

So, what you’re saying is… Everything is society’s fault, and we as individuals never need to take responsibility for anything? […] I like that. I didn’t do anything wrong, because I can’t do anything wrong, because we are all products of our environment […] Yeah! It’s not my fault, it’s society! Everything is because of society! Hurray! Everything is meaningless, nothing I do has consequences!

*(BoJack Horseman, S1-E3)*.

Examining the details of BoJack’s character development is not the goal of this paper, but it is useful in order to demonstrate the show’s construction of realism through a sensible and balanced approach to societal issues and to human behavior. *BoJack Horseman* oscillates between existentialist and nihilist takes on life and accurately portrays the complexity of both human nature and society in general. The attention paid to character development is a big part of Raúl Sánchez Saura’s very convincing argument that *BoJack Horseman* represents a departure from postmodernism (293), although I would argue that with respect to its reliance on intertextual jokes and its more than occasional tendency to lean towards nihilism, the show remains, to a certain extent, postmodernist.

As seen earlier, Raphael Bob-Waksberg mentions the unexpected gap between the goofy, colorful looks of the show and the seriousness of the themes it deals with. This sharp contrast has powerful effects on the viewer who is used to either seeing animation as a children’s medium or to the strong emphasis on absurd humor in adult animated TV shows (Dobson 184-5). This is not to say that *The Simpsons* or *South Park* do not deal with serious and sensitive topics or do not provide valuable criticism on the state of our society. Rather,
the difference between these shows and BoJack Horseman lies in the way they approach these topics. South Park, The Simpsons, Family Guy, etc., largely rely on satirical comedy to convey their social critique, and drama is not one of their typical features. Usually, one specific theme is addressed within one episode, before the show moves on to another subject in the following episode. Again, this does not mean that the show’s social commentaries have no value whatsoever, but this superficiality makes them typically post-modernist, to an extent that BoJack Horseman might not reach, as argued by Sánchez Saura (292). BoJack Horseman provides a deeply contextualized, poignant approach to topics such as depression, addiction, abortion, fake news, capitalism, etc., in a consistent manner through the lens of its characters’ experiences. Humor—sometimes absurd humor—is still one of the show’s main characteristics, but it is used in equal measure with drama. Without humor and without animation, the show would be fairly unbearable to watch and would be so dark that it would, very likely, lose a considerable part of its audience. After all, in BoJack’s words: “who wants to watch a depressing TV show?” The fact that animation is most often synonymous with comedy and absurdity in the mind of the viewer brings even more weight to BoJack Horseman’s satirical potential. The viewer, expecting yet another “foolish” funny animated show, is caught off guard when the story suddenly dives deep into a specific social issue, leaving a powerful mark on their mind. An imaginary contract based on the audience’s expectations from the animated format is somewhat broken. This is when BoJack Horseman “gets real”: it is all fun and games with the silly animals, the cool references and the hilarious punchlines, until a character dies, is psychologically scarred for life, or delivers a raw, resonating line about the absurdity of life. Coming back to Laurel Schmuck’s argument that animals mainly exist in the show for humorous
purposes, this is also where the presence of animals in the show comes into play as essential for the effective transmission of its message, and not solely as convenient material for comic relief. The animals’ appearance and their comic potential break down the audience’s defense mechanisms to allow for a greater impact of the intended message, which is thus received more strongly. Paul Wells explains this process in his analysis of the animated film *Chicken Run* and accounts for the use of animals “as yet another example of the ways in which the *seemingly innocent language of animation* can carry with it subversive or challenging messages or ideas” (Wells 165). In this sense, the presence of animals in *BoJack Horseman* increases the show’s realistic potential instead of hampering it.

In light of the arguments advanced in this chapter, Brecht’s approach to realism appears to be the most advantageous in the context of *BoJack Horseman*. The show manipulates reality in a way that reveals social mechanisms and takes advantage of its entertaining but deceiving format in order to pass on its harsh social critique most effectively, which is how Brecht envisions a realistic text. Realism in the show is constructed in a complex manner involving various formal and narrative devices which stimulate—and, more often than not, force—the engagement of the audience. It is therefore primarily in the viewer and in the truthfulness of their feelings and sensory reactions to the show that realism finds its origin, in contrast to being located in the faithful representation of physical reality. In line with, but also diverging from its animated predecessors, *BoJack Horseman* demonstrates the potential of animation to reach out to adult audiences and to depart from the habitual categorization and dismissal of animation as a medium dedicated to children. More broadly, this chapter leaves open the question of identification in the

12 Emphasis added
context of animation, beyond what has already been argued. The theories of spectatorship developed by Laura Mulvey, Christian Metz, or Manthia Diawara\footnote{See for instance: Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” (1973) ; Metz, “The Imaginary Signifier” (1977) ; or Diawara, “Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance” (1988).} could offer valuable insight to an analysis of how—or even whether—the viewer of animation identifies with what is shown on screen, through the lens of gender, race, class, or sexuality.

**CHAPTER II - “What is This, a Crossover Episode?!” Self-Reflexivity and Intertextuality Foster Audience’s Reflections**

The medium of animation has an intrinsic potential for the development of intermedial configurations. Its multifaceted nature combining the influences of various media as well as its access to a particularly extensive realm of audio-visual possibilities give animation the fantastic capacity to engage the conversation between different media and to reflect on the processes of its own creation. This potential of animation has been traditionally exploited since its inception, as observed by Jan Siebert in her study of self-reference in animated films which “[…] often include a comment on the borders between the individual media which are being crossed again and again, since drawn films show influences by comic books, literature, paintings, computer games, and (classical) live-action films” (Siebert 155). Besides self-reflexivity, the genre seems to have also developed a certain fondness for intertextual references, for various reasons and with different results. It will be one of the objectives of this chapter to examine one type of intertextual references in particular, which function as a way to build social commentary. More precisely, it will be the task of this part to explore the way that self-reflexivity and
intertextuality unfold in the show, with the conclusion that BoJack Horseman, by employing a myriad of self-reflexive processes and intertextual strategies, is a deeply political show that intends—most successfully—to affect its audience into action, or that at least pushes the viewer to reflect upon the state of American culture through a satirical commentary on the state of the film industry. Nonetheless, the show remains “mainstream” and enjoyable enough to attract a reasonable audience and be renewed for six seasons on a paid membership platform. This has been made possible, on the one hand by using some of the ingredients from the traditional recipe of its animated predecessors—namely cultural references, humor, and topical issues—and on the other, by demonstrating a great capacity to innovate, especially in terms of plot and character development as seen in Chapter I.

This part also aligns with the previous section on realism in that it uses the theories of Bertolt Brecht linking the realist potential of a text in part to its propension to be self-reflexive and to call for an actively thinking viewer. A question that can be asked and that I will attempt to answer is, can BoJack Horseman be qualified as “Brechtian”? Answering this question will give further evidence of the mechanisms behind the show’s well-crafted critique of capitalism. The diverse self-reflexive strategies employed by the show do not exist in a vacuum and have an impact on the viewer which will be determined in the following pages; yet, a distinction must be made between authentic reflexivity and reflexive processes that are hollow in terms of spectator’s active engagement. The overarching goal is to get an understanding of the effects of all these strategies on the viewer. It is not the objective of this chapter to draw up a list and enumerate all the instances of intertextuality or self-reflexivity in the show, firstly because the huge amount of references makes the task almost impossible to achieve, and secondly because a few well-
chosen examples will provide enough data to draw an accurate picture of the mechanisms under scrutiny.

1. A Brechtian Understanding of Entertainment

The sources of entertainment in our contemporary society are countless, and a show such as BoJack Horseman represents only a minuscule portion of what is available to satisfy people’s need/desire to find distractions and pleasure outside of the work context. What entertainment is and what it encompasses can seem evident at first thought but attempts to define the concept in precise terms is not such an easy task considering the vastness and diversity of products and services available. In Entertainment and Society: Influences, Impacts, and Innovations, Sayre and others turn to the etymological origin of the word to build a global definition:

The word entertainment has a Latin root meaning “to hold the attention of,” or “agreeably diverting.” Over the years it has come to refer to a constructed product designed to stimulate a mass audience in an agreeable way in exchange for money. Entertainment can be a live or mediated experience that has been intentionally created, capitalized, promoted, maintained, and evolved. In other words, entertainment is created on purpose by someone for someone else. Entertainment is easily located, accessed, and consumed. And of course, entertainment is also attractive, stimulating, sensory, emotional, social, and moral to a mass audience.

(Sayre & al. 4)
The turn of phrase “agreeably diverting” does not state what exactly entertainment is diverting us from, yet, in a capitalist society that divides time between work and leisure, it is safe to assume that most entertainment exists to relieve our minds from the constraints
of everyday life, perhaps even to escape the sometimes dull reality of experiences (Sayre and al. 6). One of the prominent features of entertainment seems to be its “agreeable” factor: in order for audiences to consume a product not just once but repeatedly, the experience must be pleasurable in some way or another. This pleasure can take multiple forms, whether it is shivering in front of a horror movie, getting motivation from listening to a pop song, travelling through time with a fantasy book, or laughing at one of Homer Simpson’s jokes. Although in different manners and with different results depending on the viewer, the underlying assumption with this view of entertainment is that it will be an enjoyable experience, and the prompting of strong emotions seems to be one of the most common ways to achieve it.

However, it is not the only function that entertainment in its various forms can and should perform according to alternative views. Bertolt Brecht, with his epic theater, is one of the most influential figures of the school of thought that believes in the role of entertainment as a powerful deconstructing tool allowing to uncover the reality and shortcomings of bourgeois society (Benjamin 18). This section particularly complements the analytical work done in the previous chapter on realism. After having established the realistic potential of BoJack Horseman in light of various theories of realism, including Brecht’s, it is now fitting to dive deeper into Brechtian approaches in order to examine the way the show articulates its position between “mainstream” entertainment and forms of cultural texts that require a more active viewer, or at least that engage with the audience in alternative ways. In his “Against Georg Lukács”, Brecht criticizes the tendency of literary theorists to be concerned with “enjoyment alone, not struggle, a way of escape, rather than

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14 Once again, Chapter IV will delve into these issues of work time and leisure time in more depth.
15 This focus on emotions could be traced back to the work of Aristotle on the tragic play in Poetics.
a march forward” in their critique of the product of entertainment (Brecht 40). It does not mean that Brecht is not aware of the function and power of enjoyment in the consumption of entertainment, but, according to him, the audience’s pleasure should not occur at the expense of the necessity to instigate social change through the exposure of society’s real mechanisms. Brecht therefore rejects escapist art that only contributes to maintaining the status quo by presenting an illusionist smokescreen to the audience. To avoid the easy trap of escapism, he is in favor of using anti-illusionistic devices which remind the audience that what they are watching—what they are consuming—is artificial. These devices can take multiple forms, and the objective of the next paragraphs will be to compare them to the various techniques used in BoJack Horseman and to examine to what extent BoJack Horseman fits into the Brechtian idea of successful entertainment.

