

Animals and Social Critique in *BoJack Horseman*

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Introduction

“The first time I met BoJack Horseman, he was puking cotton candy off the deck of his lavish house in the Hills, the lights of the city twinkling below us.” This initial, somewhat crude, sentence of the biography of BoJack Horseman – the eponymous protagonist of Netflix’s animated series *BoJack Horseman* – perfectly summarizes what I will discuss in my master’s thesis. The contrast between the act of vomiting, caused by substance abuse, and his living in an expensive mansion captures the essence of BoJack’s character. He is a former Hollywood star who spoiled his career on bad creative and interpersonal decisions, and addiction. However, because of the copious amounts of money he earned for his role in the successful television show *Horsin’ Around*, he can keep his former lifestyle intact, along with the idea that he should still be regarded as a Hollywood star. In this paper, I will explain how *BoJack Horseman* offers a valuable critique on hyperindividualism, hyperreality, disneyfication, and anthropocentrism, in postmodern society, through the creative choice for anthropomorphic animals as characters, and the existence of a tangible anthropocentric hierarchy in the series. For the theoretical background of prominent critiques on postmodernity, I will refer to the theories of Baudrillard and Simmel. In light of these theories, I will explain what aspects of postmodernity *BoJack Horseman* tackles specifically.

*BoJack Horseman*¹ is an animated Netflix series – i.e. a television series funded and released by online streaming service Netflix –, created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, that narrates the life of BoJack, a highly anthropomorphic horse. It is mainly a comedy series, though the series is typified by an omnipresence of drama. There are hardly any episodes where one of the main characters does not have a sobering realisation about life. The humour itself is often dark, thus fitting in with the at times sombre tone the series adopts. A great example is the following conversation between Wanda, a woman who just woke up from a coma that lasted thirty years, and Pinky, a network executive, to whom Wanda has to present her ideas for a show.

WANDA. Okay, what if we got relevant superstar David Copperfield to make the World Trade Center disappear?

¹ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, creator. *BoJack Horseman*. Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 2014. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=70300800>.

PINKY. Oh, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but,... David Copperfield really isn't a top draw anymore.²

In the series, a great variety of species live together with humans as equals – at least some of them, as will become clear further in the paper. BoJack used to be a famous Hollywood actor in the nineties, when he played the lead role in the sitcom *Horsin' Around*. However, since his one successful television show came to an end, he has never been able to follow up that success again. The first season introduces us to the life of BoJack Horseman in the present. The viewer meets a character that spends his days living in the past. BoJack is unemployed, and his daily activities include drinking, drug abuse and watching his former television success show *Horsin' Around* repeatedly. Moreover, he suffers from a severe depression and struggles with many existential questions. The series follows him in his quest to find happiness, which BoJack tries to find in either professional success, friendship, or a meaningful romantic relationship, and throughout the series, BoJack succeeds in his attempts to alter his lifestyle. In the first season³, he manages to create an opportunity of re-igniting his career, by being granted the role of his childhood hero, Secretariat. Further, In the second season⁴, BoJack manages to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor. However, whenever BoJack accomplishes something, his existential dread still lurks around the corner, and he soon realises that his accomplishments are meaningless, in the sense that they do not grant him true happiness.

BoJack Horseman distinguishes itself from most animated series “for adults” by being serialised, i.e. no action or occurrence is without consequence, as opposed to many animated series that consist of singular episodes that never have any lasting impact on the characters. Series such as *The Simpsons*⁵ may have recurring characters and at times make references to past events, they never truly alter the relationships between the main character. Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, stay together as a family, no matter what happens. This contrasts heavily with *BoJack*

² S2E2: “Yesterdayland.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048077.

³ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, creator. *BoJack Horseman*. Season 1. Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 2014. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=70300800>.

⁴ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, creator. *BoJack Horseman*. Season 2. Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 2014. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=70300800>.

⁵ Groening, Matt, et al., creators. *The Simpsons*. Gracie Films/ 20th Century Fox Television, 1989.

Horseman, as BoJack regularly ruins a relationship with another important character.⁶ Raphael Bob-Waksberg explains this in an interview⁷ with Slash Films:

A lot of these shows have a status quo they keep bouncing back to. One of the things we really wanted to do from the beginning, one of the things that made our show special from the beginning is there's no snapback. At the end of every episode, the damage that is done retains and the next episode will carry over the emotional story. It'll carry over even literally. If someone punches a hole in a wall, the next time we see that wall, there's going to be a hole in it. The world doesn't get fixed automatically.⁸

The series won several prizes, most prominent among which the Critics Choice Television Award for Best Animated series of 2016.⁹

To initiate my research, I will make a short analysis of BoJack's character. In the second chapter, I will link this analysis to certain notions that are prevalent in the critique of postmodern society, more specifically the notions of "hyperindividualism" and the related idea of the "total reserve", "hyperreality", and "disneyfication"¹⁰. In the third chapter, I will focus on the animal characters within the series. First, I will make a short introduction to animal studies, and consider where these characters fit in the academic study of anthropomorphic animals in the arts. Further, in the same chapter, I will focus specifically on social critique through the animal characters, and answer the question as to why the series made the creative choice to portray a society in which animals and humans live together as equals.

⁶ For example, his relationship with Todd, his inmate, fluctuates throughout the first three seasons. Initially, Todd is presented as a cheerful and careless character, who seems not to be bothered by BoJack's abusive behaviour. However, he gradually loses his respect for BoJack, and in the fourth season, the friendship between them seems to be terminated.

⁷ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael. "BoJack Horseman' Creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg on How the Show Changes the Animation Game." Interview by Fred Topel. *Slash Film*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/bojack-horseman-showrunner-interview-2/>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

⁸ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael. "BoJack Horseman' Creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg on How the Show Changes the Animation Game." Interview by Fred Topel. *Slash Film*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/bojack-horseman-showrunner-interview-2/>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

⁹ "BoJack Horseman – Awards." *IMDb*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3398228/awards>. Accessed 29 July 2018.

¹⁰ Cf. *infra*, these concepts will be thoroughly explained in the second chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I will introduce anthropocentrism as a postmodern phenomenon, and the implication of clear, tangible “anthropocentric hierarchies” in works of art. To contextualise this, I will focus on the novella “Geschiedenis van een Berg”¹¹, by Peter Verhelst. In this short literary work, Verhelst describes a society in which animals and humans live together as well. However, the relationship between them is not one of equality at all. The animals are first captured from their natural habitats, and then transferred to “Droomland”¹², simultaneously a city and amusement park. They are then taught to adapt to postmodern society through a rather harsh indoctrination process. The animals that are less proficient in abandoning their nature and adapting to human society, are locked away in cages in zoos. The main character, a gorilla whose name is never revealed, is one of the most successful “students” and obtains the highest rank an animal can receive. He is then regarded as a “full” human. Arguably the most interesting aspect about his transformation, is the inherent – though sometimes obvious – critique to postmodern society the indoctrination process implies. Verhelst’s distinction between highly anthropomorphic animals and animals that have remained closer to their original identity, puts forward an anthropocentric hierarchy that is clearly present within the society of Dreamland.

I chose to implement Verhelst’s “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, as there are certain parallels between the novella and *BoJack Horseman*. Both portray a society in which humans and animals live together. The animals in said societies show a fluctuating degree of anthropomorphism in both works as well, as a combination of highly anthropomorphic animals and “conventional”, realistic animals are present there. However, while Verhelst specifically aimed to create a fictional world in which the anthropocentric hierarchy is emphasised, this is not the case with *BoJack Horseman*, as a similar hierarchy is more subtly implemented in the series. Reading Verhelst’s critique on postmodern society through the implication of an anthropocentric hierarchy, brought to my attention that such a hierarchy exists in *BoJack Horseman* as well, which exposed me to a new level of social critique within the series. In the fifth chapter, I will discuss how the series specifically criticises postmodern society through the anthropocentric hierarchy.

¹¹ Verhelst, Peter. *Geschiedenis van een berg*. Amsterdam, Prometheus, 2015.

¹² Which translates to “Dreamland”

BoJack Horseman is a series that contains a dark, existential nihilist philosophy on life. However, I will end my paper by illustrating how the series carries a positive message as well.

Chapter 1: Analysis of the Character BoJack Horseman

In the first episode of the first season, the viewer is introduced to BoJack as a character that spends his day living in the past, abuses alcohol and drugs, and generally has a rather cynical view upon life. He embodies the so-called “fake” Hollywood celebrity: He overdramatises his gaining weight; regularly has one-night-stands; is undecided about his relationship with his agent; has friends who only want to boast with their success; and, most importantly, he is self-righteous and wishes to be at the centre of attention at all time. Especially in the first season, there is a great focus on BoJack as a finished actor who suffers from depression.

