"A FUNNY SHOW ABOUT DEPRESSION": EXPLORING MENTAL ILL-HEALTH IN NETFLIX'S *BOJACK HORSEMAN*

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ABSTRACT
Bucking the trend of live-action television, the Netflix production *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020) takes a rather unusual approach to its portrayal of mental ill-health. Often described as a "funny show about depression", the animated series about an anthropomorphic horse named BoJack relies on a colorful drawing style and an ensemble of wondrous characters to lure its audience into "dark places" of mental distress. Over the course of its six-season run, the show has managed to address a wide range of mental health issues, including trauma, depression, and addiction, as well as attempts to treat them. This essay examines how certain production choices – namely high serialization, animation, and anthropomorphism – can serve dramaturgical purposes in mental TV storytelling. Although the parameters are initially discussed separately, this study also attempts to present first assumptions about how their aesthetic interplay at the moment of reception may affect the audience's perception of mental ill-health.

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> "I am constantly filled with a lurking loneliness, a yearning, clinging to the notion that something outside of me will fix me. But I had had all that the outside had to offer!"
>
> Matthew Perry (2022: 10)

1. **INTRODUCTION**

At least since the broadcast of *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), contemporary series have embraced a realistic approach to depicting mental disorders: whether it's New Jersey's infamous mobster Anthony "Tony" Soprano (James Gandolfini) seeking professional help for his debilitating panic attacks, Hannah Horvath's (Lena Dunham) struggle with obsessive-compulsive disorder in HBO's *Girls* (2012–2017), or *In Treatment* (2008–2021), which highlights a variety of mental health conditions by following along psychotherapist Paul Weston (Gabriel Byrne) and his weekly sessions with various patients.[1] Although these examples can undoubtedly be recognized as fictional, recent drama series strive for an authentic *modus operandi* in hopes of critical acclaim and cultural prestige (Kanzler and Schubert 2022, 9).[2] It seems unsurprising, then, that modern series like *This Is Us* (2016–2022) or award-winning television drama *Euphoria* (2019–) are conceived as *live-action narratives*; relying on human actors for their staging of depression, addiction and other mental dysfunctions.

Given this trend, it appears paradoxical that numerous reviews cite an animated series about talking animals as the poster child for shows about mental distress: the talk is of *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020). Often considered to be the "funniest show about depression" (Lyons 2014), the Netflix production about eponymous lead character BoJack (voiced by Will Arnett), an anthropomorphic horse and washed-up '90s sitcom star, has repeatedly been named "one of the most nuanced, honest depictions of [mental illness] on TV" (Kliegman 2015). Despite its bright and vibrant drawing style and its collection of whimsical characters, the series addresses a wide range of mental and neurological pathologies, such as existential crisis, substance abuse, or childhood trauma, as well as their treatment, whether through antidepressants, rehab, or individual coping mechanisms. Even though *BoJack Horseman* has received critical acclaim in the feature pages – Time Magazine called it "the most important animated series since *The Simpsons* [1989–]" (Berman 2019) –, until recently there has been a large void in the field of television studies.[3] To date, there have been few essays that examine the mental states of the animated characters (e.g. Rivers 2024). Furthermore, existing research focuses almost exclusively on content, while aspects of narration and aesthetics are only mentioned in passing.

For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to explore *how* the stylistic choices of *BoJack Horseman* contribute to the way modern television is able to narrate mental disorders. This will be done in two steps, beginning with a synopsis of the series' story (*histoire*) to highlight relevant motifs in accordance with existing research. This is followed by an analysis of the *discours* – "the modus of presentation" (Chatman 1980, 43). In particular, this article discusses three parameters that are essential to the show's representation of mental ill-health, namely being a (1) highly serialized (2) animation (3) about anthropomorphic characters. The analysis is accompanied by the hypothesis that *BoJack Horseman* succeeds in its portrayal by artificially increasing the parasocial[4] distance between sensitive topics and its audience due to the aforementioned production choices, thus creating a "safe forum" to engage, relate to, or identify with the characters and their "different ways of being" (Gleason et al. 2017). By focusing partic-

1 Especially the portrayal of psychotherapy has proven to be a popular narrative in recent decades. According to Kang (2023), television critic for *The New Yorker*, the increasing destigmatization of mental illness in the broader culture has led to an almost inflationary rise of a genre the author labels as *Therapy TV*. For further approximations, see Staines (2008).

2 In this context, reference should be made to *13 Reasons Why* (2017–2020), which has been unanimously chosen by academics and the popular press as a venue to discuss the limits and consequences of realism in depicting mental illness. Above all, the explicit depiction of the suicide of 17-year-old protagonist Hannah Baker (Katherine Langford) was criticized, leading to its subsequent deletion. Under the premise of a modern-day *Werther effect* – a media-induced mimicry of suicidal behavior – the series has been associated with an increase in American youth suicides (Bridge et al. 2019) as well as a significant rise in internet searches on the topic of suicide (for a summary of findings, see Arendt et al. 2019).

3 It wasn't until 2024 – ten years after the debut season and about four years after the release of the final eight episodes – that a collection of critical essays took a systematic look at the series. *Aren't you BoJack Horseman?* (2024) features a total of 14 contributions that explore interdisciplinary issues of identity, gender, mental health, and celebrity stardom.