Placing the emphasis on the artificiality of the entertainment product is crucial in Brecht’s view, starting with the notorious technique of the “breaking of the fourth wall” which aims at exposing the apparatus whether in the context of theater, film, or, in this particular case, a TV show. The audience, instead being a group of passive observers of the events happening on stage or on screen, becomes an integral and active part of the experience and is constantly reminded that what they are watching is a construct and not the reality. In the context of BoJack Horseman, it is first necessary to recall what has been stated in the previous chapter, i.e. that the nature of the show as an animated cartoon already automatically prevents the audience from falling into the visual trap of a live-action that would “look” real. With animation, or at least with the kind of animation used in BoJack Horseman, the viewer is already automatically reminded that what they are watching is artificial. However, there is a whole range of other techniques for the creators to use
consciously in addition to what the medium does naturally. One of them, popular in Brecht’s epic theater, is the use of signs and placards that come to interrupt the events on stage, indicating to the audience what is going to happen in the following scene. This technique, mainly in the form of written prompts or intertitles, is fairly regularly used throughout the episodes of BoJack Horseman. However, these intertitles are mainly here to account for the passage of time or to provide spatial indications,\textsuperscript{16} not to let the audience know what is going on in terms of plot. Sometimes, these indications are integrated into the diegesis, as for instance in S4-E11.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image5.png}
\caption{BoJack Horseman, S4-E11: Temporal indications integrated into the diegesis}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image6.png}
\caption{BoJack Horseman, S1-E11: Example of “intertitle” providing temporal indications}
\end{figure}

In any case, there never is a total interruption of the events with, for instance, someone exterior to the plot who would walk into the scene holding a placard telling the viewer what is going on. In this sense, BoJack Horseman follows the typical techniques of Hollywood productions: written texts are often used to help the audience understand

\textsuperscript{16} See for instance from the first season S1-E1; S1-E4; S1-E5; S1-E7; S1-E11.
locations and timelines, but rarely in a too intrusive manner. Another technique used in Brechtian theater has to do with music and with songs that, once again, interrupt and comment on the action. Some songs in BoJack Horseman have a very self-conscious tone, although they do not interrupt the action but rather exist in the background. At the beginning of S1-E8, the audience can hear a song accompanying visuals of BoJack driving his car through the streets of Los Angeles with these lyrics:

Generic 80’s new wave / Beep bop beep bop beep bop / This is a song from the 80’s / The decade which it currently is

The self-conscious song acts as a humorous temporal clue to help situate the events in relation to the main plot without leaving the diegesis. Later in the episode, the same process is repeated but this time with the 90’s.17 This is a clever technique that calls the viewer’s attention onto the artificiality of what they are watching while at the same time providing a—light and funny—criticism about the cultural trends of these decades. Other practices employed in epic theater include using masks and puppetry to acting in the third person or drawing attention to the work of acting itself. These practices are virtually absent from BoJack Horseman, which adopts most of the codes of regular live-action drama TV shows as shown in Chapter I.

There is one final Brechtian practice that deserves to be given a closer look. This concept is called the Verfremdung or “estrangement-effect”. It aims at presenting familiar contents in unfamiliar ways so the audience, instead of feeling empathy, is pushed to use reason and think about the story. In other words, the defining features of Aristotelian tragedy, especially the commitment to catharsis, are denied in the epic play. Although

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17 Generic 90’s grunge song / Everyone in flannel / Generic 90’s grunge song / Something from Seattle
*BoJack Horseman* definitely elicits strong emotional responses from the viewer and in this regard does not fulfill the Brechtian “requirements,” it does employ what could be seen as an alienating or distancing effect with the use of animals as characters in the story. However, unlike a text such as *Maus* in which the use of animals definitely creates a distancing effect,\(^{18}\) the vision of the animals in *BoJack Horseman* do not really provoke the same reactions. Whether a character is an animal or a human seems to be a fairly random choice on behalf of the creators (Interview with Creative Team 04:20-05:20), and the viewer can feel empathy for them regardless of the type of character. The show indeed defamiliarizes common subjects because of the particular medium of animation and the presence of talking animals behaving like humans. But even so, the strange sensation that can arise at first from the sight of these animals quickly fades away as the viewers get used to it.

To recapitulate, *BoJack Horseman* seems to use a fairly limited number of the Brechtian techniques listed above. It is a somewhat subversive show—tackling topical socioeconomic and cultural subject matters and positioning itself fairly strongly—that is yet attractive enough to draw a substantial audience. It delivers a deeply political message through its unique format mixing drama, humor, and animation. In many ways, it also pushes its audience to develop its own critical assessment of American society in a manner that resonates with Brechtian style. The show is not didactic in that there are no direct lessons given to the viewer who is kept engaged through a more playful mode, as will be

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\(^{18}\) Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*. Pantheon Books, 1997. *Maus* is a graphic novel depicting the traumatic experiences of Polish Jews under the Nazi regime during WW2. In the novel, Jews are represented as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs. The choice of these particular animals is not random at all and seems to serve as a way to delineate racism based on stereotypes and prejudices. It also creates, to some degree, a distancing effect by replacing the actual human beings who suffered from/committed atrocities with animals.
explained in the next sections. Yet, as seen from the conclusions of these preliminary inquiries, it is difficult to view the show as more than another popular, mainstream Hollywood-type of production and, as such, cannot thus far be described as really being part of the Brechtian tradition. However, there is one more concept that I want to explore in relation to Brecht: self-reflexivity. Self-reflexive processes indeed play a crucial role in BoJack Horseman and their close examination will demonstrate the show’s potential to highlight its own artificiality, provide criticism on the state of the film industry, and foster reflection in its audience.

2. Fostering Audience Reflections Through Self-Reflexive Strategies

Self-reflexivity, which is the capacity of a text to point out and interrogate its own conditions of production, is a process widely used in the film industry—although to different extents—to engage and draw the audience’s attention to the artificiality of the text. It is a crucial element for Brecht, precisely because it enables the acknowledgement of the subjection of art to the materialist realities of a capitalist environment. Anti-illusionistic by nature, self-reflexivity stops the viewer’s suspension of disbelief for a moment and enters the realm of fiction to tell the viewer that indeed, it is fiction that is presented to them. In Robert Stam’s words, self-reflexive texts “demystify fictions, and our naïve faith in fictions, and make of this demystification a source for new fictions” (xi). The most recent self-reflexive modes can also be attached to post-modernism in that creators, and especially filmmakers, tend to draw attention to their process of productions through indirect means such as parody, pastiche, or irony, which are all reflexive postmodern devices. BoJack Horseman is a specialist of these self-reflexive processes and uses them in a wide range of forms.
First, the show does not hesitate to call the viewer’s attention to its fictitious nature through the help of the visual potential of animation. In S1-E11, BoJack embarks on the task of writing his memoirs himself as he rejects Diane’s biography. In one memorable scene, he, Sarah Lynn and Todd all take drugs to supposedly help him with his creative process. As a result, BoJack experiences strong hallucinations including running on a piece of paper, losing his outlines, and finally being erased by a pencil eraser. When he notices all this, he talks to himself: “What the—whoa! Okay, stay calm. I don’t have outlines anymore. That’s okay. There’s no boundary between me and space. This is a thing that happens.” With this scene, the show presents BoJack as a fictional character to the viewer and enhances its origin as a simple drawing and nothing real, as an echo and a reflection of BoJack’s nihilistic tendencies.

The show uses these processes on multiple occasions, and with various objectives. Sometimes, as with the previous example, it is to emphasize its own artifices and operations. In other instances, and in contrast, different styles of animation are used to reveal the inside of a character’s mind or to present a little fictional story within the diegesis. When BoJack’s girlfriend Wanda tells him a little story about a gardener, the viewer is presented with a short animation implementing the story (S2-E4). The audience’s reference to the real has shifted: in this case, the world of BoJack is the “real” world, and the fiction is distinguished by a different animation style, simpler and more “childish.” With these insertions that are not as sophisticated as its common drawing style, the show re-establishes the audience’s relationship to the real. The actual physical world is no longer
the reference for reality and the world of the “normal” animation becomes the reality the viewer holds on to, at least for a moment.

![Figure 7 - BoJack Horseman, S2-E4: Wanda tells BoJack a story, illustrated in a different style than the usual style used in the show](image)

The show also demonstrates remarkable self-reflexive capacities with respect to content. Hollywood is a convenient and recurrent setting for films and TV shows that reflect on the film industry, and BoJack Horseman takes advantage of this environment to present an extensive commentary on Hollywood’s processes of production as well as on the star system.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) The show’s relationship with the star system will be the subject of the next chapter.
Figure 8 - BoJack Horseman, S1-E11: BoJack is erased by the animator

Figure 9 - BoJack Horseman, S1-E11: BoJack notices he has lost his outlines

Figure 10 - BoJack Horseman, S1-E11: BoJack, in a panic, tries to run away
In his book *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Robert Stam asks a few relevant questions about “Hollywood-on-Hollywood” films and the extent to which they prove to be truly reflexive:

Do these films idealize or demystify the cinema as an institution? What phase of the production process—preproduction, production, postproduction, reception—do they concentrate on? To what extent do they display an anti-illusionistic aesthetic? Are they truly reflexive or do they merely exploit the filmmaking milieu as a décor in which to set a conventional comedy or dramatic realist film? How do the films comment on the reality of genre within the studio system and which genres exhibit a greater or lesser degree of reflexivity? (Stam 77)

If *BoJack Horseman* ever idealizes the world of cinema, it is only to criticize it all the more later. The vast majority of characters in the show works in the film industry and to say that none of them seems truly happy is an understatement. BoJack and Diane struggle with depression, Princess Carolyn is on the verge of a burnout more often than not, and secondary characters such as Flip, Kelsey, or Lenny Turteltaub are either exhausted, depressed, or generally unhappy. Even Mr. Peanutbutter, the face of happiness, admits that “the universe is a cruel, uncaring void. The key to being happy isn't a search for meaning. It's to just keep yourself busy with unimportant nonsense, and eventually, you'll be dead” (S1-E12). Most of the time in the world of BoJack, when the viewer sees a character living a healthy and balanced life, it either means that only the surface of this character’s experiences is made accessible, or that they live this life far away from Hollywood. This is the case for Charlotte and Cuddlywhiskers for instance, who both left Los Angeles and their hectic lifestyles for a much calmer existence.
The brutality of the film industry is repeatedly put on display for the viewer to get an accurate, demystified image of Hollywood. The show focuses on nearly all aspects of the process of production. As the show progresses, the audience follows every step of the complex mechanisms behind the creation of a movie or a TV show: writing process, funding, casting and preparation of the actors, management, shooting, marketing, distribution, reception, critics, festivals, etc. Most of the time these steps are marked by diverse complications. One time, the assistants are on strike; another time, the distributors decide to censor some scenes; and yet another time, BoJack stains his public image and it is his agent’s task to fix the issue. There are countless other examples spread throughout the series which paint an objective and realistic—and oftentimes quite gloomy—image of the film industry. Alcoholism, drug addiction, sexism, racism, blackmail, exhaustion, self-image issue, etc., are a common thread throughout the show and are often more or less linked in some way to the fact that characters work in Hollywood. More than simply using the filmmaking milieu as basic décor or showing how a film or a series is made, \textit{BoJack Horseman} makes sure to keep a critical eye on these processes and shows the “behind the scenes” of cinema production as a greedy, exploitative, and time-consuming institution.