BoJack’s philosophy on life mainly consists of ideas of existential nihilism, a theory which foundations were laid by Jean-Paul Sartre. BoJack even refers to Sartre in the fourth episode of season three (S3E4): “Hey, I stand by my critique of Sartre. His philosophical arguments helped tyrannical regimes justify overt cruelty.”¹³ In this remark, BoJack positions himself firmly against the teachings of Sartre and existential nihilism. Yet in his actions, we see him align with Sartre more than with Sartre’s critics. The existential movement, of which Sartre was one of the most important philosophers, was “responsible for the currency of existential nihilism in the popular consciousness”¹⁴, and can be summarised as follows: “Sartre’s (1905-1980) defining preposition for the movement, “existence precedes essence,” rules out any ground or foundation for establishing an essential self or a human nature. When we abandon illusions, life is revealed as nothing; and for the existentialists, nothingness is the source of not only absolute freedom but also existential horror and emotional anguish. Nothingness reveals each individual as an isolated being “thrown” into an alien and unresponsive universe, barred forever from knowing why yet required to invent meaning.”¹⁵ *BoJack Horseman* can thematically be compared to existential literature. “The common thread in the literature of the existentialists is coping with the emotional

¹³ “Fish out of Water.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 4, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073220.

¹⁴ Pratt, Alan. “Nihilism.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/#H3>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

¹⁵ Pratt, Alan. “Nihilism.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/#H3>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

anguish arising from our confrontation with nothingness, and they expended great energy responding to the question of whether surviving it was possible.”¹⁶

In the series, we follow BoJack in his quest for seeking purpose in life. Throughout the four seasons that have been published so far, BoJack iterates going through a vicious circle. First, he feels there are no goals left for him to pursue, i.e. no opportunities to regain his happiness. Then, he thinks he has found a new *raison d'être*, such as the pursuit of a lasting romantic relationship or a new role in a film, to name just a few examples. When he finally achieves his goal, he comes to the realisation that these goals were either insignificant or not desirable. Usually, BoJack then suffers an existential crisis, where he questions the necessity of his existence and seeks refuge in alcohol and drugs.

In the fourth episode of the first season (S1E4), the viewer is introduced to another trait of BoJack: his vile character. His inmate and friend, Todd, plans to realise his lifelong dream of creating his own rock opera. Initially, BoJack does not care at all for his friend's dreams, as he only truly cares about his own well-being – which he fails to conserve as well. When Diane – the ghost writer of his autobiography – tells BoJack that he does not support Todd, because he is afraid Todd might leave the house, BoJack wants to prove Diane wrong and he decides to support Todd, as a true friend should. Todd soon gathers more success than BoJack had hoped he would, and he even obtains the opportunity to present his rock opera to Virgil Van Cleef, a renowned person in the rock opera “scene”. Van Cleef responds to Todd's rock opera with enthusiasm and Todd gets the opportunity to present his show to a jury, provided that he creates one hit song. BoJack, however, is not pleased with this and decides to thwart Todd's single opportunity to live his dream. He sets up a malicious plan to make Todd addicted to a new instalment of a video game he knows Todd used to be addicted to when he was an adolescent. BoJack's plan succeeds, and Todd fails to create his hit song. BoJack even goes a step further by offending Van Cleef for denying Todd a contract, burning all bridges. The plan has succeeded and Todd will continue to aimlessly live on BoJack's couch, only to ease BoJack's selfish mind.

¹⁶ Pratt, Alan. “Nihilism.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/#H3>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

Another characteristic of BoJack is his belief in the existence of “happy endings” or closure. He struggles to live with the fact that his glory days are behind him and he is no longer famous. Especially in the first season, BoJack is a character that surpassed his “happily ever after” – i.e. his successful role in the sitcom *Horsin’ Around* – and now does not know what to add to his happy ending. His life at that moment could be described as an epilogue blown out of proportion. Most of his philosophical struggles, such as his nihilist views on existence, come forth from this idea that he has surpassed his happy ending.

Another example of this desire for closure is his friendship with Herb Kazzaz. Herb was the creator of *Horsin’ Around* and the person who gave BoJack the opportunity to play his first important role, thus launching BoJack’s career. Herb’s career comes to an end when it is made public that he is homosexual, which was a taboo in the 1990s. He wants BoJack to help him by threatening to leave the show if the executives do not recall their decision to fire him. BoJack refuses this and Kazzaz’s career is finished. Several years later, in the present, BoJack finds out that his former best friend is now terminally ill. He pays Herb one last visit, in the hope of restoring their friendship before Herb passes away. Herb, however, tells BoJack that he would not accept his apologies, because he does not want to grant him closure, as he feels that BoJack does not deserve it after his betrayal.

BoJack’s perception on life is fuelled by certain values that were popularised by mass entertainment. This phenomenon is also called “disneyfication”, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2, where I will describe BoJack’s character based on various theories on postmodernity. One example of this disneyfication, is the idea that a relationship is the ultimate goal of someone’s life. In most Disney films, the plot is concluded by a wedding. It is the point in which the protagonist’s struggles are over, and he can live in a state of equilibrium for the rest of his days. BoJack, especially in the first two seasons, therefore pursues a healthy relationship, only to realise that this goal was undesirable, as BoJack is so individualistic, he cannot share happiness with another.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background: Postmodernity According to Theories by Baudrillard and Simmel

In this chapter, I will try to answer the question: “what caused BoJack’s depression?” To achieve this, I will first discuss what the idea of the postmodern society implies. Next, I will explain BoJack’s behaviour, based on the theories of “hyperindividualism” and the “total reserve” by Georg Simmel. Though Simmel wrote his theories before there was talk of postmodernity, he is often believed to have anticipated postmodernity with them.¹⁷ Further, I will discuss the theory of hyperreality by Jean Baudrillard and the concept of “disneyfication”.

2.1. Postmodernity & Postmodernism

First, it is important to clarify the distinction between postmodernity and postmodernism:

One position maintains that postmodernity is a condition or state of being, or is concerned with changes to institutions and conditions (Giddens 1990) – whereas postmodernism is an aesthetic, literary, political or social philosophy that consciously responds to postmodern conditions, or seeks to move beyond or offers a critique of modernity.¹⁸

Postmodernity is thus a sociological term, while postmodernism is a notion mostly used in the arts. The same article clarifies the bond between both notions as follows:

For social, political, technological and economic determinists, postmodernity is a major cause of the emergence of postmodernism and postmodern culture. For others, it is a mode of society which goes hand in hand with postmodernism. Postmodernity may be

¹⁷ Bergey, James. “Georg Simmel’s Metropolis: Anticipating the Postmodern.” *Telos*, vol. 2004, no. 129, 2004, pp. 139-150.

¹⁸ Pooja. “Difference between Post-modernity and Postmodernism.” *Political Science Notes*, <http://www.politicalsciencenotes.com/political-theory/difference-between-post-modernity-and-postmodernism/222>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

a reason for some to choose postmodernism as a way of life, epistemological, ethical or aesthetic position.¹⁹

Postmodernity and postmodernism thus are two notions that are closely related to each other. They come together in *BoJack Horseman* as well, as the series is characterised by a postmodernist style, which it uses to criticise postmodern society.

First, it is important to sociologically define what precisely is meant by “postmodern society”²⁰. “Modern society” took place in Europe between 1650 and 1950. Postmodern society, as the term implies, pursued modern society, and is not only used to refer to European society, but also to other advanced post-industrial societies – and thus the United States of America, where *BoJack Horseman* takes place, as well. This is the general interpretation of postmodern society, though some sociologists – among which Anthony Giddens – argue that we never entered postmodernity at all. For the convenience of this paper, however, I will follow the general theory that postmodernity began in the 1950s.

Modern society coincided with urbanisation and bureaucratic states and constitutes the time where scientific knowledge is held in higher regard, generally, than religious faith, magic or superstition. The economic production in modern society is industrialist and capitalist. Furthermore, in Marxist theory, there were believed to be two social classes: those who owned businesses and those who worked in these businesses.

Postmodernity, on the other hand, signals a way of life so drastically different from the preceding period of modernity that many theorists have coined this new term to try and capture the ways in which the two differ. According to Karl Thompson²¹, Head of Sociology at Swansea University, there are five key features of postmodern society. The first one is globalisation, which implies that societies from all around the globe become increasingly connected. “Globalisation means there

¹⁹ Pooja. “Difference between Post-modernity and Postmodernism.” *Political Science Notes*, <http://www.politicalsciencenotes.com/political-theory/difference-between-post-modernity-and-postmodernism/222>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

²⁰ All information on post-modernity: Thompson, Karl. “From Modernity to Post-Modernity.” *Revise Sociology*, 9 April 2016, <https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/09/from-modernity-to-post-modernity/>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

²¹ Thompson, Karl. “From Modernity to Post-Modernity.” *Revise Sociology*, 9 April 2016, <https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/09/from-modernity-to-post-modernity/>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

are more flows of information and ideas, money, and people moving across national boundaries.”²²

Second, the increasing importance of mass media is another characteristic of postmodern society. The rise of digital media, such as the internet, social networks, etc. corroborate this increase in importance. Sociologists, such as Baudrillard, argue that media creates a “hyper reality”, a reality that is somehow more real than the true, objective reality. Baudrillard gives the example of the media coverage of war. This coverage can and will never represent reality in perfectly objective fashion. However, it is the only reality most of us will ever know about that war.²³

Postmodern society is also characterised by rapidity and dynamicity. Examples are the fashion and music industry, in which trends change rapidly. It is also less likely for people to have one job, they perform for their entire lives.