4 This term refers to the concept of *parasocial interactions* associated with Horton and Wohl (1956), which is used to describe how recipients relate to protagonists portrayed in the media. Often circumscribed as "intimacy at a distance" (ibid.), this article assumes that said distance can vary, depending on *how* a story is told. While the concept originally referred to real people in non-fictional television formats, parasocial relationships – as various research has shown (e.g. Keppler 1996) – can also be applied to the personnel of fictional television content, including animated stories (e.g. Krug 2017: 223).

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ularly on the stylistic choices of the series, this essay can be situated in a research tradition that defines itself under the keyword of *television aesthetics* (e.g. Cardwell 2006; Jacobs/Peacock 2013). If this approach is often (mis)understood as an effusive obeisance to legitimizing artistic value, it should be made clear that this essay is not intended as a normative judgment on narrative quality. The aim is not to argue that *BoJack Horseman* is the supposedly "best" portrayal of mental illness on television today, nor to determine the medical accuracy of the conditions from which the characters may suffer. Rather, in analogy to Nannicelli (2017, 202), this study attempts to illustrate *how* certain production techniques can (objectively) serve diegetic purposes, with particular regard to the overall theme of this journal's special issue: mental TV storytelling.

2. STORY AND MOTIF IN *BOJACK HORSEMAN*

Set in a surreal, cartoonish version of Los Angeles (designed by illustrator Lisa Hanawalt), *BoJack Horseman* revolves around the misadventures and wrongdoings of its title character BoJack: a half-man, half-horse, narcissistic know-it-all, once famous for his starring role in the fictional '90s television show *Horsin' Around*. What at first glance appears to be yet another self-reflexive meta-commentary on the abysses and clichés of American show business (see Rani 2024), turns out to be a philosophically motivated character study that addresses the mental hurdles of its cast from the very first second. As mentioned in the pilot episode "BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One" (1.01), the diegesis begins nearly 20 years post-fame: BoJack– now in his 50s – ekes out an existence filled with booze and self-loathing, haunted by his fading success despite his continued wealth and privilege. Suffering from existential dread, BoJack makes various attempts during the series' six season run to stay relevant in in the "industry": from working on his book *One Trick Pony* with ghostwriter Diane Nguyen (Alison Brie), to playing his childhood paragon *Secretariat* on the big screen to campaigning for award shows. While one could argue that the narrative rhythm tends to be tightly interwoven with different periods of his career, the show seems less concerned with whether BoJack succeeds in creating some sort of legacy than it does with raising the question why he feels this desire in the first place. And – as showrunner Raphael Bob-Waksberg (cit. in Pearl 2016) notes – there can be no simple answer to this.

Instead *BoJack Horseman* offers its audience a variety of explanations for why its protagonist is the way he is, paying particular attention to the *transgenerational transmission of trauma*. According to Chesters (2024, 102), BoJack's "penchant for self-destructive behaviors like excessive drinking and self-sabotage is spurred on by the negative reinforcement he received as a child." Raised by his abusive father, Butterscotch, and his manipulative mother Beatrice, BoJack's life – as indicated in numerous dialogues (e.g. 4.10, 22:45) and flashbacks (e.g. 2.01, 00:05) – has been marked by a sense of guilt since early childhood. As can be seen in "Time's Arrow" (4.11), Beatrice blamed BoJack for "ruining" her life, obligating him to be "worthy" (15:05) of the sacrifices she had to make, since his birth bound her to an unfulfilling marriage of emotional abuse and pain. Passing on the psychological damage she inherited from her father and husband (for a detailed analysis see Chesters 2024), BoJack has grown up with "a tattered self-concept and an unhealthy perspective about his intrinsic value" (ibid.: 102). Internalizing the idea that he is unworthy of love (4.6, 19:40) or any kind of approval (3.10; 03:15), BoJack is unable to maintain meaningful relationships, convinced that people will abandon him once as they get to know him better.[5] This explains, for example, why he would rather publish an embellished version of his memoirs than face reality:

> This [the memoir] is my last chance to make people love me again. If this goes out, everybody's gonna see the real me. Now I spend a lot of time with the real me and believe me, nobody's gonna love that guy. (1.11, 04:30)

BoJack's longing for acknowledgment, his yearning "to be seen" – as described in "Free Churro" (5.06) – finds fertile ground in the neoliberal environment of *Hollywoo* (see Gianniri 2023), making him extremely vulnerable to external validation. His attempts to feel less broken – whether through (romantic) relationships (2.06; 2.11; 4.07), his work (2.01) or other "small" objectives "like winning an Oscar" (3.03, 17:55) – are repeatedly disillusioned by the realization that none of these accolades can fix his depressive *status quo*. Among other scenes (e.g. 3.05, 20:50), this revelation is exemplified in the following dialogue between BoJack and

5 The depiction of trauma doesn't function as an absolution of guilt – neither for Beatrice nor for BoJack – but illustrates the complexity of perpetration and victimization. This statement is repeated throughout the series, for example when Diane remarks "that there is no such thing as 'bad guys' or 'good guys'", since "we are all just guys who do good stuff sometimes and bad stuff sometimes" (5.12, 19:00).