Stam also regards the anti-illusionistic qualities of a film as a good indicator for its self-reflexive potential (Stam 77). As stated earlier, the show mostly maintains a certain illusion of reality in terms of plot and character development through the use of traditional cinematic conventions. Nonetheless, Stam’s take on anti-illusionistic aesthetics is echoed in \textit{BoJack Horseman} by the fact that it is animation and that it uses various techniques to call the viewer’s attention to its artificiality. In the case of \textit{BoJack Horseman}, the filmmaking milieu is not only used as a setting for both comedy and drama, it is also part
of the “core” of the show to be reflected upon and criticized as a microcosm of capitalist American society and everything that is wrong with it. Parody is a useful tool to achieve the objective of criticism while remaining pleasurable for the viewer, while pastiche usually stays neutral in its imitation (Jameson 17). This is probably one of the reasons why parody holds such importance in BoJack Horseman. The whole world of Hollywood is parodied, from the very name “Hollywoo,” to the celebrities talk show hosted by a man called “a Ryan Seacrest Type,”20 to the genre of the sitcom with BoJack’s old show Horsin’ Around. This concept of parody constitutes an adequate transition towards the topic of intertextual references. The way the show uses intertextuality in its broader sense is the last essential self-conscious technique that this chapter is concerned with, and that is at the center of Brecht’s aspiration for meaningful entertainment that ideally leads to praxis.

3. Fostering Audience Reflections Through Intertextuality

For the final part of this chapter, I would like to draw attention to a specific type of intertextual references found in BoJack Horseman that contributes to creating and sustaining the show’s critique of capitalism. Humor is evidently an essential feature of BoJack Horseman, and a considerable amount of this humor is found in its countless jokes based on cultural references. Virtually every episode contains mini scenes used as transitions between more central scenes, or discrete jokes happening in the background of a scene involving the main characters. Playing with the fact that half of the world of the show is populated with personified animals, these mini-scenes recreates wide-spread ideas, expressions, and situations of popular culture.21 In this case, the references are not used to

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20 “A Ryan Seacrest Type” is based on real life Ryan Seacrest, famous American host for celebrity talk shows.
21 The viewer can for instance see a raccoon character rummaging through garbage, a coyote chasing a roadrunner, or a cat stuck in a tree apologizing to the firefighters who came to save her.
provide criticism of some specific aspect of culture. They seem to be there simply for the viewer’s pleasure and entertainment as they recognize the origin of the reference. These intertextual references do not advance the narrative. Just as many other adult animated TV shows—*The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, or *South Park* to only list a few—*BoJack Horseman* encourages the viewer to participate in a pleasant game of cultural knowledge and recognition.

This game can be more or less active as the viewer can choose to get involved or not. The difficulty level of locating the source text of the reference varies from an almost automatic response to a deeper knowledge of popular culture. Other intertextual references are more subtly integrated into the main scenes in the form of background details such as parodic film posters, in allusions from the characters themselves, or even in the characters’ names and behaviors. These types of references are so numerous that it is almost impossible, even for the alert audience, to catch them all at the first viewing. Re-watching *BoJack Horseman* over and over again is always an option for the most determined viewers, facilitated by the distribution of the show on a streaming platform. The viewers who are not interested in participating in this intertextual game or who miss some references are never put at a disadvantage since these references most often do not have a crucial impact on the development of the narrative. The elaborated dramatic plot is by itself sufficient to satisfy viewers desiring an animated TV show that differs from the usual type of shows on the market. For this reason, *BoJack Horseman*’s intertextuality functions slightly differently than, for instance, in *The Simpsons*. It seems important that a sufficient number of the jokes are understood in *The Simpsons*, for fear of losing its audience. Because *The Simpsons* is first and foremost a comedy, humor needs to be a permanent and
accessible feature for its audience. This is not to say that humor is not important in BoJack Horseman—it is. The intertextual jokes provide entertainment, rhythm, and also at times welcomed relief from the pit of dark intensity the show slowly dives into. Nevertheless, unlike The Simpsons, humor is not the main driving force of the show; the critique of capitalism through its plot and the development of its characters are. To put it in a nutshell, The Simpsons is a comedy that engages in social criticism whereas BoJack Horseman is a social critique in the form of drama that uses humor as one of its tools.

Besides these intertextual references with the main goal of humor and pleasure of recognition, there exists another type of references that are of particular interest for this analysis and its focus on the critique of capitalism. By more or less subtly referring to companies and celebrities or more broadly to political and socio-economic systems, these references greatly participate in making BoJack Horseman meaningful in terms of political satire. One such example is the recurrent mentioning of the mega-corporation “AOL–Time–Warner–Pepsico–Viacom–Halliburton–Skynet–Toyota–Trader-Joe's,” an ironical commentary on the current trend of capitalist mergers that are completely out-of-proportion.22 These types of intertextual references have the more serious and global function of serving as an opportunity to comment on a topical political or socio-economic issue. There are many examples of this type of references in BoJack Horseman, especially used with the objective of criticizing the absurdity and harmful consequences of the American capitalist system. The variety of topics tackled in the show is extensive and it would be counterproductive to try to list them all here. Not all discourses are given the

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22 In season 5 and later, the company is then referred to as “Disney-Fox-AT&T-AOL-Time-Warner-PepsiCo-Viacom-Halliburton-Skynet-Toyota-Trader-Joe's,” probably as a critical nod to the 2019 merger between Disney and Fox.
same degree of attention though. Some issues such as depression, feminism, or the star system are present throughout the entire series while other such as meat consumption and waste, abortion, or gun control are discussed within the span of one or two episodes. In “See Mr. Peanutbutter Run” (S4-E1), populism and the trend of electing officials with no political background is at the center of the plot. Mr. Peanutbutter, an actor and reality show presenter, suddenly decides that he should be California’s next governor. After being constantly belittled by his visibly more skilled opponent in the debate on political issues, he announces that the winner will be the one who finishes a ski race in the first position. In an unforeseeable plot twist, it is Todd who wins the race and therefore becomes elected governor of California before giving up his office to an actual politician. This is reminiscent of the ascension of Donald Trump, also a former reality TV star with no political background, to the United States’ presidency. By drawing an obvious parallel with a contemporary event and showing how the popular opinion follows and supports with no objection a completely absurd campaign, *BoJack Horseman* points out the practical problems with what is supposed to be a fair and representative electoral system.

With all these specific functions of self-reflexivity and intertextuality in mind, as well as their effects on the viewer, it is now easier to trace a direct and coherent line between Brecht’s version of successful entertainment and what *BoJack Horseman* does. The show is no doubt entertaining and pleasant to watch, but this pleasure does not get in the way of the ultimate Brechtian goal of teaching the audience how to develop reflection processes of their own in order to be able to assess the materialist reality of the world around them. In fact, pleasure facilitates this goal by keeping the viewer engaged, active, and above all aware of the design and materiality of what they are watching. *BoJack*
*Horseman* asks for an active and alert viewer, not only capable of keeping up with the numerous references, but also of following a complex overarching narrative developed throughout multiple seasons while absorbing the vehement social criticism and refining their awareness of topical social, economic, and political issues.

The findings from Chapter I and Chapter II put together bring to light an original tendency which allow the show to stand out among its animated but also live-action counterparts. This tendency materializes in the form of a constant oscillation between suspension of disbelief and breaking of the fourth wall. Chapter I and II have highlighted *BoJack Horseman’s* strong reliance on the continuity of time, a decisive strategy to reinforce its realistic effect as well as audience’s engagement in the form of emotional reactions and feelings of empathy towards the characters. The narrative mirrors the progression of time in real life in order to construct a coherent world bound by the same universal rules which helps establishing the viewer’s suspension of disbelief despite the animated format and despite the half-human half-animal characters. On the other hand, these same chapters have also revealed a recurrent pattern involving the interruption of this suspension of disbelief. The fourth wall is often broken with the help of the various tools mentioned earlier and the audience is forced to deal with incursions into the narrative. Viewers are reminded of their status of viewer and their attention is drawn towards the processes of production behind the existence of *BoJack Horseman*. The show sets up this oscillation masterfully, in such a manner that it does not fall too much on one side or the other. It does not constantly break the fourth wall, which if it was the case would prevent the recourse to the audience’s feelings so necessary for the show to function. Yet, it does not rely exclusively either on a story occurring within a bubble of escapism which would
require no participation whatsoever on behalf of the audience, pushing the viewers to rest on their laurels and accept the reality of the world of the show without question.

CHAPTER III - “Hollywood Stars and Celebrities, What Do They Know, Do They Know Things!? Let’s Find Out!”: The Star System as a Capitalist Microcosm

BoJack Horseman’s plot setting in Hollywood, the epicenter of Western film productions, naturally stirs reflection on the functions, mechanisms and consequences of the star system within our contemporary society. But the show does more than merely exploiting Hollywood as a background scene or a stage for its narrative to unfold; it capitalizes on every aspect of its realities to offer an honest, poignant account of what it means to be a Hollywood celebrity nowadays. It shows what is carefully hidden behind the glittering facade and depicts the film industry in a not so glamorous manner. In this regard, BoJack Horseman follows the lead of many other films and TV shows from various genres which have undertaken the task of shedding light on the behind-the-scenes of the film industry and the star system. In “The Star System : Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities,” Paul McDonald describes it as the manner in which “the American film business has employed, and continues to employ, regular strategies for exploiting star performers in the production and consumption of films” (McDonald 1). Key words like “strategies,” “exploiting,” “production,” or “consumption” are highly suggestive of Marxist and neo-Marxist theories and, indeed, a number of scholars understand the star

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system as a form of capitalistic production and study its mechanisms in the light of these approaches (Driessens 652).

