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From Real Housewives to The Brady Bunch: Bojack Horseman Finds Its Place

Abstract

Alissa Chater offers a three-part analysis of Netflix original animated television show, *Bojack Horseman*. In her analysis Chater discusses the ways in which the show is in dialogue with the sitcom genres it parodies as she compares the world of *Bojack Horseman* to the show-within-a-show, *Horsin' Around*, the sitcom the titular character starred in some twenty years previous. Chater explores the ways in which editing, narrative, camera movement, and other elements display the relationship between the two shows that is an essential part of the title character. Chater offers an insightful application of cinematic analysis to the medium of animated television.

Keywords

Bojack Horseman, Raphael Bob-Wakesberg, Netflix, *Horsin' Around*, Will Arnett

From *Real Housewives* to *The Brady Bunch*: *Bojack Horseman* Finds Its Place
By Alissa Chater

In the changing market of post-convergence era television, Netflix has emerged as a powerhouse of multimedia content production with its binge-worthy original series, noted for their ‘quality characteristics’ before their premieres. Netflix has sought to create the next cult-status adult cartoon with Raphael Bob-Waksberg’s 2014 series *Bojack Horseman*. Ahead of its first season, Entertainment Weekly published an article titled “What the hell is Netflix’s ‘Bojack Horseman?’” As television critic Hilary Busis outlines, there are some things audiences need to know:

It is, according to Netflix, “darkly hilarious, irreverent, serialized, animated comedy for adults”...It stars Will Arnett as the title character, “the failed legendary 90’s sitcom star from the favorite family sitcom *Horsin’ Around*, who has been trying to find his way through a muddle of self-loathing, whisky and failed relationships.”...It takes place in a universe where the airport is named after Air Bud, there’s a store called “Lululemming”[and] all the animals have hands. (Busis)

The unusual serial format of the cartoon would imply that it has a larger message. However, the scattered structure of the series’ first two episodes restrains it among a bombardment of pop-culture references and almost-too-obvious puns. In this way, *Bojack Horseman* begins to find its place. In this paper, an analysis of *Horsin’ Around*’s incorporation into the narrative will be used to consider how *Bojack Horseman* seeks to differentiate itself from the traditional family sitcom.

Several times throughout the first episode, clips from Bojack’s former television series *Horsin’ Around* is incorporated seamlessly into the narrative. In the first episode, aptly titled “Bojack Horseman: the Bojack Horseman Story, Chapter One,” this occurs as a type of prologue to the series, to better consider why the show begins at this period in Bojack’s life – 18 years after *Horsin’ Around* was cancelled. The parody of the family sitcom is heavy-handed in *Horsin’ Around* with phrases such as “*Horsin’ Around* was filmed in front of a live audience.” The brief clip at the beginning of the episode evokes the style of shows such as *Full House*, *Family Matters* and *Diff’rent Strokes*. Later, when Bojack is being interviewed by Charlie Rose, the indication that the show is not ‘quality television,’ causes Bojack to argue: “I know that it’s very hip these days to shit all over *Horsin’ Around*. . . But, after a long day of getting kicked in the urethra you just want to get home and watch a show about good likeable people who love each other. No matter what happens, at the end of thirty minutes, everything’s going to turn out okay.” By the end of the first episode, *Bojack Horseman* seems to be about the opposite – unlikable, narcissistic, and self-deprecating celebrities whose own naivety becomes their downfall. At the end of the episode, Bojack is anything but resolved about the conflict of finding someone to write his memoir. Instead, he pukes in front of his potential ghost writer, Diane, and begs her,

“Please don’t put this in the book.” There is a nice moment when Bojack begins to accept Diane despite his trepidations, but this is completely ruined – thrown up on in both a figurative and literal sense.