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his "frenemy" and former sitcom rival Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins):

BOJACK:	*Because... I'm jealous. [...] of everything. Everything comes so easy for you.*
MR. PEANUTBUTTER:	*Oh, and it doesn't for you? You're a millionaire movie star with a girlfriend who loves you, acting in your dream movie. What more do you want? What else could the universe possibly owe you?*
BOJACK:	*I want to feel good about myself. The way you do. And I don't know how. I don't know if I can.*

(2.8, 18:30)

While the attainment of wealth and showbusiness-related fame is often established as a thematic hook (Bandirali/Terrone 2021, 162), these story arcs are more likely to be understood as places where the spiritual struggles of the series' ensemble are illustrated exemplarily. These struggles may vary from character to character, but ultimately, they all revolve around and are invisibly linked to a common core: the perennial mystery of human respectively anthropomorphic existence. By using impulses from existential philosophy – the most obvious being Pascal's (1670/2014, 33–42) idea of *human insignificance*, Sartre's (1947/2007) radical understanding of *freedom* and Camus' (1942/2013) *philosophy of the absurd* – as diegetic guidelines, the show provides a narrative space in which the characters' predispositions are mixed with existential anxieties to create individual sentiments of mental discomfort.

This statement applies not only to BoJack, but to the entirety of the neurodiverse main cast: For Diane, the pattern of existential *angst* is filled with her self-proclaimed mission to "make[] a difference" (1.12, 21:30) by impacting society through her profession as a writer. This motivation comes to the fore on several occasions, whether on her trip to the fictional Third World country of Cordovia as a war correspondent (2.09–2.12) or by publishing investigative reports through the media outlet *Girl Croosh* (e.g. 6.03). The realization of one's own insignificance in moments of failure often becomes a catalyst for emotional distress: "I feel like I have no purpose. And I'm 35. And if I don't change something in my life, then this is how I'm gonna feel forever" (2.04, 22:50). Even seemingly lighthearted characters like Todd Chavez (Aaron Paul), a human twentysomething and BoJack's permanent houseguest for several seasons, do not come without mental baggage: "I'm pretty much worthless. [...] I don't have a job. I don't have any prospects. I probably won't ever finish the rock opera I'm working on" (1.04, 04:48).

In its broad approach to depicting mental (ill-)health the series avoids using individual characters as embodiments of certain impediments (see Rivers 2024, 120), instead showing how the sense of *feeling unwell* can manifest itself in different facets, in different situations or develop over longer periods of time. *BoJack Horseman* accomplishes this by addressing an extensive continuum of mental states without determining their pathological extent: ranging from stressful, but fairly common experiences such as break-ups and divorce (5.02), grief and loss (5.06), an unhealthy work-life balance (5.05), the challenges of parenthood (6.02), or coming to terms with one's sexual identity (4.01) to severe psychopathologies at the other end of the spectrum, such as Diane's social anxiety (1.01), BoJack's sister Hollyhock's development of post-traumatic stress disorder (5.09), Beatrice's worsening Alzheimer's disease (4.05) or, perhaps most obviously, clinical depression to the point of suicidal tendencies (3.12). The series thus overcomes the distinction between disrupted characters and those with a "normative" mental state, allowing these categories to coexist within a single person and permitting gradual transitions between – what the *World Health Organization* (2022) refers to as – "mental states associated with significant distress or impairment in important areas of functioning" and their consolidation as chronic disabilities.

Just as decisive as addressing of these conditions is the way the characters deal with them, showing that there is no panacea for mental health problems.[6] On the unhealthy side, we have BoJack trying to ease his worries with week-long drug benders (3.11), abusing painkillers (5.09) and alcohol – the latter being present in almost all the shows' 76 episodes – to reach a nihilistic daze of mind (3.11, 24:10), and later trying to turn his life around by visiting the rehab facility *Pastiches Malibu* (6.01). As a result, BoJack's mind oscillates between phases where nothing matters, and everything matters too much. His actions are often united by an escapist motive, where mental health is conceived as a spatial subject ("Escape from L.A."; 2.11). Diane tries to deal with trauma

6 This belief may be one of the reasons why *BoJack Horseman* emphasizes multiple focalizations, sometimes devoting entire episodes to individual characters other than BoJack (e.g. 4.03; 6.02).

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and anxiety through therapy (5.07) and prescribed antidepressants (6.07), while Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris) copes by working nonstop and developing a helper syndrome (3.09) to suppress her own difficulties. Todd, on the other hand, in line with Pascal (1670/2014: 34), takes it upon himself to distract himself with actions that the series refers to as "silly Todd adventures" (2.05, 05:16), "a series of loosely-related wacky misadventures" (ibid., 21:46) mostly detached from the overall narrative.

With all of the aspects above in mind, it seems fair to call the exploration of character psychology the show's common thread, making *BoJack Horseman* an existentialist take on mental health in a postmodern world. From this perspective, the true legacy of BoJack and his entourage is the pursuit of "real, lasting happiness" (3.3, 17:45), without finding "concrete answers or easy 'recipes'" (Gianniri 2023, 33) for it.

3. **DISCOURS**

3.1 Serialization and Accountability

Despite being labeled as a sitcom (Rivers 2024, 121) – respectively *sadcom* (Sawallisch 2021) – *BoJack Horseman* aggressively deconstructs the rules of episodic television.[7] Unlike other animated shows, there is no diegetic reset after each episode ("reset button technique"); instead, the story unfolds in a highly serialized flow of events. This prerequisite is essential to the show's portrayal of psychological distress.