McDonald’s suggestion about the intertextual quality of stars and of the star system in general form an opportune bridge between this particular chapter and the previous part that focused on intertextuality:

It is never possible for any individual member of the audience to comprehensively know all the textual sources through which a star’s identity is represented. Knowledge of stars is therefore differently dispersed across society. Moviegoers also bring many different social and cultural competencies to their understanding of a star’s identity, so that their image will be interpreted in many different ways. The meaning of a star’s image is therefore not contained in the sources that represent the star but is produced in the moment of interaction between moviegoers and star texts. (McDonald 7)

The audience holds a central role in the star system’s operations and constructs an image of a star based on sets of meanings informed by the multiple sources at its disposal. The contents of these sources are of course oriented, controlled, and managed but ultimately, it is the audience who does the intertextual work of putting together the dispersed elements to form a specific image that exists in the collective imaginary. Stars’ sovereignty over their own image can be problematic as the degree of control they hold on the information spread to the public is oftentimes minimal. This issue is fundamental in the narrative of BoJack Horseman and finds its embodiment particularly in various characters such as BoJack, Sarah Lynn, Mr. Peanutbutter, Sextina Aquafina, etc.
1. Stars as Intertextual Entities with Ideological Power

Stars are so complex and fascinating that they have an entire area of academic research dedicated to ideological, sociological or semiotic analyses of their power, image, processes of creation, etc. John Ellis defines the star as “a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation, and then feeds back into future performances” (Ellis 598). In addition to the concept of the star as an intertextual entity establishing a connection between different texts and sometimes from different media, an emphasis is put on the fluidity of the image of the star which circulates, transforms, and evolves with time and circumstances. According to Allen, this fluidity is the result of the polysemic nature of the star (607). The movie star in particular is a dual entity comprised of the actor and character blending together to create images with multiple possible significations. The image of a star, also oscillating between public and private sphere, is therefore never totally pre-established and varies depending on the person manufacturing it, although a dominant image usually circulates fairly homogeneously within the collective imaginary. Allen continues by arguing that, “as structured polysemies, stars do form a social as well as an aesthetic discourse” that oftentimes goes hand in hand with sets of meanings including “success, wealth, romance, “acceptable” social behavior”, and consumption” (Allen 608). These sets of meanings are not fixed in time and are not necessarily a truthful or comprehensive reflection of reality. In BoJack Horseman’s third season, BoJack appears to have regained popularity in the eyes of the public with his movie Secretariat. He is healthy, looks sincerely happy, is proud of his work during interviews, and seems to have managed to tame his tendency to behave erratically in public (S3-E1). But this apparent happiness and peace of mind is only a fabricated image projected to the
audience. In private, BoJack struggles with his self-esteem, with his relationships, and with his addictions.

The existence of a discourse of stardom and its positioning in popular culture inevitably brings about important questions as to the star’s ideological functions. For Richard Dyer for instance, the overall ideological role of the movie star is to help preserve the status quo and thereby the power of dominant ideologies (Dyer 5-6). What Dyer argues is that stars and their commodification contribute to the spreading of Western paradigms, largely disseminated by Hollywood film productions. It is however also necessary to argue that Dyer’s fairly pessimistic statement about maintaining a status quo should be nuanced by the idea that the power held by stars can also be used in a positive and conscious manner.

Contradictory opinions of stars’ ideological functions also circulate among star studies. Allen mentions Alberoni’s vision of stars as a “powerless elite,” implying that they have no concrete political or social power (Allen 608). This theory is challenged by many historical examples, the most recent perhaps being the significant involvement and impact of celebrities in the Black Lives Matter movement. Many stars are outspoken advocates for the campaign and use their fame and public platform to provide artistic, financial, political, and social media support—although sometimes with mixed results. Celebrities can actually be publicly criticized for not speaking up on political and socio-economic issues, which would imply that fame comes with responsibilities and duties towards the community.

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I will now look in detail at a particular episode in BoJack Horseman that perfectly reveals how stars’ ideological influence unfold: “BoJack the Feminist” (S5-E4). The episode starts with a famous “Hollywoo” actor called Vance Waggoner caught on multiple occasions proclaiming sexist, racist and xenophobic slurs. He is publicly rejected from the industry, and for a few years, goes on an apology tour. As a result, he is awarded the prestigious “Forgivie” at the annual We Forgive You award ceremony. Already a few minutes in, the show provides a commentary on the film industry’s hypocritical tendencies. Princess Carolyn hires Vance to play BoJack’s partner in Philbert. BoJack is present at the award ceremony, and, right when Vance is on stage receiving his award, BoJack is photographed making a disgusted face. His grimace is provoked by a smelly cheese at his table and has absolutely nothing to do with Vance being forgiven. Nonetheless, the photograph is rapidly spread throughout the media and is picked up by many progressive movements interpreting BoJack’s grimace as a sign of him refusing to forgive Vance.

The whole story blows up and, because of the upcoming partnership between Vance and him on Philbert, BoJack accepts to give a public explanation to tell the truth about what really happened. However, at the talk show he is invited to, he is not given the opportunity to tell his version of the event as he is constantly cut off by the panel of female presenters who twist the few words he pronounces and turn them into a feminist anthem:

Presenter 1: BoJack, clear the air, why’d you give Vance the face?
BoJack: Well, there was this cheese –
Presenter 2: and you’re lactose intolerant, which reminded you that Vance lacks tolerance?
BoJack: No, it –
Presenter 3: The cheese stands alone, but no woman should stand alone when standing up to sexual harassment?
BoJack: No, it wasn’t any of those things!
Presenter 1: So, you’re saying it wasn’t any one thing, more of an accumulation?
Presenter 2: BoJack, it is really incredible you’re taking a stand against your co-star.
BoJack: No, I’m not taking any stand –
Presenter 2: I mean, the guy choked his wife and most of Hollywoo is, like “No biggie. Good for him!”
BoJack: Okay, well, obviously it’s not good he choked his wife.
Presenter 3: Wow!
(Audience applauding)
BoJack: No, no, no! I wasn’t trying to make some bold statement or anything. It’s just that… choking your wife is bad!
(Audience cheering and applauding)
BoJack (smiling): Really? Okay.
Presenter 1: Can I just tell you how amazing it is to hear a man say that?
BoJack: Well, Paloma, someone needed to take a stand.
(Audience cheering and applauding)
BoJack: Call me crazy. I mean, this is just old BoJack talking, but how about we don’t choke any women?
Presenter 1: So true, right? Don’t choke women!
Audience: Don’t choke women! Don’t choke women!
Presenter 3: BoJack is right. Hollywoo shouldn’t legitimize abusers by allowing them to star in movies and TV shows that play off their problematic personas!

Figure 11 - BoJack Horseman, S5-E4: BoJack's grimace makes the headlines and is picked up as a new feminist emblem
Upon noticing the enthusiasm of the audience for—absurd—“feminist” statements he did not even mean to pronounce, BoJack takes this golden opportunity to surf on the popular wave of feminism and gain the public opinion’s favors. He ironically turns himself into a feminist champion, even though the viewer has witnessed for the past four seasons a constant display of sexist behaviors. Vance then announces to Princess Carolyn that he refuses to do Philbert (he has many other offers now) and Princess Carolyn, also using the convenient pretext of a newly discovered feminist impetus, decides to take Vance down.

The rest of the episode consists of BoJack being the new public face of feminism under the guidance of an actual feminist, Diane. Like in the previous example about abortion, Diane realizes that, through the cover of BoJack’s face, she is able to reach a large audience and educate them about feminist issues, without having to endure sexist comments. BoJack, on the other hand, sees this as a welcomed occasion to make people listen to him and love him. In the middle of the episode, Diane gives a presentation on “the media cycle” to a reluctant BoJack. She explains how “pop culture inherently normalizes

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26 About his, BoJack says: “Yeah. Everyone loves a male feminist. It turns out the problem with feminism, all along, is it just wasn’t men doing it. We’re much less shrill.”
things, and that power works both ways,” for positive as well as negative matters.\(^{27}\) When Vance retaliates by publicly pointing out the overt sexism of Philbert’s script, BoJack’s credibility as a feminist is put to the test. In a rare moment of revelation, BoJack realizes that both Diane’s feminist claims and Philbert’s inherent sexism are well-founded. At the end of the episode, he hires Diane as a consulting producer on the show to help making it more “gender equality aware.”

This episode of BoJack Horseman demonstrates both the capricious nature and the powerful potential of the star system as an ideological tool.\(^{28}\) It oscillates between two main stances standing at opposite sides of the spectrum. On the one hand, the show presents hopeful, optimistic moments where stars can use their public platform and their fame to help influence their audience and build a more equal society. On the other hand, these episodes, and the show in general, offer very cynical and nihilistic takes displaying the selfishness of celebrities and producers, as well as the thoughtless eagerness and absurd gullibility of the general public ready to forgive and forget about stars’ problematic past behaviors the moment they start to show some—often artificial—remorse. An interesting element is the fact that BoJack did not speak about feminism on purpose. This qualifies the apparent willingness of celebrities to use their fame in a positive altruistic manner. Moreover, “BoJack the Feminist,” instead of ending on a positive note with Diane being hired as a consultant on Philbert, showing that change is possible, concludes with Flip openly telling her that her presence will not change anything. This comes as further

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\(^{27}\) Diane’s presentation comes as another example of BoJack Horseman’s self-reflexivity explored in the previous chapter.

\(^{28}\) Another example of this can be found in (S3-E6). The episode focuses on Sextina Aquafina, a teenage popstar, and the issue of abortion.
evidence of the show’s occasional tendency to lean towards a cynical perspective on the star system.

Parallel to the main plot events in the “BoJack the Feminist” episode, there is a substory about Mr. Peanutbutter trying to make his public image do a 360 turn in order to get the part of BoJack’s tough partner in Philbert. After Princess Carolyn explains to him how his natural friendly temperament makes it impossible for him to look credible in such a role, Mr. Peanutbutter decides, with Todd’s help, to show the world how tough he can be. According to them, the best way to do so is for him to be caught on camera acting as a gangster. He tries to transform his image by changing his outfit style and by having paparazzies photograph or film him showing “aggressive” behavior. Yet, no matter what he does, the result is always the same: the persons he tries to act tough towards end up thanking him for being so considerate, gentle, and nice, even when he did nothing for this to happen. The difficulty or impossibility for Mr. Peanutbutter to get the film industry and the general public to distinguish between his everyday real personality and his job as an actor illustrate yet another crucial aspect of the star system. Once a certain image of the celebrity starts to form, whether based on false rumors or actual truths, this image is imprinted on the public’s mind and can be very difficult to change (McDonald 6). Because of his friendly nature and the fact that everyone views him as a nice person, Mr. Peanutbutter is always typecast for roles that correspond to this particular image. The film industry assumes that associations between the fictional character and the off-screen personality of a performer are going to be made automatically by the audience. Producers do not want to take the risk of impairing the authenticity a TV show or a film’s plot by bringing in an actor with a public image that does not correspond to the character’s identity.
in the story, except in specific cases when this effect would be sought after. Mr. Peanutbutter’s image as the nice guy is anchored too deep in the collective imaginary and it has become difficult to differentiate clearly between actor and character, reducing his job-opportunities on the market. Allen explains how “the star’s private life has little if anything to do with his or her “job” of acting in movies, yet a large portion of a star’s image is constructed on the basis of “private” matters […]” (Allen 608). In the case of Mr. Peanutbutter, it is the combination of his “public” private life, his previous roles, the work of his agents, and his various appearances as TV host and in reality TV that has contributed to the manufacturing of this image he is unable to shake off. John Ellis’s understands the relationship between a star’s performance and their public image in terms of three possible combinations:

1. The fiction can content itself with performing the image in those rare cases where the star’s image outside of cinema is fairly stable, i.e. the role can resemble the circulated image
2. The fiction exceeds the circulated image, i.e. at times the role can contradict the circulated image
3. The fictional figure is ‘to one side’ of the star’s general image, elements are used, denied, or added, i.e. the role can be to one side of the circulated image

(Ellis 603-604)

Mr. Peanutbutter clearly belongs to the first category in which the fictional characters he is asked to play often corresponds to his real personality and to the general positive image he vehiculates. In contrast, BoJack’s part as Secretariat in the eponymous
movie could fall into the second or third category.\textsuperscript{29} One the one hand, the film’s marketing strategy uses the very obvious fact that BoJack and Secretariat are both horses with tortured personalities to build a coherent image of the character. On the other hand, it is also evident that BoJack’s actual physical condition and his widely known extravagant lifestyle stand in stark contrast to Secretariat’s rigorous discipline as an athlete.