Although the show is critical of the excessive niceties of the traditional family sitcom, it pays homage to them both structurally and stylistically. Although *Horsin’ Around* is not used seamlessly the way is in the first episode, the second episode, “Bojack Horseman Hates the Troops” has a traditional three-act structure with both an A and B plot and a conflict that is arbitrarily used to interrupt the ambiguous serial plotline. It is shown in the opening credit sequence that Bojack uses a similar “three wall” mise-en-scene despite the freedom of movement it has as an animated cartoon series. In the opening credits, Bojack makes a conveyor belt-like movement through the spaces or ‘sets’ of the show, all of which will be featured in the episode. Furthermore, restrained camera movement in a multiple camera style gives *Bojack Horseman* the voyeuristic quality of a family sitcom predicated on the idea of an audience looking into the lives of a supposed ‘real’ family. In analysis, this becomes an interesting juxtaposition as Bojack has a similar ‘alternative family’ one would expect from *Full House* or *Diff’rent Strokes*, but in an ill-defined, unrealistic universe where some people are animals and some people are humans.

In the second episode, conflict arises when Bojack buys a box of muffins at the grocery store which were ‘dibsed’ by ‘Neal McBeal the Navy Seal’ (an actual seal) who wanted them as his first treat when he arrived home from Afghanistan. In several instances, when Bojack and Diane begin to work on his memoir, the ambiguous serial plotline of the season is interrupted by the contrived issue of the muffins. They are used to prevent Bojack from talking about his past. The pun of ‘Neal McBeal the (literal) Navy Seal’ is a weak one-note chuckle that is not unlike the humour in *Horsin’ Around*. *Bojack Horseman* departs from this humour by politicizing the issue, turning it into a deeper consideration of the ill-treatment of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, making it more modern than the dated sitcom format.

The ambiguous intentions of Bojack’s character are reasserted in the show’s final credit music. The lyrics state “and I’m trying to hold onto to my past. It’s been so long I don’t know how I’m gonna last. I guess I’ll just try and make you understand that I’m more horse than a man, or I’m more man than a horse.” This brings up not only the ambiguous reflection of past that the show seeks to consider, but Bojack’s existentialist crisis of self. In conclusion, the ambiguity of the first two episodes is given meaning through the use of *Bojack Horseman*’s show-within-the-show *Horsin’ Around*. By depicting a traditional family sitcom, sites of alignment and departure make indications toward the show’s larger ideology.

Style in *Bojack Horseman*

As was the case with the first two episodes, one episode in discussion features implicit stylistic reference to *Horsin’ Around* whereas the other does this in an in-direct way. Points of departure from *Horsin’ Around* and *Bojack Horseman* are done primarily in the mise-en-scene

with clothing and setting, suggesting that *Bojack Horseman* is built on an ellipsis which stylistically picks up on these characters years later. This should be read not as a way to alienate these characters from their original source on the show, but acts as a way to impose realism in an unrealistic world.

Most relevant in episode three, titled “Pricky Muffin,” there is a circumstance in which *Bojack Horseman* duplicates a sequence from *Horsin’ Around*. While the sequences have the same number of shots, the breakfast sequence in *Bojack Horseman* has longer shot durations. The camera does not necessarily cut to the character who is speaking. In *Horsin’ Around*, two on-screen characters never speak during the same shot. In the first shot after the establishing in *Bojack Horseman*, all three characters are on-screen, speaking to each other in a shot which lasts for an unusual long thirteen seconds. In addition, the *Bojack Horseman* sequence also features a one-liner joke, but there is no laugh track to accompany it. More generally, each sequence has a distinct mise-en-scene which makes them dated. *Horsin’ Around* uses the wood panelled kitchen typical of a 1990s home, whereas *Bojack Horseman* uses a contemporary-looking kitchen whose only distinct feature is an abstract piece of art. Together, these qualities give *Bojack Horseman* a sense of realism. Editing is not simply for telling the audience where to look, but for creating focus on the cynicism of each character. The stylistic ellipsis of the mise-en-scene confronts the reality of aging, a subject which many sitcoms (*Horsin’ Around* included) have difficulty confronting and which cartoons rarely never display.