Opposed to animated protagonists like Homer Simpson or Peter Griffin, BoJack does not get his long-awaited "fresh start" (6.11, 23:08) – what's done is done, and even trivial nonsense like stealing the letter 'D' of the famous Hollywood sign (1.06) has long-lasting consequences that affect the characters' mental well-being (as well as the diegetic world). The permanence of action recalls two decisive motives that recur throughout the series: accountability and change, both of which can be addressed as matters of *agency* that differ in their temporal orientation. As Gianniri's essay (2023, 37–40) affirms, accountability is offered as a retrospective of past (mis-)behavior, thus raising the question of responsibility. Watching BoJack, the audience witnesses many instances of questionable conduct, ranging from minor, forgivable offenses, such as stealing a bag of muffins from Navy Seal Neal McBeal (1.03), to drastically affecting the lives of those around him. To name a few examples: manipulating Todd's rock opera (1.4), sabotaging Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter's wedding (1.09), stalking and traumatizing 17-year-old Penny Carson (2.11; 3.11), strangling his co-star and love interest Gina Cazador while high on opioids (5.11), to being involved in the death of Sarah Lynn (Kristen Schaal) by causing her relapse after nine months of sobriety (3.11). In addition, the accountability motif is reinforced by flashbacks to the pre-diegesis timeline, which adds even more events – e.g. BoJack's betrayal of showrunner Herb Kazzaz (1.08, 13:20) – to his pile of guilt. Despite being held accountable by his friends, the media (6.12) or court (6.16), BoJack finds it difficult to take responsibility for himself. In fact, much of the narrative is driven by his argumentative efforts to emphasize his supposed innocence. Since BoJack can only find salvation by separating his actions from his "deep down" (1.11, 23:42), i.e. the claim that a morally good self remains beneath his narcissistic and self-destructive behavioural patterns, he is always quick to point to external stressors for everything that happens. Such excuses range from the influences of his spatial environment, e.g. his inability to speak underwater at the *Pacific Ocean Film Fest* (3.04) or living in the "tar pit" of Los Angeles (2.11, 19:48), to the idea of genealogical fatalism, he inherited from his mother: "You were born broken, that's your birthright. [...] You're BoJack Horseman and there's no cure for that" (2.01, 24:20). This, as a site note, explains why BoJack fundamentally rejects the work of Sartre, as he reveals in "Fish Out of Water" (3.04, 00:26) and "The Amelia Earhart Story" (5.05, 18:50). As described in *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre (1947/2007, 29) argues that "man is condemned to be free, [...] once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does", leaving him "alone and without excuses". The idea of absolute responsibility not only neglects BoJack's sense of victimhood, but also evokes an awareness of his own agency, making him "nothing more than the sum of his actions" (ibid.: 37) – an assessment echoed by Todd:

7 *BoJack Horseman* not only breaks the sitcom formula, it outsources it through the (omni-)presence of *Horsin' Around*. As a *mise-en-abyme*, the show-within-a-show functions as an unattainable antidote to diegetic reality. In this respect, the sitcom epitomizes the image of near-complete bliss; a state of domestic utopia (Ghiara 2019: 168–169) in a world where "no matter what happens, [...] everything's gonna turn out okay" (1.01, 01:40) and every issue can be "conveniently settled in 22 hilarious minutes" (3.11, 05:16). This is especially true for BoJack, whose compulsion to watch the show on repeat resembles a longing for an alternate past, filled with "good, likeable people, who love each other" (1.01, 01:38) that never existed. Consequently, any attempt to live one's life according to the rules of a sitcom (1.03, 17:00) is condemned to failure. Vice versa, high serialization itself becomes one of the major metaphors for actuality, or as Todd puts it: "[T]his is not a TV show, this is real life" (ibid., 16:00).

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> You [BoJack] can't keep doing shitty things and then feel bad about yourself. [...] You are all the things that are wrong with you. It's not the alcohol or the drugs or any of the shitty things that happened to you in your career, or when you were a kid. It's you. Alright? It's you." (3.10, 24:50)

This insight seems especially hard to grasp for someone, who by his own admission "can't even be responsible for [his] own breakfast" (1.01, 22:25), let alone his happiness. Another example of this obstacle can be found in "The Showstopper" (5.11). Here, BoJack, driven by a drug-induced paranoia, tries to find out who is sabotaging his newfound spark of happiness. Even when he's on the bright side of life, he's haunted by a feeling of distrust; a "little rancid itch saying something isn't right" (03:18). It takes little more than a *Truman Show*-style epiphany – in the form of a surreal, giant balloon image of himself floating on the horizon – to convince BoJack that there are neither conspiracies nor a revolt "to reveal [his] secrets and destroy [him]" (15:50), but that he himself is the cause of his dysfunctional life.

On the other hand, the aspect of change is attached to BoJack's ambition not to repeat hurtful behavior, making it a forward-looking vow of improvement. And even though there are sequences where this plan appears to succeed (e.g. 6.02–6.13), he seems to be caught in a vicious cycle that gets progressively worse with every failure. The motif is therefore addressed *ex negativo*, since no lasting change becomes apparent:

> "It doesn't get better and it doesn't get easier. I can't keep lying to myself, saying 'I'm gonna change.' I'm poison. [...] I come from poison. I have poison inside me, and I destroy everything I touch" (3.12, 10:49).