Another trait of postmodernity is consumerism. Consuming has become more important than working, or as Karl Thompson formulates: “The image of the postmodern society is thus one of a shopping mall, rather than a factory.”²⁴ Individuals also have a wider range of options to pick their lifestyle. Postmodernity thus offers more freedom of choice than modern society.²⁵

A final aspect of postmodernity is a growing cultural diversity and hybridity. This implies that a great variety of products can be consumed, on the one hand, and that people from many different religious and racial backgrounds live together, on the other.

²² Thompson, Karl. “From Modernity to Post-Modernity.” *Revise Sociology*, 9 April 2016, <https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/09/from-modernity-to-post-modernity/>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

²³ Cf. *infra*, chapter 2: “Baudrillard and Hyperreality”, a deeper analysis of the notion of “hyperreality” and an application to the series.

²⁴ Thompson, Karl. “From Modernity to Post-Modernity.” *Revise Sociology*, 9 April 2016, <https://revisesociology.com/2016/04/09/from-modernity-to-post-modernity/>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

²⁵ Which is one of the reasons for BoJack Horseman’s depression. He suffers from the “radical freedom” (Sartre) we have in postmodern society, cf. *infra*.

2.1.1. *BoJack Horseman* as a Representation of Postmodern Society.

In various ways, *BoJack Horseman* exemplifies – and satirises – postmodern society. The globalisation of postmodern society, and the spread of American culture it implies, is exaggerated in the series as having spread even to the bottom of the ocean. In the fourth episode of the third season (S3E4)²⁶, BoJack is obliged to promote his new film there. Apparently, the fish have adapted the same type of society as the humans – and animals – at the surface. This can be read as a satire on globalisation, as the Western way of life has even infiltrated the bottom of the ocean.

The importance of mass media, and the hyperreality they spread, are often shown throughout the series. For example, in the second episode of the first season (S1E2)²⁷ – fittingly titled “BoJack hates the Troops” – the power of media is thematised. When BoJack “steals” a pack of muffins from a Navy Seal, it causes national outrage. BoJack is then supposed to publicly apologise on national television for insulting a soldier. However, he cannot contain himself and makes the situation worse in the following conversation, broadcasted live on the news:

NEAL MCBEAL. (the Navy Seal) I spent a year in Afghanistan making America safer, and this is the thanks I get?

BOJACK. Really? You, specifically, made America safer?

NEWS ANCHOR. Well, BoJack, surely, even you would agree that the troops are heroes?

BOJACK. I don't agree to that. Maybe some of the troops are heroes, but not automatically. I'm sure a lot of the troops are jerks. Most people are jerks already, and it's not like giving a jerk a gun and telling him it's okay to kill people, suddenly turns that jerk into a hero.

²⁶ “Fish out of Water.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 4, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073220.

²⁷ “BoJack Hates the Troops.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298931.

(the conversation then ends in silence and facial expressions of bewilderment)²⁸

When he claims that the hyperreal image the media spread about the army – that all soldiers in the army would be heroes – is false, because, in reality, some of the soldiers might not have committed any true heroic acts, the media represents him as a traitor of his own country.²⁹ This is one of many examples in the series of the extent of the media's power in contemporary society.

The rapidity with which our society changes is also often exemplified in various typical flashback scenes. These scenes consist of BoJack driving his car through a crowded street in Los Angeles, singing a song that is typical for this era. In these scenes, the overwhelming difference with which every decade is characterised is a satire on this rapid change of pop culture and society in general.

The growing cultural diversity is embraced by *BoJack Horseman*. First, the characters represent a wide variety of races. Todd is of Hispanic descent, Diane's family originates from Vietnam, and her ex-boyfriend is a black man. Moreover, the animal species are occasionally connected to race. Therefore, the implication that every species is regarded as another race hyperbolises cultural diversity, as an impossibly large variety of races is present in *BoJack Horseman's* representation of Los Angeles.

2.1.2. *BoJack Horseman* as a Postmodernist Series

The concept of postmodernism is often linked to Jean-François Lyotard, for whom postmodernism implies a loss of faith in science and other emancipatory projects within modernity.³⁰ The term is mainly characterised by a tone of irony and scepticism. Further, the notions of metafiction and intertextuality are often connected to postmodernism as well.³¹ Postmodernism, as the term

²⁸ "BoJack Hates the Troops." *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298931.

²⁹ At the end of the episode, BoJack formulates a much more eloquent opinion on the hyperreal image of the soldiers as perfect heroes in the media. I will include this excerpt further in the paper, as the scene is more fitting as a commentary on another phenomenon that will be discussed. (cf. *infra*, chapter 2: "Simmel's Total Reserve")

³⁰ Palmer, Daniel. "Explainer: what is postmodernism?" *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-postmodernism-20791>. Accessed 20 July 2018.

³¹ Staels, Hilde. "General Theoretical Background." *Moderne Engelstalige Letterkunde I*. Ghent University, Ghent. 29 September 2017.

implies, followed and was a reaction to modernism, which involves innovation (exemplified in the *avant-garde* movement), characters that were no longer perfect – as was the case in classic realism – and were instable beings in an instable world, and a change in setting from the countryside to the city.³²

BoJack Horseman is a series with many postmodernist traits, as it takes a sceptical stance towards postmodern society, a stance which this paper will comment on. Additionally, it contains many moments where clear intertextual references are made to other films and series. For example, the fourth episode of the third season (S3E4), is the creators' take on the classic "silent episodes" that were often implemented in 1990's cartoons. There are also many references to films and popular culture in general in the names of the episodes, such as "Live Fast, Diane Nguyen" (S1E5)³³, a wordplay on "Live Fast, Die Young", which is either a reference to the film of 1958, or the autobiography of James Dean, the late American film star. Celebrities often make guest appearances on the show as well, such as Daniel Radcliffe³⁴, and character actress Margo Martindale, who appears in several episodes. The opening scene of the eighth episode of the second season³⁵ even mimics the camera technique of *Birdman*³⁶, the 2015 winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture.

2.2. Simmel's Total Reserve

The roots of the total reserve lie within Ernest Mandel's notion of "late stage capitalism", a term he used to describe the economic system in modern society, though remains relevant in the context of postmodernity. Mandel uses this notion to indicate how consumption controls the life of modern man. In this type of society, the individual is tempted to retreat within subjective

³² Staels, Hilde. "General Theoretical Background." *Moderne Engelstalige Letterkunde I*. Ghent University, Ghent. 29 September 2017.

³³ "Live Fast, Diane Nguyen." *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 5, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298934.

³⁴ Season 2, episode 8: "Let's Find out." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048083.

³⁵ Season 2, episode 8: "Let's Find out." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048083.

³⁶ *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. Directed by Alejandro G. Iñárritu, New Regency Pictures, 2014.

experiences. It also means that one searches to experience as many stimuli as he can provide himself with. Generally, according to Simmel, this causes hyperindividualism to rule within this postmodern society. Hyperindividualism, as the notion suggests, implies that an individual abandons social relationships and retreats within himself, leading to him becoming estranged from society. Here, we observe a “new” form of individualism. The individual is no longer a romantic soul, retreating within himself to reflect upon life. Instead, he has become rational, calculative, and cynic. According to Simmel, the first cause of hyperindividualism is the incentive of modern man to protect himself from the oversupply of stimuli, which he does by cancelling the stimuli he does not wish to absorb. This leads to him being indifferent to anything that does not lie within his own, pre-selected interests. Simmel argues that this is necessary for the individual to maintain his sanity. The unfortunate result, however, is that most of us have become passionless and rational people; indifferent, in short. The economic nature of late stage capitalism contributes to this state of hyperindividualism as well, because it demands people to be productive, which can only be achieved when one introduces a certain degree of calculation within his life. Finally, according to Simmel, this hyperindividualism can further escalate into the stadium of the “total reserve”. This type of individual has become morally and socially indifferent. They can reach a state of anomia, which means that they reject moral values, only to concentrate further on the conservation of their individuality.

BoJack is a great example of a total reserve as he often acts immorally to ensure his own well-being, for example when he sabotaged Todd’s rock opera.³⁷ Moreover, in the second episode of the first season (S1E2)³⁸, it became clear that most, if not all, characters have reached the state of total reserve. After a fight with a Navy Seal, BoJack is obliged to publicly apologize to him on national television. BoJack apologizes for his behaviour. However, he follows up his apology with an eloquent speech about the hyperreality that surrounds the army of the United States:

You’re a hero. All the troops are heroes, [...] And I don’t believe saying that cheapens the word and actually disrespects those we mean to honor by turning real people into

³⁷ Cf. supra

³⁸ “BoJack Hates the Troops.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298931.

political pawns. Also, I am not deeply ambivalent about a seeming mandated celebration of our military by a nation that claims to value peace, telling our children that violence is never the answer, while refusing to hold our own government to the same standard.³⁹

Unfortunately, his speech remains unheard, because everyone in the room redirects their attention to Mr. Peanutbutter, a dog who is performing tricks. Apparently, the people in the room deem a dog's tricks to be more important than BoJack's useful reflection upon the glorification of the US military. This is typical for the total reserve, as (s)he wishes to cancel out the hard truth about society, to maintain his/her psychological well-being.