The complex mixing process involved in the creation of the star image can also unfold at a more personal level for the star himself or herself. During the shooting of a show or a movie, fiction collides with reality, sometimes resulting in a problematic amalgam for the performer who is unable to distinguish between his or her real life and the character he or she is playing. \textit{BoJack Horseman} takes this to an extreme with its representation of BoJack’s mental crisis during the filming of \textit{Philbert}. First, the show’s set and the fictional house where Philbert the character lives is a copy of BoJack’s real house. Second, Philbert has many character traits that are also part of BoJack’s troubled personality. Third, some of the show’s plot elements mirror traumatic experiences in BoJack’s life.\textsuperscript{30} All these elements, added to drug consumption, contribute to BoJack’s increasing confusion as to what pertains to reality or not, leading him to a dangerous mental breakdown where he physically hurts his partner Gina on set. With this example, \textit{BoJack Horseman} depicts the work of acting as a deeply, intimate experience that can rapidly go awry if not managed in a healthy manner because of the unstable power of the emotional luggage stars can bring to their characters. Once again, on-screen and off-screen personas merge to form the abstract entity that is the star image, with nonetheless very material

\textsuperscript{29} The episodes about \textit{Secretariat} can be found in season 2 and in the first half of the season 3.

\textsuperscript{30} This happens sometimes on purpose, as e.g. when Diane intentionally integrates a problematic element from BoJack’s life into \textit{Philbert’s} plot to make him realize the condemnable nature of his actions.
consequences. *BoJack Horseman* provides a critical but deeply realistic depiction of the potential power, struggle, and influence of stars in our capitalist society. The underlying capitalist critique comes as a reinforcing element adding to the overall realistic feeling of the show. The critique goes even further when the show does not hesitate to portray its stars as mere commodities for society to consume.

2. **Stars as Commodities and Faces of Capitalism**

   Earlier, this analysis mentioned the usefulness of Marxist approaches in the study of the star system, which is consistent with the idea of the star part of both production and consumption processes in the film industry (Dyer 5). In his work on celebrity culture, Driessens straightforwardly points out the fact that stars “embody and personify the ideology of capitalism” (652). This statement comes as a reinforcement for the argument made at the beginning of this chapter about overt ideological aspects of stardom. Driessens’s argument about stars personifying the capitalist ideology operates at a more concealed level and in a more mechanical manner. The Marxist concepts of commodity and alienation in particular are essential in the understanding of the “default” role played by the movie star in the capitalist system.

   The first, most evident, aspect of the role of the movie star is its participation in the creation of the film or the TV show. The star image plays a crucial role in the physical production of the merchandise that is going to be commercialized. As actors and actresses, they are part of the means of production in that they can be considered as “natural” resources that are converted into the components that make the final product. Their body as well as their image is transformed through steps involving human labor (acting, writing, filming, editing, etc.) and means of labor (tools such as the audiovisual materials used for
filming, computers, etc.). In other words, stars actively and deliberately participate in the filmmaking process of production, distribution, and exhibition which makes them a phenomenon of production. In addition, the presence of particular star in a film or a TV show often functions as an appealing factor for the audience. What naturally ensues, as described by McDonald, is that “[i]n this circuit of commercial exchange, the star therefore becomes a form of capital, that is to say a form of asset deployed with the intention of gaining advantage in the entertainment market and making profits” (McDonald 5). So far, the star has been described as a means of production and a form of capital, to which can be added the clear notion of the star as part of the labor force. Performers are employed by the film production company, sign contracts, and use their skills to transform the subjects of labor, including their own body and image through their acting work.

The final product that is going to be sold on the market in the form of the film or the TV show is what Karl Marx understands as the commodity: “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfy human wants of some sort or another” (Marx 2). However, this process of commodification also happens elsewhere in the filmmaking process. Stars, or rather their image, has also turned into a commodity that has been carefully manufactured to be later consumed by the audience and by the film industry. A more or less fluctuating economic value is given to their image, which, as it becomes a commodity, also slips out of the star’s control. This second process in which “commodities strip off every trace of their natural use-value, and of the particular kind of labour to which they owe their creation” is called alienation (Marx 139). Stars are disconnected from their image (the product of labor) as it freely circulates in both material and abstract manners. Richard Dyer summarizes these processes of commodification and alienation in these
words: “Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces” (Dyer 6).

*BoJack Horseman* offers very concrete representations of the commodification and alienation processes involved in the star system. As a celebrity agent and film producer, Princess Carolyn naturally contributes to the molding and commercialization of the images of the stars she manages. In the third episode of season four, one of her celebrities, Courtney Portnoy, is starring in the upcoming action movie *Ms. Taken*. Her public image is entirely fabricated towards a specific goal which is to make her more popular with audience in order for the film she is starring in to make more profit. She has no real control over her image which becomes an entity completely dissociated from her, illustrating the processes of commodification and alienation inherent to stardom.

The show is filled with similar examples when a celebrity’s image is shown to be the artificial result of twisted machinations. Alongside the common view of celebrity as commodity, there exists a coexisting understanding of celebrity as “pathology.” Kerry O’Ferris, in his study of “The Sociology of Celebrity” takes the example of research conducted by a few sociologists to determine the levels of narcissism among celebrities. The answers drawn from psychological questionnaires filled in by a pool of celebrity respondents show that “on a variety of different dimensions, celebrities are exceptionally narcissistic—more so than other professional groups or the population at large” (O’Ferris 375). These narcissistic tendencies, although possibly “associated with positive traits (such as extroversion and likeability),” tend to be more often be linked to negative aspects of personality such as “self-centeredness, lack of empathy, and manipulative behavior.”
This pessimistic but realistic perspective on the star entity is extremely relevant in the context of *BoJack Horseman*. Indeed, BoJack and pretty much all the stars around him are most of the time depicted as highly narcissistic. BoJack’s problematic behavior emerges from a mixture between his troubled childhood and the consequences of his fame. Especially in the first seasons, he rarely thinks about the well-being of the people around him, has no empathy for the distress of others, and considers his problems as bigger than anyone else’s. He also has an excessive ego. These behavioral patterns hide deeper self-esteem issues which contribute to his depression and that are explored throughout the show. His status as a celebrity definitely has deep pathological implications for BoJack, which can clearly be seen in Sarah Lynn’s portrayal as well. Being a star seems to bring what it means to live in a capitalist system to a paradoxical epitome. While wealth, freedom, and success seem to be the promise of hard work, they appear to be only an unattainable incentive that pushes individuals to consume themselves and lose notions of empathy and solidarity in the process of never-ending productivity.

*BoJack Horseman* paints an overall very negative portrait of the star system plagued with narcissism, addiction, betrayal, hypocrisy, etc. As it is essentially an embodiment of the capitalist ideologies and its excesses, criticizing this star system so strongly indirectly involves a much larger, general critique of capitalism. Through its gloomy depiction of stardom and what it means to be a star, the show takes an unmistakable stance against the detrimental effects of a capitalist system that turn everything, including people, into commodities and revels in social behaviors revolving around selfishness, greed, and general emptiness. In this regard, the show also displays a critical attitude towards postmodernism and the lack of depth that it usually entails. Once again, the show’s
relationship to postmodernism appears to be ambiguous since, as explained in the previous
chapters, *BoJack Horseman* also employs many postmodernist devices such as pastiche,
mainly for humor purposes, without taking a critical stance towards the cultural elements
it refers to. Perhaps using tools that are familiar to the audience makes it easier for the
overall message to be conveyed and remembered.

This chapter endeavored to demonstrate how the issue of the star system holds a
particular place in *BoJack Horseman*, at the level of the plot just as well as at the level of
production. It came as a logical continuation to the chapter on intertextuality because of
the very nature of the star system, built upon a whole set of meanings involving stars’
personas and images, cultural texts, media representation, and audience participation, all
constantly working and evolving in connection to each other. The way the show accurately
portrays the star system’s harmful consequences, especially on celebrities, is also further
evidence of its realism.

**CHAPTER IV - No Time to be ‘Horsin’ Around’: Mechanisms of Subsumption and Commodification of Time**

The three previous chapters have intended to determine the narrative and
 cinematographic strategies employed by *BoJack Horseman* to construct and convey its
message to the audience. This chapter plays the role of both a conclusion gathering the
devices explored earlier in this analysis, and an attempt to delve deeper into theoretical
aspects of Marxist and neo-Marxist studies of capitalism in order to develop an acute
reflection on two processes inherent to capitalist systems and ideologies—namely
subsumption and the connected concept of commodification—that the show depicts so accurately.

At the beginning of the episode “What Time Is It Right Now,” (S4-E12) Princess Carolyn voices what seems to be a fairly widespread concern nowadays when he says: “There’s so little time, and what are we doing with it?” Her words could not set out more explicitly the strong argument that the show constructs around the consequences of capitalism having become a way of life and the way it has reshaped subjectivities. Above all, it is through a particular perception of time and society’s relationship with it that these consequences appear to be most flagrant. For instance, the show’s adroit portrayal of the dysfunctional manner in which free time and labor time are unevenly balanced in the lives of its characters is deeply revealing of our society’s equally dysfunctional way of consuming time. In this respect, I argue that BoJack Horseman provides a sharp criticism of the absurd operation of a capitalist system that, in Mosco’s words, “fails to guarantee free time to pursue what it most promises: freedom” (Mosco 57) yet without really giving answers as to how to move away from it.31 The show is especially successful in the way it manages to convey a sense of urgency for the characters to correctly employ the time that is allocated to them, and it does so through various tools, whether technical, rhetorical, or plot-related, that this analysis has been determining thus far. Season 4 of BoJack Horseman particularly revolves around the themes of the past, nostalgia, regrets, and a profound awareness of the inexorability of the passage of time. In addition, an analysis of BoJack’s

31 As mentioned in Chapter II, there are examples of alternative lifestyles in the show but they never directly apply to the main characters. There is the example of Cuddlywhiskers who lives like a recluse and who claims to have found happiness and freedom after having given up everything (S3-E3).
former sitcom *Horsin’ Around* will allow me to draw conclusions on *BoJack Horseman*’s final takeaways with regard to the issues aforementioned.