In a stereotypical sitcom structure, such absence of character development and the manifestation of a diegetic *status quo* might be perceived as sad, but less drastic. After all, the impossibility of progress is already inherent in the operational logic of the genre. As Schleich and Nesselhauf (2016, 120–126) point out with reference to Fiske (2011), the fundamental conflict of episodic television such as *The Simpsons* is designed from the outset to be intractable. As a result, the characters will repeatedly make similar mistakes over and over again and will not learn any lessons, because the dramaturgical framework prevents them from doing so. The characters' activities lose their scope, the possibility of acting responsibly is fragile, because the series' memory of events is wiped clean at the beginning of each new episode. In this way, narrative worlds can be created – as *South Park*'s (1997–) Kenny McCormick is *living* proof –, in which even mortality loses its horror (see also Mittell 2015, 23). Not so with *BoJack Horseman*: by implementing narrative threads across episodes and seasons – the longest of which is probably the development of BoJack's disgruntled mental state itself – every action is interrelated with the character's mental health, forcing not only him but also the show's writers' room (Topel 2018) to commit to decisions made. This seems all the more plausible when one emphasizes that the diegetic events manifest themselves not only receptively in the cognitive understanding of its viewers, but – first and foremost – in the memory of the portrayed characters. Following Mittell (2015, S. 133), in order to have a chance for character development, the narrative must progress: "a core facet of seriality is that narrative events accumulate in characters' memories and experiences." From BoJack's point of view, the psychic harm of many plot points derives from their potential avoidability, which exposes his good intentions as self-deception. This in turn leads to a circular pattern of behavior that Diane refers to as the *sad sack routine* (6.12, 02:50): "He'll talk about his addiction. 'Showbiz is awful. My parents were abusive.' He'll say he's changed. That he's not that guy anymore", just to do it all over again. Linking Diane's quote to Mittell's (2015, 133) suggestion that a major part of television entertainment lies in "watching characters grow and develop over time", it seems almost ironic that the audience can find something enjoyable in BoJack's stagnation episode after episode. This makes high serialization all the more important, as it raises the question of whether this change will (still) occur over the course of the plot or if BoJack remains the same deeply depressed horse that viewers got to know (and possibly even like) in the pilot. Hence, high serialization is fundamental to the feeling of guilt and the steady deterioration of mental well-being, which reaches its 'rockiest bottom' (6.12, 05:50) just before the series finale. Ergo, the true tragedy of the narrative arises from the unrealized possibility of change, in the awareness that change could have been possible at any moment in the story. But – as indicated by the intro of the show – BoJack seems to be stuck in an eternal loop. What would make him the perfect sitcom character elsewhere, becomes the epitome of how difficult it can be to overcome psychological problems when there is no invisible reset button to press.

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3.2 Bright Colors and Dark Places – Animation as a Form of Defamiliarization

While media studies have focused intensively on neurodiversity and its audiovisual representation in films of all kinds (e.g. Wedding 2023), the field of animated productions remains a blind spot in comparison. Despite the lack of research, there is an allusive, yet confident consensus that animation is highly suited "to provide the viewing audience an outlet for understanding people and popular issues" (Markovich 2021, 24). According to Declerq (cit. in Miller 2020), animated narration is particularly applicable to illustrate "inner worlds", a quality that makes it useful for capturing experiences of mental distress. In opposition to live-action film, the author continues, animation does not reflect the world "as we see and hear it" and is able to offer "a window on experiences of mental ill health which may otherwise be inaccessible to some audiences" (ibid.).

Looking at *BoJack Horseman*, a first point of reference to justify this assertion in more detail is offered by Ristola (2024). In her essay, Ristola examines aesthetic techniques that she identifies as *scribbling* and *compression*. To emphasize the former, a scribble refers to a rushed and loose cluster of lines that often refuses clear form or function. With its aesthetic of liminality and transformative potential, *BoJack Horseman* uses scribbles primarily "to illustrate the fractured psyches" (ibid., 66) of its characters. Such use can be experienced in "Stupid Piece of Sh*t" (4.06): Ruminating on his worst mistakes, BoJack spirals into self-hatred. As part of his depressive state of mind, scribbles can be found in the background of the animation, hinting at the current chaos of the character's thoughts. Thus, anarchic line work is used to visualize subjective experiences that are not indexically representational, in short: to "make the invisible visible" (ibid.: 65). To further understand of what is going on inside the protagonist's head, the visualization is enhanced by the audio of an inner monologue, revealing a harangue of negative self-talk: "You're a real stupid piece of shit and everywhere you go, you destroy people. Of course, your mother never loved you. What do you expect?" (22:50).

A similar scene can be found in "Good Damage" (6.10), when a combination of audio and scribbles illustrates Diane's struggle with anxiety and self-doubt. In other scenes (4.11), the technique is used to make the symptoms of neurological disorders more tangible. With regard to Beatrice's worsening dementia, the face of her former housekeeper, Henrietta, is blocked in flashbacks by constantly moving scribbles, implying that her memory is rapidly deteriorating. As the use of scribbles illustrates, animation can play to its strengths when implemented as a narrative vehicle to render states of mind – whether hallucinations caused by drug excesses (1.11), depression (4.06), or even the cognitive process of dying as can be witnessed in "The View from Halfway Down" (6.15) – accessible that could otherwise only be observed externally.