2.3. Baudrillard and Hyperreality

Part of this hyperindividualistic tendency to ignore certain stimuli, is the phenomenon of hyperreality, first discussed by Jean Baudrillard. According to Baudrillard, "postmodern universe is one of *hyperreality* in which entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of banal everyday life, as well as the codes and models that structure everyday life."⁴⁰ The phenomenon breaks the boundary between the real and the imaginary. People no longer perceive reality "objectively"⁴¹. Instead, they place a "filter" of imagination on reality. A relevant example is Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The man who helped Fidel Castro seize power in Cuba has now become a symbol of leftist activism everywhere. His head is printed on t-shirts, flags, posters, etc. He is a classic example of a person who had his identity almost entirely stripped away, to have it replaced fully by symbolic attributes. Baudrillard⁴² also speaks of an "aesthetic hallucination" of reality. He claims that hyperreality is

³⁹ "BoJack Hates the Troops." *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298931.

⁴⁰ Kellner, Douglas. "Jean Baudrillard." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

⁴¹ Better formulated: people perceive reality LESS objectively, as in essence, no perception of reality can ever be completely objective.

⁴² Keunen, Bart, et al. "Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur." *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

constructed by simulacra: images of images. The city of Venice is a good example of a simulacrum.⁴³ When tourists visit Venice, they already have a certain image of the famous city in their minds. They have seen it in movies, read about it in literature, have heard all sorts of rumours about Venice, etc. When the tourist finally arrives in Venice, he does not wish to experience the city as it exists. Instead, he keeps living in his hallucination of the city, with his own ideas of how Venice should be experienced. This is a one example of how our lives are shaped by our own expectations.

Hyperreality is one of the causes for BoJack's depression and existential nihilist outlook on life. As he gradually becomes aware of the hyperreal, or "fake" nature of Hollywood he begins to understand how meaningless his achievements in Hollywood are. In the fifth episode of the third season (S3E5)⁴⁴, BoJack's latest film is revealed to be a box office success, and he can officially be deemed a film star. This greatly boosts his self-esteem. However, throughout the season, BoJack gradually realises that his status of film star is only a hyperreality, as people do not necessarily care about him, but more so about his status as film star itself. As his bubble is burst and he realises that the hyperreality of Hollywood will not grant him true happiness, BoJack is disillusioned and starts questioning his role in society and the utility of his existence in general.

The setting of the series functions as a symbol for the hyperreal, as well. Both Los Angeles and Hollywood feature prominently in the show. Hollywood is generally perceived as a place where image is primordial. Part of this hyperreal narrative of Hollywood are the absurd, reality-defying beauty standards. For example, underwear models are perceived as having the ideal body type, and many people chase the goal of achieving this body type.⁴⁵ However, the physical appearance of these models is not at all realistic. Still, Hollywood seems to present these body types as perfectly maintainable for the average person. Another hyperreal idea that is connected to the

⁴³ Keunen, Bart, et al. "Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur." *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

⁴⁴ "Love and/or Marriage." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 5, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073221.

⁴⁵ Keunen, Bart, et al. "Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur." *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

ideal appearance, is the disdain and fear for aging. Many Hollywood actors try to reduce the effects of aging through plastic surgery, hair implants, etc. BoJack comments on this in the first episode of the first season (S1E1)⁴⁶ when he sees Lenny Turteltaub, a famous Hollywood producer, who is a turtle with a hairpiece, he remarks that turtles should not have hair. This scene tells us that hairpieces are unnatural, not only for a turtle, but for humans as well as a hairpiece is a symbol of the hyperreal being imposed on reality. This is not the only scene where Turteltaub's concern with his ageing body, as in the seventh episode of the third season (S3E7)⁴⁷, he refers to himself self-deprecatingly as an "old turtle". Some people in the film industry want to keep up the hyperreal image that they never grow old and unattractive. Turteltaub is the ideal character to criticise this desire to remain handsome, as turtles are animals that can surpass the age of 100. Yet, despite the fact that he is older than the other people/animals in the society of *BoJack Horseman*, he still craves to appear equally attractive. This satirises the sometimes absurd and unnatural lengths some people in Hollywood would go to, in order to maintain the hyperreal image that they are symbols of beauty and health.

In the same scene⁴⁸, BoJack comments on the hyperreal representation of actors in magazines. As a successful film star, he often appears on the cover of magazines. When he inspects these covers in a meeting with his PR-team, he notices that, even though he is on the covers, they do not represent him as he really is. The purpose of the pictures is to make BoJack appear as a bright and successful film star, who is delighted with his success. BoJack then clarifies to his PR-team that he prefers another cover, one that is made with mirror paper. As BoJack looks into this mirror, he realises that he appreciates this cover more, because it represents him much more realistically. He cannot cope with the idea that this hyperreal image of him as the jubilant actor is spread to the masses while he knows that he is someone else entirely in real life. The sentiment of this scene can be extended to the entire third season⁴⁹ as we follow BoJack's journey to promote his film, in

⁴⁶ "BoJack Horseman, The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter 1." *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 1, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298930.

⁴⁷ "Stop the Presses." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073223.

⁴⁸ "Stop the Presses." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073223.

⁴⁹ *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*.

an attempt to win the Oscar for best actor. He is surrounded by a PR-agent at all times and is forced to keep up appearances, as every day, another element is added to the hyperreal image of him as a cheerful film star in the media, which eventually only fuels his disillusionment with the hyperreality of Hollywood even more. When he is asked why he prefers the magazine cover with the mirror, BoJack answers: “I don’t know. All the pictures of me, they looked backwards. But when I looked at the mirror ad, I was seeing me as I see myself, and I thought there was something beautiful about that. Intimate, almost.”⁵⁰

2.4. Disneyfication

A dominant form of hyperreality in our contemporary postmodern Western society, is the process of “disneyfication”. Matusitz & Palermo⁵¹, in the abstract of their essay “The Disneyfication of the World, A Globalization Perspective”, explain the phenomenon of disneyfication as follows: “Disneyfication implies the internationalisation of the entertainment values of US mass culture. It is the idea of bigger, faster and better entertainment with an overarching sense of uniformity worldwide. (...), Disneyfication is regarded as spectacle, theming, hybrid consumption, and emotional labour.” According to Alan Bryman, in his “The Disneyization of Society”, disneyfication – sometimes written “disnification” – is a term that has been used to describe various processes. A first interpretation of the notion is described by Walz as follows: “often used pejoratively, [Disneyfication] denotes the company’s bowdlerization of literature, myth, and/or history in a simplified, sentimentalized, programmatic way.”⁵² Bryman summarizes this interpretation as “rendering the material being worked upon (a fairy tale, a novel, a historical event) into a standardized format that is almost instantly recognizable as being from the Disney stable.”⁵³ Bryman gives the example of a museum on Colonial Williamsburg which the colony in a “safer”, and thus Disneyfied way, because that kind of history was deemed “undesireable”. There was an

⁵⁰ “Stop the Presses.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073223.

⁵¹ Matusitz, Jonathan & Lauren Palermo. “The Disneyfication of the World: A Globalization Perspective.” *Journal of Organisational Transformation & Social Change*, 16 July 2014, pp. 91- 107.

⁵² Bryman, Alan. “Disneyization.” *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Thousand Oaks, 2004. Pp. 1-14. Print.

⁵³ Bryman, Alan. “Disneyization.” *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Thousand Oaks, 2004. Pp. 1-14. Print.

omission of certain historical elements – such as slavery, and the inhumane way the slaves were treated – to present the audience a history that “was too influenced by a Disney view of how American history should be presented to the masses”⁵⁴. Another interpretation of disneyfication is gentrification, i.e. “the process of renewal and rebuilding accompanying the influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents.”⁵⁵ Bryman concludes that the term is characterised by plurality. However, in most definitions, it implies the sanitisation and trivialisation of cultural products under the influence of the Disney company. Disneyfication, then, is a notion that mostly carries negative connotations and implies that cultural products become uniform, stale, and less sharp or perceptive. In this essay, I will focus mainly on the first type Bryman discusses, thus on the cultural consequences of this transformation of society to resemble the Disney theme parks and to represent a sanitised version of reality, and argue that Disneyfication has even seeped into people’s perception of life in general.

The earlier mentioned museum on Colonial Williamsburg is a small-scale example of how the ideas, spread by Disney films and theme parks, have become prevalent in our society. Certain historical facts – such as the living conditions and general treatment of slaves – were omitted, to make the museum more enjoyable for the visitors. The general perception of life has become comparable to this process. Disneyfication in this sense implies that the typical Disney film tropes have become so widespread, that they have a lasting influence on our perception of real, everyday life. The notion then implies the believe in closure, or happy endings⁵⁶, the idea that we are the “heroes” in our own life, and the general tendency to ignore uneasy truths. This interpretation of disneyfication corresponds with Baudrillard’s idea of the “simulacra”.⁵⁷

The most obvious indication that *BoJack Horseman* satirises this dineyfication, lies within its creative choices for talking animals and animation, two characteristics that are prevalent in the

⁵⁴ Bryman, Alan. “Disneyization.” *The Disneyization of Society*. London: Thousand Oaks, 2004. Pp. 1-14. Print.