The second episode of discussion, “Zoes and Zeldas” begins with a meta-criticism of how family sitcoms are considered academically. In this, Diane’s old boyfriend Wayne, a television critic, discusses the continued relevance of *Horsin’ Around*’s competitor series *Mr. Peanutbutter’s House*. In this, he breaks down two character binaries called “Zoes and Zeldas” and further tries to impose this on Bojack, calling him a Zelda. It becomes interesting to note that this episode, which articulates the limited understandings of television characters, has the most diversity in terms of setting, clothing and the diversity of characters featured. All of *Bojack Horseman*’s lead characters are shown in formal wear, casual clothes and pyjamas at some point in the episode. In one sequence, Diane and Bojack discuss his memoir while playing in a never-to-be-seen-again billiards room, while usually this is done in Bojack’s office. Wayne, the show’s only African-American character, is first introduced. The continued effort to diversify the characters of the show can be understood as a subversive type of stylistic ellipsis. Even though *Horsin’ Around* is not directly referenced, the difference between its representation years later is its progression into reality, showing the multiplicity of character and mise-en-scene.

In my earlier analysis, the world of *Bojack Horseman* was shown to be one in which some people are people and some people are animals, but both have hands. Although an effort to stylistically age *Horsin’ Around* through a more realistic representation is shown, *Bojack Horseman* is by no means realistic. Here, stylistic qualities of the show are consistently confounded by the strangeness of its setting. The ideology behind this distinct televisual world

remains to be seen, yet the stylistic references between *Horsin' Around* and *Bojack Horseman* are distinct.

No Really, “What the hell is Netflix’s *Bojack Horseman*?”

Earlier in this analysis, I cited an Entertainment Weekly article titled, “What the hell is Netflix’s *Bojack Horseman*?” In this, television critic Hilary Busis summarizes, “It is, according to Netflix, a ‘darkly hilarious, irreverent, animated comedy for adults.’ . . . It takes place in a universe where the airport is named after Air Bud, there’s a store called “Lululemming” [and] all animals have hands” (Busis). Thus far, analysis has focused on a comparison of *Bojack Horseman* and the show-within-the-show *Horsin' Around*, analysing aesthetic juxtapositions between *Bojack Horseman* and the traditional family sitcom. A conscious effort is made to textually differentiate the two with *Bojack Horseman* exhibiting qualities found in the single camera sitcom. Earlier I referred to this aesthetic as a means to make *Bojack Horseman* more ‘realistic.’ However, it seems too comfortable to assume notions of ‘realism’ in a show which so aggressively situates itself outside of the real world, as Busis describes.

In the final part of this analysis, it will be argued that the series more accurately lapses into presentism, meaning the present day is anachronistically introduced into depictions of the past or future. As such, the show’s constant reference to the past is metatextual as it refers to television’s ability to use the past as a means to make better sense of the present. Ultimately, as *Bojack Horseman* attempts to differentiate itself from the traditional family sitcom, it idealises both its narrative and aesthetic tropes to incorporate them into its format. To better explore this model, this analysis will present a studies-based comparison of the traditional family sitcom to determine how *Bojack Horseman* works in homage. It will also analyze the final two episodes, “Downer Ending” and “Later” to discuss metatextual elements of the show’s seriality and introduce the argument of presentism. Finally, this analysis will make broader considerations of how *Bojack Horseman* works as original content on a multi-platform streaming service in the post-convergence era.