I will explore the manner in which the show renders visible processes of subsumption and commodification at two main levels. One the hand, a study of the narrative and the characters’ behaviors and personalities will provide the base of the argument that time is nothing else but a commodity in their life, and that they all are both victims and agents of the perpetuation of a capitalistic system that has completely subsumed their way of life. On the other hand, a more technical analysis of the cinematographic tools employed by the creators of the show will prove useful in demonstrating how it recreates the sensation of the passage of time and the hold it has on its characters, and how it manages to make the audience feel it as well. As Chapter I demonstrated, this is rendered possible by the larger range of tools that animation has over live action to distort and play with reality, as well as the tendency of the audience to associate animation with humor (Stabile & Harrison 5), therefore often keeping a more open mind regarding the distortion of this reality.

In order to provide some food for thought as to how *BoJack Horseman*’s pessimistic but realistic perspective on life could be lightened, I intend to apply some of the theories of French-Austrian social philosopher and journalist André Gorz, particularly from his book *Farewell to the Working Class*. Since the show acts as a critical reflection of our current system, it is interesting to explore how Gorz’s ideas could be implemented within the narrative of the show. His views on the emancipation of individuals being enabled through a liberation from work and a focus on free time as a way to achieve more autonomy - through artistic activities for instance - are more than relevant in the analysis of a show
that focuses on a world that straddles artistic creation and the capitalist urge to accumulate capital. *BoJack Horseman* is full of irony throughout, but one of the most powerful instances of irony might lie in the paradoxical realization that, as an artist and a creator of artistic content, BoJack is one of the characters who least enjoys art and the product of his own work - a motif interestingly reminiscent of the Marxist concept of alienation. Departing from ‘classical’ Marxism, Gorz did not only argue for the emancipation of the worker, but also for the emancipation from work that he envisioned along with the unequal ownership of the means of production as an obstacle to self-determination (Berry & Kenny 465). Although his theories focus mainly on industrial work, they can nonetheless be particularly enlightening when applied to film industry workers as seen in *BoJack Horseman*.

1. **Processes of Subsumption Change Society’s Perception of Time**

Processes of subsumption as envisioned by Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches constitute an appropriate starting point and theoretical framework for this analysis, in part because they facilitate the introduction of the subsequent argument constructed around the show’s relationship to time. First and foremost, subsumption is divided into two connected processes with one, called real subsumption, arising from the other, formal subsumption. For a few specific reasons that will become evident in the next paragraphs, real subsumption is the process that this analysis is interested in, but it seems necessary to start where it all begins. In a nutshell, “formal subsumption designates the internalization of work to capital” (Clover 1568). Formal subsumption therefore describes the mechanisms by which labor process is harnessed by the capitalist owner of the means of production and
forced to submit to the wage system. This creates the necessary conditions for real subsumption to emerge.

With real subsumption, it is not only the workplace that is the object of rearrangement but the entire environment of the worker and social relationships in general. Capital has pervasively inserted itself into all aspects of everyday life and its requirements are no longer limited to the workplace. In his *Micro-Politics of Capital*, Jason Read formulates this process in the following words:

> It is no longer possible to separate capital, as the producer of goods and commodities, from what used to be called the superstructure: the production of ideas, beliefs, perceptions, and tastes. Capitalist production today has either directly appropriated the production of culture, beliefs, and desires or it has indirectly linked them to the production and circulation of commodities […] In short, capitalist production has taken on a dimension that could be described as “micro-political,” *inserting itself into the texture of day-to-day social existence and, ultimately, subjectivity itself*. (Read 2; emphasis added).

Read goes on by arguing that capital has fundamentally transformed—and is still transforming—“the very structure, or basis, of human existence itself” (2). Studying the processes of real subsumption is revealing of the extent to which capitalist requirements have penetrated deep into individuals’ subjectivities, their relationship with each other and to the world around them. Needless to say, one of these capitalist requirements is very much connected to time. Through processes of real subsumption, capitalism has made us reevaluate our understanding of this concept and many aspects of these mutations are
represented in *BoJack Horseman*, in a manner that is facilitated by the fact that the show takes place in Hollywood and the film industry, as will be explained later on.

First and foremost, envisioning time as a social construct allows us to examine the concrete transformations and highlight historical changes that have been taking place within the context of capitalism, in comparison to past or other economic systems. Society’s relationship to time has not always been what it is today and our acceptance of the seemingly objective way it functions because it is based on mathematical operations has tremendous consequences on our way of life. David Harvey investigates time as a socially constructed concept of which the current understanding is used to maintain and further promote the capitalist system (Harvey 424). He underlines the existence of standards and behaviors that result from our contemporary conceptualization of time:

[...] in modern societies, we accept clock time, even though such time is a social construct, as an objective fact of daily life; it provides a commonly held standard, outside of any one person's influence, to which we turn again and again to organize our lives and in terms of which we assess and judge all manner of social behaviors and subjective feelings. Even when we do not conform to it, we know very well what it is that we are not conforming to. (Harvey 418)

Time has no meaning by itself, it is the value that we inject into it that produces its signification, with wide-ranging consequences on society. Society is able to make sense of things through the way it classifies them, and this natural habit of classifying unfortunately is often used to set up the power relationships between individuals. In this way, the capitalist understanding of time is useful to establish the “superiors” (the owner of the means of production) and “inferiors” (labor force) like the concept of race is wrongly used to
establish “superiors” and “inferiors”. This is not dissimilar to Stuart Hall’s comprehension of race as a floating signifier, although for obvious reasons our perception of time, unlike racial profiling, has actual scientific foundations. Floating signifiers absorb rather than emit meaning, as explained by Hall:

Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, can never be finally fixed, but is subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation. To the losing of old meanings, and the appropriation and collection on contracting new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified, made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations, at different moments of time. (Hall)

The value and signification of time has changed over the centuries, and still varies today from one culture to another. Thompson gives numerous examples of how the value that society ascribes to time has evolved throughout history. Quoting Pierre Bourdieu on his study of the Kabyle culture, he shows how the attitudes of different cultures regarding time can be compared to capitalist societies. The Kabyle have “[a]n attitude of submission and nonchalant indifference to the passage of time which no one dreams of mastering, using up, or saving… Haste is seen as a lack of decorum combined with diabolical ambition” (Thompson 58-9). This serene approach is completely opposed to the capitalistic eagerness to control time and to the fairly negative idea that associates lack of haste to lazy behavior.

Now, how is this pervasive capitalist conception of time reflected in BoJack Horseman?

2. **Blurred Boundaries Between Work Time and Free Time**

At the level of the plot as well as at a more technical level, the show constantly plays with the notion of time and the perverse relationship that capitalist societies have
developed with it. It depicts the effects that subsumption has on individuals at work and in their personal development. In particular, these effects materialize in the increasing difficulty to draw a clear distinction between work time and leisure time. As an actor, BoJack stands at the intersection of work time and leisure time. One objective of his job is the creation of entertaining content that is to be consumed by people during their free time. In other words, the product of his work time provides material that feeds others’ leisure time. Defining what work time and free time (or leisure time\textsuperscript{32}) exactly encompass is a laborious task and has formed propitious grounds for quarrels among scholars. There exists a wide variety of work time theories, each carrying their particular set of pros and cons. For this analysis I choose to focus on Marxist and post-Marxist theories because they reveal some flaws of capitalism beyond solely giving clear-cut definitions of work time without acknowledging the resulting consequences. In his book \textit{Capitalism and the Political Economy of Work Time}, Christoph Hermann explains the Marxist perspective on work time in these words:

For Marxists the essential distinction is not between work time and non-work time, but between necessary and surplus work time. Surplus labor time is the difference between the time necessary to produce the commodities consumed by the working class for its reproduction, and the time workers spend at work. Surplus labor time depends on the length of workday and the intensity of work. It is appropriated by capital and turned into profit […] labor power is the source of value of commodities produced and exchanged in capitalist societies, and work time is the measure of value (Hermann 24).

\textsuperscript{32} For purposes of clarity, the terms ‘leisure time’ and ‘free time’ will be employed interchangeably in this paper, although a semantic distinction can be made.
Identifying necessary and surplus work time allows Hermann to point out the capitalist exploitation of the modes of production. Work time then comprises the entire time that workers spend at work and not just the “productive hours”. As for free time, Marx describes it as a “time for the full development of the individual” which is “both idle time and time for higher activity” (Marx 631). Put another way, free time is time when the power of the labor force is not sold as commodity. Feminist scholars have further specified that “not all non-work time is automatically leisure” (Hermann 35-6) calling attention to such activities as domestic chores and caring for the family which are often performed by women and which are far from being idle time. The concept of free time/leisure time is therefore envisioned in this analysis as time that is dedicated to activities outside of the work sphere and that do not fall under the domain of domestic work. Defining a perfect line between work time and free time today is a rather delicate enterprise, whether in the academic context or in the reality of everyday life. Alan Tuckman explores this issue when he argues that “new working time arrangements tend to blur the boundaries between ‘free’ and ‘working’ time, assuming an availability of labour power to capital” (Tuckman 47). The kinds of working arrangements that take place within the context of the Hollywood film industry depicted in BoJack Horseman definitely fall under the processes that Tuckman describes.

Through the character of BoJack, the show realistically reproduces the heavy load of working hours that is commonplace for actors in the industry as well as the typical long periods of unemployment between two jobs. Tuckman actually puts his finger on a very relevant metaphor that Marx uses to describe workers’ availability (53). Marx indeed compares the worker to the actor who is waiting behind the curtains to go on stage at any
moment. Even though he is not needed for each and every scene, the actor is there, ready in the background. This metaphor literally materializes in *BoJack Horseman* where the actor *is* the worker. The largest actors’ union in the United States, the Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists protects their actors by establishing workweek, overtime, or rest periods rules, but the number of hours worked a day can easily reach 14 to 20 hours for demanding productions, often starting very early in the morning (SAG-AFTRA). In addition, the work of an actor does not stop at the limits of the studio or filming location as they have to research their part or learn their lines. For his roles in *Secretariat* and then *Philbert*, BoJack is on an intense schedule for which he has to be flexible and mentally receptive, and that often encroaches on his free time.