⁵⁵ “Gentrification.” Def. *Merriam-Webster Online*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 29 July 2018.

⁵⁶ Cf. supra

⁵⁷ Cf. supra: images of images

general Disney film. In the third chapter of this paper⁵⁸, I will specify how the series uses animals to criticise disneyfication and postmodern society in general.

One example of a critique on disneyfication can be found in the fifth episode of the second season (S2E5), *Chickens*. Todd, Diane, and a girl named Irving decide to rescue the chickens of a free-range farm from being eaten. Though they succeed in their attempt, Irving afterwards contemplates on whether their “heroic deed” was truly impactful and if their actions have contributed to the bigger picture. Todd and Diane reassure her that they indeed have improved the world by rescuing the group of chickens. The scene ends when the camera moves focus to a fast food restaurant, that changes their sign from “5 million chickens served” to “6 million chickens served”, and thus implies that their action was but a drop in the ocean and that their sentiments of heroism are not actually justified. Diane, Todd, and Irving are therefore *disneyfying* their lives, because they actively filter away the uneasy truth that they cannot save the chickens, to give themselves a feeling of gratification. They will continue to feel like heroes, while millions of chickens will continue to be killed and served in the future. The three of them have decided to put a hyperrealistic filter upon reality. They might not have made the world a better place. However, they believe they did, and for them, this is most important, because they *perceive* themselves as heroes.

Furthermore, also typical for the concept of disneyfication, is the seeking of “endings”, or closure. The typical Disney movie has a cathartic ending, in which all problems and difficulties are resolved. Modern people have grown up with these films and their ideals, and therefore expect the same type of happy end to take place in their life. *BoJack Horseman*, however, tries to puncture this belief, as no successes achieved by BoJack are ever perpetual. In the first two episodes of the second season (S2E1 and S2E2)⁵⁹, he finally thinks to find what he so long believed would make his life perfect: a romantic relationship with potential. After an argument, BoJack asks his girlfriend, Wanda, to cohabit with him. Wanda agrees to his request. However, as she hugs BoJack, sealing the pact they made, the couple is symbolically surrounded by fire. This is a metaphor, first, for the

⁵⁸ Cf. *infra*

⁵⁹ S2E1: “Brand New Couch.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 1, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048076.

S2E2: “Yesterdayland.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048077.

anxiety BoJack feels at the thought of living in a romantic relationship with someone, and second, for the future of the couple. A classic Disney story would end at this moment, when everything has perfectly fallen into place. Unlike these stories, *BoJack Horseman* wishes to keep things realistic, by consistently showing what occurs after such ending⁶⁰. The agreement between BoJack and Wanda does not happen at the end of the season. Instead, it takes place in the second episode already, because the show chooses to focus on what comes after the “cheerful” convergence. BoJack soon comes to realise that his relationship with Wanda is not the Holy grail that will lead him to true happiness. He finds himself unable to build a meaningful romantic bond with one specific person, and soon, the relationship between him and Wanda ends.

Not learning from his mistakes, BoJack decides to pursue another romantic relationship regardless of the outcome of his first attempt. At the end of the second season⁶¹, he wants to revive a relationship with a love interest, Charlotte, from two decades before. The episode before⁶² ended in typical Disney- fashion, as BoJack and Charlotte meet each other again, after BoJack had repeatedly revealed to regret his decision not to marry Charlotte twenty years before. This is where *BoJack Horseman* subverts the Disney narrative, so many people have become accommodated to, once again. Whereas the creators expected the viewer to believe that BoJack and Charlotte are finally together again – by reconciling them at the end of the episode, with no more words wasted – they already crush this dream in the beginning of the next episode. Charlotte tells BoJack that she has been happily married for years and has two children with her husband. The Disney narrative is not entirely broken, because BoJack decides to distance himself from the distressing Hollywood lifestyle for a few months, by staying with Charlotte and her family in New Mexico for a few months. BoJack becomes a friend of the family, and it seems as if he has been able to abandon his plan to make a pass at Charlotte. However, after a few months, BoJack realises why he came to New Mexico and he tells Charlotte what he feels and even attempts to convince her to leave her husband and “run away” with him. This is a crucial “anti-disneyfication” moment

⁶⁰ Cf. supra

⁶¹ “Escape from L.A.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 11, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048086.

⁶² (S2E10) “Yes And.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 10, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048085.

of the series. Charlotte makes BoJack face the harsh reality that for decades he has been dreaming about having a relationship with a woman he hardly knows:

CHARLOTTE. BoJack, I think you've got the wrong idea.

BOJACK. Let's go. Let's get out of here right now.

CHARLOTTE. No, Bojack.

BOJACK. You and me, THIS is real. You know this is real.

CHARLOTTE. My husband is right upstairs.

BOJACK. I don't care about your husband, all that matters is us.

CHARLOTTE. Don't do this, BoJack.

BOJACK. I know you feel it too. So many times in my life, I have done the wrong thing, but this is the right thing, and I have never been more sure of anything. I have wasted so much time sitting on my hands and imagining what could have been. Tell me you don't feel the same. Tell me you haven't thought about it.

[...]

CHARLOTTE. I have worked very hard to build this life for myself. I am happy here. And you just roll into my life like a hurricane. Why? Because we knew each other for five minutes, thirty years ago? I don't know you. [...] And you don't know me.⁶³

In the above excerpt, it is striking how BoJack has lived in his own (hyper)reality all those years. In his hyperreality, Charlotte remained unmarried and kept waiting for BoJack to change his mind and come live with her for over twenty years. The only reality he knew was one where Charlotte was destined to marry him. In objective reality, Charlotte – unsurprisingly – already married someone else. This scene also subverts the Disney trope of the hero who interrupts the wedding ceremony to assure his love interest that she will marry the wrong person. In reality, the love

⁶³ "Escape from L.A." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 11, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048086.

interest probably has contemplated the relationship with her lover for several years before marrying him, and cannot be easily convinced that she should marry someone she hardly knows. The at first assumed *Disney* scenario then receives its final blow when BoJack attempts to seduce Charlotte's – 17 years old – daughter. This breaks all ties between BoJack and Charlotte's family.

Another aspect disneyfication, is the idea that anyone can accomplish their dreams, as long as they work hard for it. However, in reality, this is often not the case, as people are restrained by their economic capacities. We often need to adjust these dreams and sometimes even completely abolish them. Modern life, according to Simmel, is not aesthetic as the economic environment of late stage capitalism demands a rational attitude in life. It also demands people to use their capacities rationally.⁶⁴ In the series, Diane, a literature major, repeatedly has to ignore her talents to bring food to the table. A flashback to 2007 shows that she used to work at Starbucks – stereotypically presented as a place where college graduates work when they are unable to find work – at the age of twenty-seven.⁶⁵ Because she struggles to find work as a writer, she has to work at a coffee chain to earn money. In the present, she has been able to find work as a writer. However, she had to become a ghost writer of autobiographies of celebrities, such as BoJack. In the third and fourth seasons, she works as a social media manager, a task that is implied to consist of shallow and uninspired blogs and social media posts. However, Diane is someone who always wanted to improve the world with her writing. Yet, the necessity of earning money is too great for her to pursue her dreams.

A final implication of disneyfication is the idea that we are the “heroes” in our own story. This means that people in general perceive their lives as if they were films or novels, in which we are the protagonists. This idea was commented on by Nietzsche, who argued that people tend to think about their lives in such way, in an attempt to find use in their existence. “He [Nietzsche] calls this becoming a “poet of one's life” to draw attention to the idea that living a meaningful life is living

⁶⁴ Keunen, Bart, et al. “Het Moderne als Modernistische Levenshouding (of de Moderne Esthetiek in Kunst en het Alledaagse Leven).” *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp. 42-68. Print.

⁶⁵ “Yesterdayland.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 2, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048077.

it as though in the process of constructing a fine work of literature.”⁶⁶ This phenomenon is satirised in the eighth episode of the third season (S3E8)⁶⁷ of *BoJack Horseman*. In this episode, there are two competing talent agencies, of which only one will have the chance to become successful, due to circumstances. The first agency is that of Princess Carolyn, one of the main characters of the show, while the second agency is led by her greatest rival and her former lover. The creators of the show thus want the viewer to sympathise with Princess Carolyn. However, at the beginning of the episode, her rival makes the following statement: “We’re [...] coming out on top. I know we will, because we’re the good guys.”⁶⁸ This is quite the baffling statement, as the average viewer never perceives them as the heroes, because the story is told from Princess Carolyn’s perspective. At the end of the episode, the rivals have succeeded in re-igniting their agency, while Princess Carolyn now finds herself in an even more precarious situation, as her agency is on the verge of bankruptcy. The rival then concludes the episode: “Wow, everything worked out. You gotta love a happy ending.”⁶⁹ The series here clarifies that, in general, we live with the distorted idea that we are “heroes” and that we only deserve success and prosperity. However, as many people live with this perception, it is impossible to always be rewarded for our hard work or good behaviour.