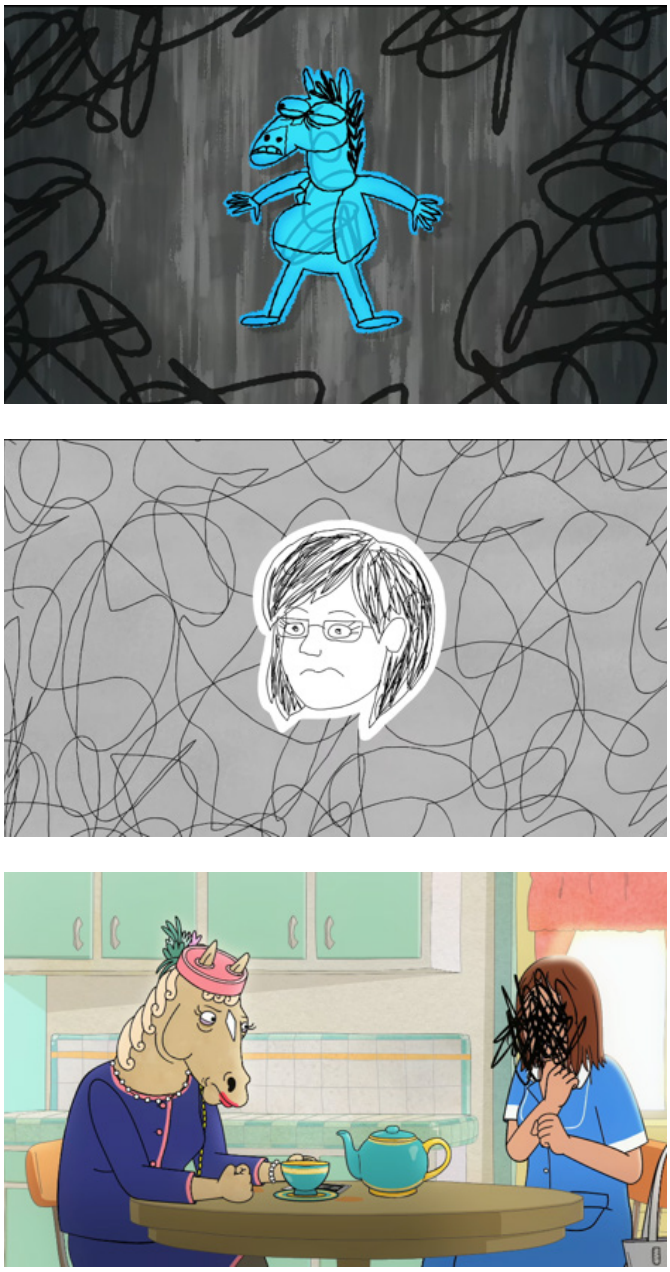

FIG. 1: USAGE OF SCRIBBLING IN "STUPID PIECE OF SH*T" (4.06), "GOOD DAMAGE" (6.10) AND "TIME'S ARROW" (4.11)

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While Ristola provides valuable information about scenic design choices, it remains unclear, how the general decision in favor of animation can affect the presentation of mental disorder. Considering this question, one could suggest that animation is initially used as a "welcoming" contrast to disguise the seriousness of the show's fabula, as Bob-Waksberg (cit. in Kliegman 2015) renews his choice of medium:

> We use how bright and cheerful the show is to go to dark places [...]. It feels more acceptable because it's just a fun, silly cartoon – we can go to some of these real issues, and it doesn't feel as heavy as it would in a live-action show.

This pragmatic conjecture – which has also been reaffirmed by the show's voice cast (see Netflix 2020) – could be fruitfully linked to the theoretical concepts of neoformalist film theory. Animation's ability to "let[] us see differently" (Ristola 2024, 65) can be interpreted as an act of aesthetic defamiliarization (see Thompson 1988, 10–11). By taking material from the everyday world (e.g. the feeling of being depressed) and placing it "in a new context and [...] in unaccustomed formal patterns" (ibid., 11), namely the cartoon universe of *Hollywoo*, the series evokes strategic awareness of the issues presented, whereby the familiar appears strange in its new setting. This statement may be all the more true when one considers that the thematization of taboo subjects on television is primarily associated with the art form of *quality drama*.