It is through Princess Carolyn that the show truly portrays the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries between work time and free time. Throughout much of the series, Princess Carolyn is available 24 hours a day for her clients, i.e mostly BoJack, and dedicates her life to her job. Free time seems to be only a theoretical concept for her, an abstract idea that she has to compromise on or even totally disregard if she wants to be successful professionally. Her mobile phone, always on and ringing, acts as a symbol of the way work time and free time blend into an indistinct mixture. Tuckman mentions the role of technologies in this phenomenon when he explains how “[d]evelopments such as the pager, mobile phone and laptop computer seem to have reversed the spatial demarcation and closed the space between home and workplace” (Tuckman 50).

Free time is not only about having the time but also having the right mindset to be able to enjoy it, which is definitely not the case for either BoJack or Princess Carolyn. They both work in an industry that is supposed to provide cultural entertainment to be consumed
during free time, but they do not take the time and/or have the right mindset to consume
the very thing that they produce. Princess Carolyn is never seen watching a movie or a TV
show once she starts her work as an agent, probably to emphasize how focused on work
she is. The only thing that BoJack watches is *Horsin’ Around*, his former show from the
late 80s/early 90s, and when he does, it is most of the time in a situation of frustration or
nostalgia (and usually when he is under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs).\textsuperscript{33} There is
nearly a complete absence of cultural consumption in both of their lives: the little free time
that Princess Carolyn has, she spends worrying about work. Although BoJack has massive
amounts of free time, this free time is most often spent thinking anxiously about the past
and the future.\textsuperscript{34} There is a formidable pressure to find the correct balance between work
time and free time, and it is again with Princess Carolyn that this tendency is most visible
in the show. As the archetype of the career-driven and ambitious working woman, she is
one of the rare characters in the show that eventually finds some peace after having
struggled for decades. For a long time in the show, on every occasion she finds herself
drifting away from her focus on her job she ends up disappointed and hurt, and her only
solution is to concentrate all her energy back on work: “Starting now, you are a hard,
heartless career girl, go to work, be awesome at it, don’t waste time on foolish flights of
fancy. From now on you are a robot,” she says to herself (S1-E7). Free time to her is merely
time that is wasted. Yet, it seems that her job consumes her, and she is stuck in the culturally
prescribed narrative of the insensitive career woman throughout most seasons. In the last
season, she proves that finding the right balance is not about hours being equally spent

\textsuperscript{33} The topic of *Horsin’ Around* will be examined in more details in 5. *BoJack Horseman, à cheval
Between Existentialism and Nihilism.*

\textsuperscript{34} See for a typical example of BoJack watching his own former show in *BoJack Horseman* (S1-E1).
between work and free time, but about what works for her personally. Once she finally acknowledges that work is what makes sense to her and that increasing her free time is not necessarily the right answer in her case, she can finally enjoy her time off work to the fullest.

3. **Time as a Commodity**

The episode “What Time Is It Right Now” opens with a shot of Princess Carolyn pitching *Philbert* to some producers in a room full of clocks of all imaginable designs and from all conceivable time periods. It then goes on with Flip, the writer of this new TV show, making numerous—more or less subtle—plays on words related to time in his description of the show to impress the producers. Through the symbolic effect of the room, the clock can be recognized as the ultimate sign for the commodification of time, insofar as it is the literal manifestation of the selling and display of the originally abstract concept that time is. It has become an object of consumption and, more so, an object that governs and controls modern lives. Princess Carolyn and the other characters are surrounded by clocks that constantly remind them of the passage of time and that stress the never-ending urgency to make lucrative decisions before someone else does and wins the pot. Even more symbolically powerful, the company called “whattimeisitrightnow.com” that owns the TV show *Philbert* literally started as a website providing the very simple service of telling what time it was in real time.\(^{35}\) It goes without saying that this service is completely irrelevant in our current modern environment where time is displayed literally everywhere, from watches to phones to computer, etc. However, the fact that a company whose original purpose is to tell time owns a TV show and by proxy technically controls the lives of its

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\(^{35}\) See the actual website created by the show for this occasion:  
[https://www.whattimeisitrightnow.com/](https://www.whattimeisitrightnow.com/)
actors and other crew members, including BoJack’s and Princess Carolyn’s, is highly meaningful in terms of *BoJack Horseman*’s concerns with society’s relationship with time.

Although Marx never explicitly mentioned time as a commodity and envisioned it mainly in relation to the concepts of exchange-value and labor time, many scholars after him extended his theory to apply it to time itself. Time as a commodity translates into the existence of materialistic processes of exchange (you can ‘exchange’ time against something else, whether material or immaterial) and into the basic principle that *time is money*. In his essay “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” Edward P. Thompson straightforwardly describes how “time is now a currency: it is not passed but spent” (61). This monetary conception of time has been so internalized within the context of—and through—capitalism that it is rarely challenged, even though its effects are unquestionably harmful to the well-being of society as a whole as well as to individuals and their personal life. Summarizing the views of various political economists, Wolfgang J. Fellner suggests that substituting time and money perfectly is merely impossible because time holds different values depending on different activities, whether in the context of work or in the context of leisure. According to him, utility or pleasure are not the only intrinsic properties of activities. He identifies power, playfulness, sense of meaning and sense of belonging as being just as important in the creation of value in activities. Fellner envisions the commodification of time as a harmful shift in the relevance of the intrinsic values given to activities (7). The commodification of time leads to an emphasis on values related to status and recognition, and, in terms of emotions, to the rise of feelings of helplessness, loss of control, dependency, as well as insecurity disorientation and the deterioration of the quality of relationships.
Through his career BoJack seeks recognition and a certain status in society, but because he is always looking further in time in terms of job prospects, he forgets to truly enjoy the present experience. As a result, a perpetual sensation of restlessness emerges; a sense of urgency that is completely manufactured by society’s relationship to time that, once again, has mutated within the larger context of subsumption. The productivity originally demanded by capitalism within the work environment has transcended the physical boundaries of the workplace and invaded the individual sphere and transformed expectations in terms of personal development. Dimensions of life that did not formerly belong to the work sphere have been seized upon by capitalist requirements through subsumption and commodification mechanisms. Every day that BoJack does not spend working on restoring his former fame seems to bring him closer to his own obsolescence and highlights his—supposedly problematic—lack of productivity. Yet, when he does manage to improve his public image, or straighten such or such aspect of his life, the passage of time reminds him over and over again of how inexorably gone the past is. It is in his mother’s words that it is best expressed: “Time’s arrow neither stands still nor reverses. It merely marches forward” (S5-E11). While time spent working should provide BoJack with a sense of meaning and belonging, the focus is shifted on the fulfillment of instincts of power and control, which in turn provokes this unhealthy relationship to time as a good that can be purchased and spent, instead of appreciating it as simply being.

The character of Princess Carolyn provides another appropriate example of the effects of subsumption and the commodification of time that manifest mainly in the deterioration of her relationships. Although she loves her work as a celebrity agent and later as a manager and producer and is objectively very good at it, her efforts often remain
unappreciated by her colleagues and clients. This leads her to work twice as hard as everyone else. She spends even more time at work, which infringes on her personal life and her relationships.

The particular sensation of restlessness and hurriedness described by Fellner is also very convincingly conveyed audio-visually in the show. Animation has an abundance of technical tools at its disposal that allow great freedom for the creators of the show to reinforce the potential power of a given atmosphere. Once again, one of the strengths of BoJack Horseman lies in the fact that although it is a cartoon, it often feels more realistic than many live-action productions. Precisely because it is a cartoon, the audience is more susceptible from the start to accept a greater distortion of reality without necessarily leaving the realistic setting permanently, as explained in Chapter I.

On multiple occasions, the audience can physically perceive the feeling of urgency that surrounds the characters in the show. The overall pace of BoJack Horseman, at least in the first seasons, is fast, almost frantic: the scenes come one after another without rest and the speech delivery of most characters is impressively quick, rarely leaving time for the characters and the audience to catch their breath and reflect on the situation. Many scenes involving BoJack’s job as an actor on set are constructed in a way that suggests disorientation and hurriedness. The camera focuses on BoJack’s confused expression while in the background a swarm of anonymous people from the production crew moves rapidly, all in the hurry to do their jobs. The voices of various other characters addressing BoJack on such and such issue all jumble together in a loud cacophony that produces an intense feeling of disorientation in both time and space (S5-E1).
Finally, the show resorts to visual effects that would be difficult to implement in a live-action production that aims to be realistic. An example of how brilliantly the show manages to recreate complete time and space disorientation both at the characters’ level and at the audience’s level can be found in the episode “That’s Too Much, Man!” (S3-E11). In this upsetting episode, BoJack goes on a drug-fueled bender with his younger friend Sarah Lynn. A confused BoJack completely loses his grip on reality and the notion of time vanishes, leaving both BoJack and the audience perplexed. This is visually depicted through scenes that abruptly jump from one to another without any coherence. Days become weeks and maybe months before BoJack asks: “how long have we been on this bender?” The background around him often gets blurry or shaky as time seems to dissolve. As an echo to the concepts examined in Chapter II, there is even a self-reflexive reference to the messiness of the episode itself when BoJack is projected to the past after he blacks out on heroin. BoJack revisits a meeting with Cuddlywhiskers who worked with him on an unsuccessful show and who says: “This last episode got the worst rating yet. I was afraid your character trying heroin would be a bridge too far. And the disjointed blackout structure, with the one flashback in the middle, really confused our audience. They hated all the fourth-wall-breaking meta-jokes” (S3-E11).

4. **Gorz: Liberation from Work and Focus on Free Time**

At this point in this analysis, it is useful to once again go back to one of Thompson’s quotes about the deep-seated links between capitalism and the commodification of time: “In mature capitalist society all time must be consumed, marketed, put to use; it is offensive for the labor force merely to “pass the time” (Thompson 90-1). In the capitalist context of accumulation of capital and ever-increasing search for profit, free time beyond what is
strictly necessary for the reproduction of labor is wasted time. *BoJack Horseman* highlights the ethical and philosophical shortcomings of this capitalist conception of time that does not leave room for the pursuit of happiness beyond the sphere of professional achievements. Although some might indeed achieve self-fulfillment through their work like Princess Carolyn does, it is not always the case for other characters such as BoJack whose job as an actor does not give him a lasting sense of accomplishment. André Gorz took a great interest in this question of balance between work time and free time and advocated for a reduction of working hours in favor of a more beneficial focus on free time in order to find a sense of accomplishment outside work. In *Farewell to the Working Class*, he argues for the liberation of time and the abolition of work. As understood by capitalism, work mostly refers to activities that are carried out for someone else in exchange of a wage and that follow a time schedule established by the person who pays the wage. Work should not be the main focus of our lives but merely a secondary activity that serves to produce the necessary goods and services for society and that is useful to provide a supplementary income: “Thus the abolition of work does not mean abolition of the need for effort, the desire for activity, the pleasure of creation, the need to cooperate with others and be of some use to the community. Instead, the abolition of work simply means the progressive, but never total, suppression of the need to purchase the right to live [...] by alienating our time and our lives” (Gorz 2).