First, it is important to make final conclusions on *Bojack Horseman*’s use of aesthetic modes from the multiple-camera and single-camera sitcom. *Bojack Horseman* uses a three-wall set up, 180 degree axis of action and a restrained camera movement in the style of a multiple-camera sitcom. In the second part of this analysis, this was further examined in the shot-by-shot analysis of the breakfast sequence. In this, longer shot duration and scaled down sound was shown to borrow qualities of the single-camera sitcom to establish difference from *Horsin' Around* which is more of a direct parody of the multiple-camera mode. As *Bojack Horseman* is a cartoon, it would follow the single-camera mode of production. In this, the show is conceivably “pre-edited during the pre-production stage” (Butler 216) through storyboards. Nevertheless, it still uses elements of the multiple-camera mode in post-production. As discussed earlier, *Horsin' Around* was shown to use elements of the traditional family sitcom such as a laugh track, music, dubbed-in-dialogue and shot/reverse-shot patterns in which cuts occur when the next character

speaks. As was described by television cultural critic Jeremy Butler, these elements are normally used to smooth over discontinuities which inevitably occur when editing a multiple-camera set-up. (Butler 315) As *Bojack Horseman* uses the single-camera mode of pre-production, it is not subject to the same discontinuities. Therefore, the use of the multiple-camera mode is innovative as a means to accentuate *Horsin' Around* as a traditional family sitcom and establish difference between the two shows. As *Bojack Horseman* is a cartoon, it has the freedom to shift between these two modes in a way which is continuous and comprehensible.

Given the unusualness of *Bojack Horseman* as a serial cartoon show, it becomes relevant to question how the show is a serial and what that contributes to its presentation of the past. As was Butler describes, “Serial characters carry a specific, significant past – much more than do the series characters.” (Butler 44) In this, the past is constantly referred to as a means to create a multilayered narrative. (Butler 44) Reference to the past is shown to be used in two ways. In the first case, it juxtaposes *Bojack Horseman* with *Horsin' Around*. Of the characters discussed, Bojack Horseman and Sarah Lynn are the only characters to be depicted in both shows, with their characters appearing progressively aged in *Bojack Horseman*. In the third episode which was analysed, “Prickly Muffin,” efforts are made to differentiate the past and present, effectually ‘dating’ either of the series two shows. As it was shown through a shot-by-shot analysis of the breakfast sequence, Bojack and Sarah Lynn are constantly reflecting on their past, literally re-enacting their actions in the present tense. For Bojack and Sarah Lynn, this re-enactment is part of idealising the past. For the viewer, who can make linkages with the past more objectively, it is a way to notice the failure of Bojack and Sarah to realise what lead them to become their present selves. In doing so, it pays homage through aesthetic repetition and makes a distinct criticism of the performative aspects of the traditional family sitcom.

In another way, *Bojack Horseman* makes serial references to the past in the more traditional sense by constantly referring back to major narrative points which occurred previously on the series. (Butler 44) This type of seriality occurs most for *Bojack Horseman*’s protagonists. It can be noted that the central themes, plots, characters and environment are focused around Bojack and the challenges of his mid-life crisis. However, this is balanced by the depiction of core relationships with the series few main characters: Sarah Lynn, Diane Nyugen, Todd Chavez, Princess Caroline and Mr. Peanutbutter. Beyond this, other characters are incidental and appear sporadically throughout the series and our analysis. The first of the two most recently viewed episodes, “Downer Ending,” is by far the most experimental. Most of the episode is structured as a drug-fueled hallucination as Bojack has a final breakdown when trying to complete his memoir. In this, references to the past become the show’s main device to resolve serial conflicts.

One major plotline throughout the season has been Bojack’s relationship with Diane in which he finds himself unable to admit that he is in love with her. Previously, the show has used a more traditional means of representing the past by using a flashback to explain that Bojack had tried to kiss Diane (the first episode to feature this is “Our Story is a “D” Story”). In “Downer

Ending,” Bojack’s anxiety over Diane comes to the fore as he imagines her as a monster during the hallucination. As she melts and oozes, dividing into several parts, she repeats lines which were shown to bring Diane and Bojack back together in their original context. By evoking images of the past in the present, Bojack is able to confront his fear of Diane head on. In a second viewing of the show, audiences may be able to anticipate this type of presentism when those lines occur for the first time. For example, Bojack connected with Diane over a pancake which was then re-introduced in the monster sequence. If they were to watch the pancake episode for a second time, they may think of the monster Diane.

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