Although defamiliarization is not an exclusive feature of animation, but is inherent in even the most conventional art forms, as Thompson admits (ibid.), there can be noticeable differences in intensity. If habitual, "everyday perception" is designed to identify the familiar as such as efficiently as possible (ibid., 36), defamiliarization strives for the exact opposite by artificially obstructing direct access to what is being depicted. Since live-action usually bears an evident resemblance to non-filmic reality, it could be argued that photorealistic series establish a referential connection more easily. As a result, the viewer "simply recognizes the identity of those aspects of the real world that the work includes" (ibid., 12). Animation, on the other hand, can be seen as a 'roughened form' *per se*; the possible illusion of reality is neglected from the outset due to its optical alterity. However realistic the *histoire* may be, animation maintains a certain distance simply by virtue of the composition of its media text.[8] This, in turn, requires that the audience is forced intensely "to concentrate on the processes of perception and cognition" (ibid., 36) in order to draw conclusions about the similarities between the content presented and its overlap with the real world. This hypothesis can be described using the example of explicitness. While certain plot points would make for graphic scenes in live-action television, e.g. the retroactively deleted depiction of Hannah Baker's suicide in *13 Reasons Why*, animation seems to raise a barrier that can weaken the affective impulses a series provides. According to Hanawalt (cit. in Bradley 2018), it's the child-like innocuity of animated storytelling that forms a seemingly unfitting – to not say *defamiliar* – juxtaposition to the "super-real" issues it depicts. It allows the writers to "go to darker places [...], because it doesn't feel too dark" (Netflix 2020).

FIG. 2: COMPARATIVE PORTRAYAL OF HEROIN ABUSE IN *BOJACK HORSEMAN* (3.11) AND *13 REASONS WHY* (2.13)

8 This may be also the reason why viewers tend to form stronger parasocial relationships with characters portrayed by real human actors than with characters that are solely animated, as indicated by Sheldon et al. (2019). Although the study refers to the technique of *computer-generated imagery* (CGI), this finding strengthens the suspicion that animation is generally received in a less 'narrow' way, allowing for identification at a safe distance.

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The result is a distorted picture of reality that must first be resolved through cognitive effort. This feature becomes particularly important, when one considers that it is not unlikely that there is a segment within the audience that is affected by mental issues themselves and may be susceptible to this kind of material – keyword: *trigger warning*.

All in all, the animation in *BoJack Horseman* could function as a first step to increase the distance between the emotional realism portrayed and the viewer's lifeworld to possibly prevent harmful reception experiences (Arendt et al. 2019). In contrast to other series, the viewer is not confronted with the image of a human counterpart, but can behold familiarities of the real world through the lens of the absurd; a point that can also be examined in relation to the show's anthropomorphic ensemble of characters.

3.3 Anthropomorphism

As the dominant trademark of the show, anthropomorphism is one of the most discussed topics for deciphering the media text of *BoJack Horseman* (e.g. Alberti 2024, Varela 2024, Haga 2024). After all, as the title of the series and the outro song make unmistakably clear, the audience is dealing with a character whose identity incessantly oscillates between the categories of horse and (hu)man. With this choice, the Netflix production makes use of a storytelling technique whose roots go back to antiquity and the fables of the Greek poet Aesop: understanding mankind by using animals as surrogates. While anthropomorphism has a long history in literature, its use in film and television is comparatively recent. And even though the creators of *BoJack Horseman* (cit. in Di Placido 2020) affirm that they "were always looking for opportunities for humor" and no lectures, they still seem well aware of the "cultural footprints" they are following, when they turn the parable *The Tortoise & The Hare* into a subtle background joke (5.12, 08:45). Even if anthropomorphism can occasionally be used for no apparent reason (Haga 2024: 47) or simply function as leeway for plump animal puns like the cameo of celebrities like Quentin Tarantulino (1.07) or Maggot Gyllenhaal (2.03), it would be thoughtless to assume that hybrid characters in *BoJack* Horseman serve no parabolic purpose.

Undeniably, animals are an integral part of the narrative world. Because they coexist as equals and share a similar way of life, it's perceived as perfectly normal for humans to interact, work or party with animals on a daily basis, or even to engage in interspecies relationships with them (for a detailed analysis, see Alberti 2024). As the concept of anthropomorphism is not conceived as a strict dichotomy in which characters either behave in accordance with their animalistic origins or fully human, it's surprising how *humanized* the ensemble of *BoJack Horseman* is constructed. As Haga (2024, 46) points out, the narrative is based on the premise "that every character behaves like humans, even though their visual appearance is that of an animal." As further explained, *BoJack Horseman* rarely derives from these principles. Since *deviations* – as the author calls the transition to *pure animal behavior* – are largely absent and not subject to any functional logic, animality is present primarily as a matter of visuality; hence framing BoJack as a "human trapped in a horse's body" (ibid., 58):

> The reason we accept BoJack as a relatable person is through his performativity. Although he is aware of being a horse, this is only on the level of visual appearance. He behaves like a human being: he hides pills like a human addict, lies, eats, mourns, and worries like a human. (ibid., 57)

Balancing a human inner within an animalistic exterior resembles a dramaturgical tightrope maneuver, since the series must simultaneously succeed in creating a sense of resemblance that is nonetheless perceived as defamiliar to create an "ideal playground in which to explore the internal issues of mental health" (Rivers 2024, 127).

Resemblance, in the sense of a representational, "true-to-life" quality, can be found in the emotional realism of the show, which expels the character's experience of mental distress as recognizable to its (human) audience. As the series demonstrates in many places, BoJack's problems are rarely caused by his animalistic nature; especially his conflicted family situation is framed as relatable since Diane suffers from comparable problems (6.10). According to Keppler (1996, 17–18) such conformity is essential to enable parasocial interactions, since the interest we take in the life of a fictional character arises in much the same way that viewers engage with fellow human beings. This impression is echoed by Krug (2017, 237), who says that animated creatures are particularly well received when they are endowed with identifiable human characteristics.