Gorz’s theory aims at taking advantage of the already on-the-way working time reduction happening through the development of new technologies and automation to reorient the resulting free time towards meaningful personal and/or collective activities. Liberating time for everyone would allow people who are otherwise bound to rigid working
hours and schedules that leave no real free time to engage in activities of their choice. This chapter does not aspire to delve into the logistics as to how to implement such a system – Gorz already does it very well\(^\text{36}\) but, put simply, reducing the working time for everyone would basically allow more people to work less and would generate a better distribution of wealth.

However, Gorz does acknowledge the existence of people like Princess Carolyn who “hope to realize themselves in their work” and “identify […] and define themselves through it” (Gorz 6). More often than not, he describes, these people belong to the category of “skilled” workers and would certainly show reluctance towards the abolition of work because it would supposedly threaten their place in society. Gorz criticizes the selfishness of this stratum of workers who turn a blind eye to the societal advantages that the abolition of work and the liberation of time would produce for everyone, merely because they benefit from the existing system – or at least they think they do. Regarding this matter, Gorz declares: “Capitalism owes its political stability to the fact that, in return for the dispossession and growing constraints experienced at work, individuals enjoy the possibility of building an apparently growing sphere of individual autonomy outside of work” (Gorz 80). Apparently being the key word here since the freedom that is promised appears to be nothing more than a smoke screen for the great majority of society. In reality, free time is not truly free insofar as it is not quantitively nor qualitatively enough for people to pursue their personal goals – or even simply think about personal goals – beyond the time they need to rest from work and complete the burdensome household tasks. The class perspective is one of the points where Gorz starts to divert from classical Marxism. Marx

wants the working-class to take power and liberate itself; Gorz wants a “non-class of non-workers” who is liberated in work and from work.

Gorz indirectly mentions the commodification of leisure time when he criticizes the way in which “we appoint professional buffoons to fill our emptiness with electronic entertainment, and content ourselves with complaining about the poor quality of the goods and services we consume” (Gorz 148). On the contrary, he calls for individuals to regain control of their time and their life, including the kind of entertainment they have access to during their free time. Applied to the context of BoJack Horseman and the Hollywood industry, Gorz’s theory of the liberation of time and the abolition of work means that the creation of entertainment would then take place during people’s free time. The entertainment industry slides from the work sphere to the autonomous sphere. Cultural content would be produced more homogeneously – in terms of equal opportunities – by the people and for the people, generating more diversity. Gorz conceives the practical implications as followed:

[…] the expansion of the sphere of autonomy depends upon a freely available supply of convivial tools that allow individuals to do or make anything whose aesthetic or use-value is enhanced by doing it oneself. […] libraries, places to make music or movies, ‘free’ radio and television stations, open spaces for communication, circulation and exchange, and so on need to be accessible to everyone. (Gorz 87)

People can of course still “work” together to create content, but the time pressure that currently exists because “time is money” disappears. The technical means to produce a movie or a TV show would be collectively owned, in order for everyone to be able to make
a movie if they choose to, unlike the current situation in which the means of production necessary to make a movie or a TV show are concentrated in very few hands. Since no one’s income depends on the final product, people working in the film industry are neither pressured nor owned by money. This is what happens in BoJack Horseman on multiple occasions when the content of the film or TV show in which BoJack acts is controlled by the producers, or botched because of the pressing schedule. In the episode “The Stopped Show”, the shady company ‘whattimeisitrightnow.com’, which owns the TV show Philbert, demonstrates its power to pull the plug on production at any time if it is not profitable anymore (S5-E12). On the contrary, in the society envisioned by Gorz, the film is not a commodity anymore, and neither is the audience.

5. BoJack Horseman, à cheval Between Existentialism and Nihilism

I previously argued that a specificity of BoJack Horseman in comparison to other similar animated TV shows lies in its heavy reliance on the continuity of time. In these final paragraphs, I will examine how this reflects in the specific case of Horsin’ Around. I will also look in more detail at BoJack’s relationship with time, which will allow me to draw broader conclusions on the show’s ambivalent message.

Horsin’ Around, the show that started BoJack’s career in the late 80s, is a sitcom. This implies that, among other characteristics of the genre, it is filmed in front of a live studio audience. This analysis talked about the breaking of the fourth wall earlier and in this case, the fourth wall is literally down for the live studio audience. It also means that sometimes, it takes multiple takes before being able to get the right one and the audience is there to witness the actors, including BoJack, make mistakes. Yet, these mistakes have no consequences because the actors always get to try again and make it perfect. This is also
true for the work of acting in general, except in the context of live performance such as plays, only without the presence of the audience. Time therefore functions differently for actors at the moment of filming. Time can be stopped, mistakes can be corrected, and time then sets off again as if nothing happened in between. This is what BoJack has been used to for years, especially at the beginning of his career with *Horsin’ Around*, and what might partly account for his difficulties to accept that errors have consequences and that time goes on uninterrupted, with no possibility to go back and try to fix what is broken.

The way time functions within the narrative of the sitcom is also revealing of broader philosophical patterns. Time in *Horsin’ Around* seems to operate in a loop, in the sense that every episode starts at the dawn of a new day synonymous of new “incidents” that will be resolved by the end of the day/episode. As in all sitcoms, time and space are very contained and every single issue is resolved within the span of one episode. The tone is light and even if the characters may evolve slightly over the seasons, it is nothing like what happens in the world of *BoJack Horseman* with its ever-present focus on trauma, where issues linger for years, if not decades, and where people age and die without finding this final resolution that characters in *Horsin’ Around* seem to get so easily.

More importantly, the particular relationship that BoJack entertains with his former show reveals a lot about the ambivalent sentiments he, as well as the show in general, feels towards the past. *Horsin’ Around* is a finished product, frozen in time, that can be endlessly rewatched. No matter how many times BoJack will watch it, nothing will ever change in terms of the show’s story and resolutions. However, what can and do change is the perception that BoJack the viewer, with a very real life, has of it. He is constantly exposed to a vision of himself as an illusionary perfect character in an illusionary perfect show,
which makes the issues of his present even more flagrant. This pattern of rewatching *Horsin’ Around* magnifies BoJack’s own problematic and ambivalent relationship with time and with the past. On the one hand, he has developed a strong attachment to the past, a certain nostalgia for a supposedly happier and more successful period of his life where all troubles seemed to either have no consequences or the possibility to be fixed. On the other hand, he despises this past as well because it is reminiscent of his troubled childhood and the start of his numerous addictions and behavioral issues. In addition, watching a permanently young version of himself only reminds him further that time has passed. Unlike BoJack the character in *Horsin’ Around*, BoJack the viewer ages, just as we the viewers age as we rewatch *BoJack Horseman*.

Finally, the continuity of time and its reality effect mentioned in Chapter I and II and that are so essential to *BoJack Horseman* as well as the ambivalence of the show’s stance towards two fairly opposed philosophical views, namely existentialism and nihilism, find all their significance in the show’s portrayal of time. Although it takes time and work, characters in *BoJack Horseman* have the possibility to change if they put their heart to it, reflecting a more optimistic vision of life. However, these characters evolve within a system that never really changes but rather reinvents itself in new ways. The Hollywood setting and therefore the capitalist system remain unchanged from the beginning to the end of the show, despite many attempts from the characters to provoke some change. Whether it is the assistants’ strike being quietly stifled by the industry or Diane’s efforts to denounce sexist and racist behaviors being diverted, all attempts of reform in the show end up into nothingness. The fall of a big capitalist structure, the company “whattimeisitrightnow”, as a consequence of sexual assaults accusations by employees against the CEO seems to be
an optimistic turn of events but it only results in the dismissal of most of the workers and the former CEO is immediately offered a new job opportunity by another multinational corporation. No matter how long the system is given, it seems to have the endless capacity to reinvent itself and to survive in one form or another. All this seems to lead to the argument that in the world of *BoJack Horseman*, change is possible but only at the level of the individual.

In other words, time seems to function linearly for individuals, even for characters who seem to have a habit for repeating past mistakes and harmful behaviors like BoJack. After all, the very end of the show is the demonstration that there is—as tainted as it is—a light of hope for people who want to change. On the other hand, time would function in a loop pattern with regards to larger capitalist systems and particularly larger societal, economic and political structures, because they have the pernicious capacity to recreate themselves under seemingly new and “better” forms, that end up being disguises for endless patterns of greed, abuse and selfishness. In the light of this relationship to time, I believe this ambivalence between an existentialist view towards individual change and a nihilistic perspective on systemic change can be seen as the show’s final and general take on society and capitalism. This would also explain further the ambivalent nature of the show’s relationship with postmodernism that has been mentioned throughout this work.

*BoJack Horseman* does not provide any ready-prepared solution for the issues it raises simply because there is no such solution. According to the show, it seems that all one can do is try to evolve at a personal level and hope this will in time reflect on larger socio-economic structures. The show is remarkably powerful in its ability to make us question our own life, even though it might have nothing to do with Hollywood, and the
fact that it is in the form of a cartoon does not stop it from being disturbingly realistic in numerous instances—quite the contrary.
Works Cited


“Interview with the BoJack Horseman Creative Team!” Youtube, uploaded by Jazza, 24 March 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KoflRvAr0M&list=WL&index=25


BoJack Horseman Episode Guide

Season 1 (Released 22 August 2014)


Season 2 (Released July 17 2015)


Season 3 (Released 22 July 2016)


Episode 4: **Fish Out of Water.** Writer: Elijah Aron & Jordan Young. Director: Mike Hollingsworth.


**Season 4 (Released 8 September 2017)**

Episode 1: **See Mr. Peanutbutter Run.** Writer: Peter A. Knight. Director: Amy Winfrey.


Episode 6: **Stupid Piece of Sh*t.** Writer: Alison Tafel. Director: Anne Walker Farrell.


Episode 8: **The Judge.** Writer Elijah Aron & Jordan Young. Director: Otto Murga.

Episode 10: **lovin that cali lifestyle!!** Writer: Peter A. Knight. Director: Anne Walker Farrell.

Episode 11: **Time’s Arrow.** Writer: Kate Purdy. Director: Aaron Long.


**Season 5 (Released 14 September 2018)**

Episode 2: **The Dogs Days Are Over.** Writer: Joanna Calo. Director: Amy Winfrey.


Episode 8: **Mr. Peanutbutter’s Boos.** Writer: Kelly Galuska. Director: Anne Walker Farrell.

**Season 6 (Part I Released 25 October 2019 / Part II Released 31 January 2020)**


Episode 14: **Angela.** Writer Shauna McGarry. Director: James Brownman.

Episode 15: **The View from Halfway Down.** Writer: Alison Tafel. Director: Amy Winfrey.


South Park. Created by Trey Parker, Matt Stone. Produced by Trey Parker, Matt Stone, Brian Graden, Deborah Liebling. Comedy Central, 1997-present.