BoJack as a character criticises the trope of the hero as well⁷⁰, as he is symbol of the struggle of postmodern man to make his life worthwhile. In Disney films, everyone has a duty or a task. The hero of that movie has a clear, most of the time singular, goal, which he pursues at all time. Through an embodied experience of fictional characters, we place ourselves in his shoes, and this sometimes translates to our own lives, as we perceive ourselves as the hero in our own “story”. BoJack, on the contrary, is a perfect anti-hero⁷¹, among other because he has no true goal to pursue in his life. When the narrative of the clear-cut goal is revealed to be a distorted

⁶⁶ Young, Julian. “Later Nietzsche.” *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. London, Routledge, 2004. Pp. 82-96. Print.

⁶⁷ “Old Acquaintance.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073224.

⁶⁸ “Old Acquaintance.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073224.

⁶⁹ “Old Acquaintance.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073224.

⁷⁰ Cf. supra

⁷¹ Also, cf. supra: chapter 1: character analysis of BoJack

representation of reality, BoJack becomes unhappy as he feels that he has no true purpose in life. Max Weber, in 1919, noticed how the modern world had been “demystified”. Man used to work for God and fulfil his duty in life, to earn his entrance to Heaven. Nowadays, however, the influence of faith in general has diminished. We live in a rational society, that does not believe in the supernatural anymore. The meaning of life cannot be explained by myths or religion anymore.⁷² This is the background to which existentialism and existential nihilism were born. These philosophers claimed that every person was responsible for their own deeds. Sartre named this with the notion of “radical freedom”.⁷³ This phenomenon is what causes BoJack’s dissatisfaction with life. He cannot process the infinite freedom that is granted him and feels anxious that he cannot find his path in the infinity of available paths to walk.

Benjamin added to Weber’s theory the notion of remythification. While he agrees that the world has abandoned its idea that myths and religion can give meaning to life and adopted a cool rationality to observe life, he argues that life has been remythified by industrialisation and capitalism. He writes that capitalism brought a new “slumber” – the former slumber being religion – to Europe, which reactivated mythological powers. The new economic system, according to Benjamin, rules over the people, who are unmighty to resist it.⁷⁴ Ernst Casirrer built upon this theory and created the concept of the “phantasmagoria of merchandise”: people compensate the disappearance of myth by mystifying objects of consumption. They grant objects psychological powers. Benjamin gives the example of fashion. Normal objects, clothes, get a certain psychological power, they attract us.⁷⁵ From the moment mass production began, a new cultural

⁷² Keunen, Bart, et al. “Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur.” *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

⁷³ Onof, Christian J. “Jean Paul Sartre: Existentialism.” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/sartre-ex/>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

⁷⁴ Keunen, Bart, et al. “Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur.” *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

⁷⁵ Keunen, Bart, et al. “Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur.” *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

era arrived, one where we make irrational associations with objects.⁷⁶ People thus find meaning in consumption. Here lies another explanation for BoJack's depression. He already went through this fase of turning to consumption. Now he has an expensive mansion, car, and lifestyle in general, he notices how none of these objects bring him gratification. Once BoJack understands all hyperreal shallowness Hollywood society and mass culture entails, he starts searching for "true" meaning in life. This is the point where the viewer meets BoJack in the first season: when he has burst all the bubbles and realises he should do something more significant in life, and when he realises that consumerism does not lend his life purpose anymore. In the second season⁷⁷, BoJack has a relationship with Wanda, a woman – or, actually, an owl – who has been in a coma since the 1980's. Her excitement for consumption contrasts heavily with BoJack's negative views on life. In the eighth episode of the second season⁷⁸, Wanda is infatuated with a tablet and the social media messages that appear on it. BoJack, as opposed to Wanda, has lost such wonder, not only for technology and consumption, but consequently for life in general as well. The series follows his path of finding what will make him contented again.

2.5. Case Study: How Do These Notions Interact?

The seventh episode of the second season (S2E7)⁷⁹, titled "Hank after Dark", is a perfect example of how these three notions of hyperindividualism, hyperreality, and disneyfication, interact with each other. In this episode, Diane accidentally mentions at a press conference how many women have accused Hank Hippopotamus, a beloved celebrity, of what is presumably – as his misconduct is never explicitly defined – sexual intimidation and/or sexual harassment. This causes general outrage towards Diane, as Hippopotamus is close to a father figure for many people. The following

⁷⁶ Keunen, Bart, et al. "Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur." *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

⁷⁷ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, creator. *BoJack Horseman*. Season 2. Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 2014. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=70300800>.

⁷⁸ Season 2, episode 8: "Let's Find out." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048083.

⁷⁹ "Hank after Dark." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048082.

scene shows a debate in a news studio between Diane; Cardigan Burke, a sociologist; and Tom Jumbo-Grumbo, the news anchor:

BURKE. What do you have against Hank Hippopotaulus? Everyone says he's a really nice guy.

JUMBO-GRUMBO. Good point.

DIANE. That's exactly the problem. Because he's so nice, people don't want to think he is capable of awful things, so they let him off the hook.

JUMBO-GRUMBO. We don't know what happened, it's a classic "He said, she said".

DIANE. "He said, THEY said". It's eight different women. Are they all lying?

BURKE. I mean... Probably.⁸⁰

This exemplifies how widely disneyfication is spread in our society. People – certainly when the news is first announced – refuse to believe that their favourite celebrity has committed such atrocities, because this celebrity is part of the hyperreal filter they mentally place upon society. Like the tourist wishes to perceive Venice as he thinks it should be perceived, many people in our society wish to perceive their favourite celebrity with their own prejudices of how this person should behave. The celebrity has been stripped away of his/her true identity and is reduced to a symbol of perfection. When fans see this person on their television screen, it gives them a feeling of gratification. Therefore, they refuse to believe that this person is anything but holy. When Hippopotaulus meets Diane, he tells her that she would better stop the accusations. He is not threatening her, instead he is telling her the truth in a sense: that people will turn on her instead, because they cherish him so much.

HIPPOPOPAULUS: "Twenty-four hours from now, the news cycle will move on to something else."

[...]

⁸⁰ "Hank after Dark." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048082.

HIPPOPOPAULUS. Sweetheart, everyone knows who I am. I'm Hank Hippopopaulus.
(with a villainous tone) Who the hell are you?"⁸¹

The scene is also a critique on the power of mass media. Diane is ultimately forced to stay quiet on the matter, as the image the media present of her leads to her being scolded and ridiculed in the streets of Los Angeles.

All this is connected to the notion of hyperindividualism as well, because many people will ignore the victims of said celebrity, only to not puncture their hyperrealistic bubble and keep their own happiness intact. However, the best example of hyperindividualism comes later in the episode, when Diane and BoJack are having a discussion on the matter. Suddenly, Todd appears and – with the typical absurd and dark humour of *BoJack Horseman* – tells them he has switched his identity with the dictator of the fictional country Cordovia and that he has accidentally ordered a genocide to the military forces of Cordovia. However, as he explains this delicate and highly distressing matter, BoJack and Diane ignore him and focus on their own problems – which are grave as well, however most probably less so than a genocide. What is truly interesting about this scene is that Diane had been planning to go to Cordovia, to write the memoirs of the humanitarian Sebastian St. Clair. The scene implies that Diane was never concerned with the suffering people of Cordovia, and that she only wants to join St. Clair in an attempt to validate her life. Therefore, it also implies that Diane, although to a certain degree concerned about the victims of the sexual harassment as well, was mainly trying to validate her own life.

The series builds further on the subplot of Cordovia to give more insights into the hyperindividualistic tendencies of the characters. In S2E9, Diane finally joins St. Clair in Cordovia, and apparently, even he, who is famous for helping people in war zones, lives in his own hyperindividualistic world. He insists that Diane focusses on him exclusively. Even when she tries to help a local child, he tells her to keep her attention with him, so she can record all the heroic deeds he commits:

⁸¹ "Hank after Dark." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 7, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80048082.

VOICE-OVER OF DIANE. (taking notes on St. Clair) *The second thing you notice about Sebastian St. Clair, is how much he talks about himself.*

ST. CLAIR: This way is the library I built. And over there is the statue of me building the library. And on that wall is a painting of me posing for the statue. Put a chapter in your book about that.⁸²

The longer she resides within the company of St. Clair, the more Diane begins to realise that he is just another hyperreal symbol, another individual in which the expectations of the public are projected. *BoJack Horseman* here clarifies that we live in a society where image is primordial.

The series also often criticises the importance of image on social media. A good example of this critique can be found in the sixth episode of the third season (S3E6)⁸³. Diane, who now works as a social media manager for teenage pop star Sextina Aquafina – who is, as the name suggests, a parody of the oversexualisation of pop stars and their music and performances –, accidentally posts on the social media of the pop star that she is getting an abortion. Instead of rectifying the error, the PR team decides to pretend that Aquafina *is* having an abortion, when they notice that Aquafina is getting praised as a symbol of the pro-choice movement.⁸⁴

⁸² S2E9: "The Shot." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 9, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048084.