BoJack's horse body, on the other hand, provides a "palatable vehicle" (Varela 2024, 31) to explore these uncomfortable, sometimes hurtful human experiences in a compelling manner. First, by making the characters humans in disguise, the series creates a momentum of universality (Haga 2024, 47).

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Asked about his decision for an anthropomorphic cast, Bob-Waksberg (cit. in Topel 2018) commented that:

> by making Bo[J]ack a horse, it allows an audience to project themselves on him in a way that if you were looking at a picture of Will Arnett, you might not be as inclined to. [...] By making them more foreign, they become more relatable.

While "universal" characters might benefit possible identification, it should not be overlooked that the character design also comes with critical implications. For Robertson (2015), anthropomorphism functions as a form of whitewashing, allowing the show "to take all the shortcuts that come with not having to consider race a factor in [...] life." If BoJack wasn't a horse, Robertson continues, not only would *BoJack Horseman* be just another show about another difficult male antihero in the vein of Walter White or Don Draper, but many of the show's elements would be considered as problematic (for an opposing position see Alberti 2024). Although Rivers (2024, 128) agrees with the statement that "if BoJack were not a horse, he would essentially be a white middle-aged man", she nevertheless sees anthropomorphism as expedient in the depiction of mental illness. To the author, "othering" BoJack is a necessity to provide the distanced space required to explore his mental (ill-)health effectively:

> His horseness allows him to be disconnected from the typical constructs of a white middle-age male lead, and that of a position of power, and highlights the humanity of his struggles all the more poignantly as a result. (ibid)

The process of artificially creating and utilizing incongruity thus seems to be a double-edged sword. On one side, anthropomorphism may diminish the importance of cultural influences; on the other side, the oddity of the characters provides an easy way for the audience to engage with sensitive subjects beneath the bright, colorful, animalistic surface.[9]

Last but not least, anthropomorphism provides ground for humor, which in turn allows viewers "to better connect with stigmatized and uncomfortable topics" (ibid., 127). Since it is often assumed that irony and sarcasm can be used to distance oneself from the earnestness of life (e.g. Martin 1998, 42), this effect is twofold in *BoJack Horseman*. First, BoJack distances himself from his own feelings by using sarcasm to confront hurtful thoughts, e.g. by repeatedly referring to himself as "a dumb sitcom actor" (2.9; 22:30) or diagnosing himself with "an internalized self-hatred of horses" (6.6, 15:50). This distance is doubled when the show offers its audience comedic exaggerations of sensitive issues like alcoholism, while still reflecting on their harmful effects. In short, it may be a simple presumption, but it just seems less bad, when a 1200-pound animated horse drowns its sorrows in horse tranquillizers (1.2) or needs only "one vodka bottle for every day of the week" (5.9, 08:15) that when a human behaves that way.

4. CONCLUSION

Even if neither Bob-Waksberg nor Netflix (see Kliegman 2015) originally intended *BoJack Horseman* to be a multi-season revelation about the depths of mental distress, the series has claimed a unique way of doing so as it got progressively darker throughout its run. The feat achieved is a narrative that does not shy away from tackling sensitive topics, but presents them to its audience in a tolerable, considerate way. This impression is attributable to a balance of dramaturgical procedures of approximation and defamiliarizations. The serial form, or more precisely the high degree of narrative serialization, can be seen as an imitation of the finality of (real) life, whereas animation and anthropomorphism simultaneously obscure the view of this very reality. While both parameters are said to be capable of creating aesthetic distance on their own, it seems plausible to assume even stronger "distancing effects" (Rivers 2024, 127) when these factors are in play together and mutually reinforce each other. It's not without reason that animation and anthropomorphism are often conceived as an inextricable unit. Varela (2024, 30), for example, formulated that it's the *animated anthropomorphism*, which functions as a device "to develop challenging discourses in an allegorical and more palatable way for audiences." Perhaps to gently teach us – as human viewers – that when we look at BoJack Horseman and the *Hollywoo* ecosystem, we often look at ourselves (in a highly exaggerated way, of course). The element of humor, which also distinguishes *BoJack Horseman* from contemporary depictions of mental ill-health, and which unfortunately came up short in this essay, certainly contributes to this as well.

9 This conclusion is also supported by a study from the University of Toronto. Although the study by Larsen et al. (2017) refers to the effects of anthropomorphic characters on the learning behavior of preschool children, the author's findings support the impression described here that human characters have a greater potential for identification with the recipient.

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Further research would therefore be promising. Especially in light of years of stigma, it seems all the more important for research to open up to new, unconventional approaches and to redefine television (aesthetics) as a useful avenue *to understand psychopathology* (see Wedding 2023). After all, and this does not seem to have changed to this day, media is still "the public's most significant source of information about mental illness" (Baun 2009,32); not only for people without experience of mental health conditions, but also for those troubled with mental agony. In this context, to quote creator Bob-Waksberg (cit. in Netflix 2020) one last time, shows like *BoJack Horseman* can provide their fans helpful "vocabulary to talk about feelings that they have had, relationships that they never quite understood", which may allow them to get help they didn't quite know how to ask for. Or to end with the last lines of Todd Chavez: "Isn't the point of art less what people put into it and more what people get out of it?" (6.16, 10:53).

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