⁸³ "Brrap Brrap Pew Pew." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 6, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073222.

⁸⁴ The movement that is committed to "protecting women's access to safe, legal abortion". Source: Mangan, Julia. "A Closer Look at the Pro-Choice Movement: Cases, People, and Organizations in Pro-Choice America." *Odyssey*, 26 Januari 2017, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/pro-choice-movement>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

Chapter 3: The Choice for Animals as a Means of Social Critique in *BoJack Horseman*

The most obvious critique on our postmodern society – most importantly through the notions of hyperindividualism, total reserve, hyperreality and disneyfication – lies within the characteristic traits of the main characters of *BoJack Horseman*, as has been described in the previous chapter. A deeper insight into the social critique in the series can be gained by focussing specifically on how it represents its animal characters. The creative choice to implicate animals in the world of *BoJack Horseman* might be one of the main assets of the series. However, this choice goes beyond the need to attract viewers, as it offers a new, more subtle level of critique on our postmodern Western society.

To define how the series utilises animals to offer social critique, it is important to first specify how *BoJack Horseman* physically represents animals. To get an image that is as accurate as possible, Chapter 5 of Caracciolo's "Strange Narrators"⁸⁵ will prove to be of great importance. Caracciolo mentions that our experience of the world is embodied, i.e. largely shaped by how our bodies are "assembled". Door handles, for example, are named as such, because "handle" is connected to "hand", which refers to the body part we use to manipulate the door handle. Dogs, however, cannot open a door with their hands. They do not have hands, to begin with, but paws, and whenever a dog would like to open a door, he would use his mouth to do so. Thus, one of the main differences between humans and animals lies in their bodily experience of the world. However, this is not the case with the animals in *BoJack Horseman*, which could be said to have "evolved" into a next level of anthropomorphism. Even though BoJack is perceived to be a horse by other characters in his world, he has a mainly human body. Similar to the other "animal" characters, only his head and his height/weight remind us that he is an animal. BoJack has human arms, legs, feet, hands, and torso. Moreover, his experience of the world and his behaviour, if anything, are mostly human. Thus, it could be argued that BoJack, along with other prominent

⁸⁵ Caracciolo, Marco. "Tales of Rats and Pigs." *Strange Narrators in Contemporary Fiction: Exploration in Reader's Engagement with Characters*. Lincoln, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 2016. Print.

“animals” in the series, has strongly “evolved” into a human being, only maintaining some animal characteristics.

3.1. Case studies: Why Are the Main Characters Animals?

How exactly does *BoJack Horseman* use animals to criticise the postmodern Western society? This can be answered best by focussing on the three most important animal characters in the series. The character in which the social critique is most clearly conveyed through his species, is Mr. Peanutbutter⁸⁶, a dog. Stereotypically, dogs are mostly characterised by excitement, vitality and obliviousness. *BoJack Horseman* uses this trope of the eternally enthusiastic dog to make the viewer aware of their disneyfied perceptions of life. To achieve this, the series uses its favoured tool: subversion. People expect a dog to be joyful and at the beginning of the series, this expectation is confirmed. Mr. Peanutbutter is successful, cheerful, and universally loved. His character never truly changes. However, occasionally, he is subjected to the harsh realities of life. These moments of cynic realism contrast so heavily with the cheerful nature of the dog, that the viewer automatically begins to question this oxymoron, as their image of the perpetually joyous dog is subverted. The clearest example of such moment, occurs in the final episode of the first season (S1E12)⁸⁷, when Mr. Peanutbutter claims that “the universe is a cruel, uncaring void.” Another example can be found in episode 8 of the third season (S3E8)⁸⁸, when Mr Peanutbutter pays a visit to his brother Captain Peanutbutter, who evidently is a dog as well and has the same cheerful character of his brother. First there is a merry meeting between the two of them on the “Labrador Peninsula”, a place that is introduced to the viewer as being void of all misery. However, what Mr Peanutbutter is not yet aware of is the illness of his brother, who suffers from cancer. His illness has made Captain Peanutbutter contemplate life, and in between his moments of happiness, he occasionally expresses an existential nihilist reflection towards Diane, “one day they

⁸⁶ The theories on Mr. Peanutbutter and Princess Carolyn were inspired by the theory of Hannah Lazar: Lazar, Hannah. “BoJack Horseman: The Depressing Purpose of its Anthropomorphic Animals.” *HS Media Nerd Reviews*, 26 August 2016, <http://hsmmedianerdreviews.blogspot.com/2016/08/bojack-horseman-depressing-purpose-of.html>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

⁸⁷ “Later.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 12, Tornante Company/ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298941.

⁸⁸ “Old Acquaintance.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073224.

[his children] will die, just like us.”⁸⁹ Her reaction is similar to the reaction the series wishes to transfer to the viewer: one of shock and confusion. By confronting the dog with the harsh realities of life, and by posing the powerful paradox of the cheerful dog that copes with existential nihilist ideas, the creators here wish to transfer to the viewer that no one ever has a perfect life, though their appearance may suggest the opposite, and that the Disney ideals of “happily ever after” do usually not apply to real life.

Next, it is no coincidence that Princess Carolyn was chosen to be a cat. Princess Carolyn is a character that typifies people in our society, who are purely career-driven. Though she is over forty years old already, she has always valued her career over her personal relationships. She has never taken the time to found a family, which she now regrets, as she would have desired to have children. The series follows her as she is in constant debate as to whether she should choose to abandon her job, to make time to start a family, or further attempt a successful career. According to human stereotypes, the cat is a species that consistently seeks satisfaction. They require copious amounts of sleep – and are thus perceived to be lazy –, whimper for food, and often seek attention from their owners. Princess Carolyn, however, fails to find this satisfaction, and works tremendously hard in attempt to find it. As is the case with BoJack, she struggles to understand what she wants to achieve in life. She is focussed on her career, which she takes extraordinarily serious. Yet, she feels as if she misses a good marriage, and perceives this as the ultimate goal. However, in the course of the series, it becomes clear that she cannot maintain a romantic relationship, because she is too invested in her job to make time for her partners. In the fourth season⁹⁰, she chooses to finally make time to start a family. However, because she waited too long, she has to face the biological truth that it will be hard for her to still bear a child. Her character is a critique on the pressure for success in postmodern society, and the hyperreal image that a fulfilling life is one dedicated to the achievement of professional goals. While cats in real life mostly

⁸⁹ “Old Acquaintance.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 8, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. Netflix, www.netflix.com/watch/80073224.

⁹⁰ Bob-Waksberg, Raphael, creator. *BoJack Horseman*. Season 4. Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 2014. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/browse?jbv=70300800>.

seek attention from their families, Princess Carolyn for decades neglected her intuition to start a family, to work on a more successful career.

A more difficult question to answer is why BoJack was chosen to be a horse. The most presumable theory⁹¹ is that though horses used to be of great importance to man, they now have lost their significance in postmodern society. The horse, for a long time, was the only fast means of transportation of people and goods. This function has now been adopted by cars, bicycles, motorcycles, etc. It was also a symbol of power. One example of this is the famous painting of Jacques Louis-David, "Napoleon Crossing the Alps"⁹². In this painting, the prancing horse contributes considerably to the epic – and hyperreal – image of Napoleon. However, nowadays, horses have become pragmatically obsolete. They merely serve entertainment purposes now – the fact that BoJack is an actor supports this theory on why BoJack is a horse. Though horses still appear in horse races, and horseback riding remains a common pastime, the true necessity of the horse has disappeared. BoJack, too, was once a relevant figure in society. However, he is now but a shadow of his former self, and people do not perceive him as an admirable film personality anymore. Moreover, BoJack is a character that searches meaning in life. However, unlike Princess Carolyn, he does not know in the slightest what he wants in life. While she constantly oscillates between choosing for her career or choosing for a family, BoJack at the same time has many more options in life and none at all. He searches for meaning in romantic relationships, one night stands, friendships, acting roles or his acting career in general, fame, etc. Yet, he does not seem to be able to find it. BoJack seems to be an allegorical character that represents postmodern man. Just like BoJack, 300 million people suffer from depression globally, thus feeling as if they have no further purpose in life, nor anything left to rejoice over.⁹³ The horse, of which the functions have decreased over the past centuries, is a metaphor for the increasing number of people that feel obsolete.

⁹¹ Theory by Hannah Lazar: Lazar, Hannah. "BoJack Horseman: The Depressing Purpose of its Anthropomorphic Animals." *HS Media Nerd Reviews*, 26 August 2016, <http://hsmmedianerdreviews.blogspot.com/2016/08/bojack-horseman-depressing-purpose-of.html>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

⁹² David, Jacques-Louis. *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. 1801, oil on canvas, Château de Malmaison, Paris, Rueil-Malmaison.

⁹³ "Depression." *World Health Organization*, 22 March 2018, <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/depression>. Accessed 31 July 2018.

Chapter 4: Peter Verhelst's "Geschiedenis van een Berg" and the Tangible Anthropocentric Hierarchy

4.1. Anthropocentrism

Merriam-Webster defines anthropocentrism as "considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe"⁹⁴. The Encyclopaedia Britannica adds to this that "anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, and so on) are resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind"⁹⁵.

According to Richard Nimmo⁹⁶, anthropocentrism is a typical phenomenon in the postmodern condition of man:

... all modern discourses can be understood as discourses of humanity⁹⁷, so that to be modern is to have a human-centred view of the universe. Thus human beings are hailed as the source of all meaning and value, the agents in all action, the eye in the storm of existence itself. Rather than a sheer contingency, a cosmic and evolutionary accident in an indifferent universe, 'man' is taken to be the measure of all things, and the world merely an arena for human action.⁹⁸

[...]

The division takes many forms, but perhaps the most basic and persistent is subject-object dualism. [...] [The subject-object dualism] is nothing less than foundational for modernity. Humans are subjects, while non-humans are objects, it tells us, and from this essential difference all else follows. In truth, both parts of this dualism are mutually

⁹⁴ "Anthropocentric." Def 1. *Merriam-Webster Online*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web.

⁹⁵ Boslaugh, Sarah E. "Anthropocentrism." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. n.d. Web. 28 October 2013.

⁹⁶ Nimmo, Richie. "The Making of the Human: Anthropocentrism in Modern Social Thought." *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. Leiden, Brill, 2011. Print.

⁹⁷ Nimmo utilises the word "humanity" as a less negatively connotated alternative to "anthropocentrism".

⁹⁸ Nimmo, Richie. "The Making of the Human: Anthropocentrism in Modern Social Thought." *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. Leiden, Brill, 2011. Print.

constitutive, such as to make a nonsense of their separation [...]. But humanist⁹⁹ discourse suppresses this dialectical interrelationship, rendering it an asymmetric dualism and inscribing humans and non-humans as incommensurable, as though they belong to different ontological domains or sectors of reality.¹⁰⁰

Anthropocentrism is, in some regards, a type of hyperreality, in that man has the distorted idea that he is not part of the animal kingdom and is superior to animals and nature. However, anthropocentrism is not exclusive to the postmodern perception of life, as it has long been part of our mindset. When Darwin revealed that man was a descendant of primates, there was general outrage. The difference with that era, is that we now know and accept that we descend from animals, yet still choose to neglect this fact in our actions and mentality. We know that we used to be much closer to nature, yet we continue to exploit it and live in a hyperreal slumber of consumption and appearance. The anthropocentrism of postmodern society is commented on in both “Geschiedenis van een Berg” and *BoJack Horseman* through the existence of a “tangible” anthropocentric hierarchy in both works.

4.2. Geschiedenis van een Berg

A literary work that offers interesting insights into the animal representation in *BoJack Horseman*, is “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, by Peter Verhelst. In this novella, Verhelst poses a critique on the notions of hyperreality, hyperindividualism, and anthropocentrism, and questions what defines civilisation and how humans interact in our postmodern society, by creating a fictional world where humans live together with animals. In an interview with Ruth Joos¹⁰¹, he explains that wherever people are located, the dark side of humankind prevails, in the form of display of power. In the book, this is conveyed through the anthropocentric stance the humans adopt towards the animals. The relationships between animals and humans in the novella, though highly different to those in *BoJack Horseman*, shed a new light on the society portrayed in the series. The society in

⁹⁹ Less negatively connotated alternative to “anthropocentrism”.

¹⁰⁰ Nimmo, Richie. “The Making of the Human: Anthropocentrism in Modern Social Thought.” *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*. Leiden, Brill, 2011. Print.

¹⁰¹ Verhelst, Peter. “Geschiedenis van een Berg – Peter Verhelst.” Interview by Ruth Joos. *Joos*. Radio 1, 9 May 2013.

“Geschiedenis van een Berg” is one where humans and animals live together as well. However, the relationship between them is much more abusive than in *BoJack Horseman*. Humans clearly control animals and even the animals that are highest in rank, compared to their lower ranked “counterparts”, often must deal with abuse by their human leaders. There is a clear anthropocentric hierarchy, in which humans stand above and control the animals. In *BoJack Horseman*, society is much more harmonious, as the most anthropomorphic animals live together with humans as equals. However, reading “Geschiedenis van een Berg” and comparing the society it describes to the one in *BoJack Horseman* proves useful to formulate new reflections on how society in the series works, as the exact nature of the hierarchy in the series is never fully explained.

For the remainder of this essay, I will focus on an interpretation of *BoJack Horseman*, set against the philosophical reflections on the relationship between animals and humans in “Geschiedenis van een Berg”. First, I will address how the notions of hyperindividualism, hyperreality, and disneyfication, are criticised in the novella. Then, I will focus on the “anthropocentric” hierarchy that rules within the society of the novel. Finally, I will use the information gathered from the reading of this novel, to gain new insights into the extensive critique of modern society in *BoJack Horseman*.

In “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, a gorilla is captured from his home in Africa, and is taught how to behave like a human being in the park of Dreamland. The “trainer” of the gorillas tells them that being a gorilla equals losing. To become a full member of society, they are obliged to abandon their true identity. Through a rather harsh indoctrination process, the gorilla is transformed into a fully functional human being, and even his animal body traits are concealed. The gorilla is forced to abandon his original identity, to adapt fully to our modern society. He even obtains a higher status in society, because of his ability to conceal his identity so thoroughly. He has adapted fully to our postmodern society and only occasionally shows his true animal nature. While the gorilla keeps evolving into a well-adjusted member of human society, he begins to experience the flaws of the modern human lifestyle. He feels an enormous pressure to perform his job and starts suffering from what seems to be depression, as he becomes more and more isolated and estranged from true social contact outside of the workspace. Near the end of the novel, Dreamland is

destroyed in a disastrous fire, during which the gorilla murders his human boss. After the fire, the other animals accuse him of the atrocities the humans subjected them to in Dreamland, as he joined the side of the humans. The novel ends in a positive note, as the gorilla finds love. Verhelst poses, which he seems to confirm in an interview with Ruth Joos in 2013¹⁰², that love will always surface, no matter how far humankind has strayed from nature.

Joos and Verhelst acknowledge that there is only a small difference between humans and animals. However, this difference is often perceived as gargantuan, and people have become so absorbed within their hyperreal image of human society, that they have developed an anthropocentric feeling of superiority over animals. This hyperreality of anthropocentrism is symbolised by Dreamland, a city and amusement park, where the novel takes place. Initially, Dreamland is presented as a state-of-the-art utopia and the pinnacle of human evolution. However, gradually the reader begins to realise that this utopia is nothing more than a hyperreal illusion. Technologically, mankind may have evolved impressively, mentally, it has strayed far from its own nature. Humans can no longer be the social beings they originally were. Instead they have retreated within the subjective. Therefore, Verhelst compares Dreamland, interpreted by Joos as an ending point of society, to a dung heap. What modern man perceives as a miracle, Verhelst exposes as a hyperreal illusion. Dreamland is not a dream, it is a symbol of how far mankind has strayed from nature, even going as far as neglecting nature to create an amusement park.

Furthermore, the concept of hyperreality is criticised in through the training program of the gorillas as well. One of the main lessons they need to interiorise, is to smile at all times, with no regard for their feelings. The novel argues that creating a hyperreal façade is expected of people in our postmodern society. This contributes to the disneyfication of life and the distorted, hyperreal filter we place upon reality daily. The gorilla copes with many internal struggles after he was obliged to abandon his own nature. However, he cannot let his true emotions surface, because that would puncture the public's idea of living in a safe space. After all, they have withdrawn in their hyperindividualistic capsules, where they cancel the negative stimuli, to keep their conscience clear.

¹⁰² Verhelst, Peter. "Geschiedenis van een Berg – Peter Verhelst." Interview by Ruth Joos. *Joos*. Radio 1, 9 May 2013.

Another lesson that is taught to the gorillas, is the importance of having meaningless conversations through small talk. This is a critique on the hyperindividualistic tendency of people in our society to have empty conversations with each other. Because we are so encapsulated¹⁰³ in our own experience of the world, when holding conversations with people we do not hold as dearly as our closest friends, we often use empty sentences in which we pretend to be more interested in the other party's situation than we truly do. This type of conversation is highly hyperindividualistic, as we only have them to maintain our image of sympathetic members of society. The gorilla protagonist of "Geschiedenis van een Berg" has fully internalised this lesson, as he can never hold a meaningful conversation with anyone. He is never able to tell people about his conflicted emotions. For example, when he has to kill a lion at the zoo he works at, he suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, as he does not have any deep connections with anyone, he cannot communicate this conflict to anyone. The only interpersonal contact he ever had, were business meetings. Above that, he refuses to tell his boss about his trauma, as he fears to be discharged, and consequentially returned to the lower ranks in the hierarchy.

The gorilla's view upon the world is similar to BoJack's, in the sense that it is also determined by hyperrealism to a high degree. They both pursue objectives which they think will bring them happiness. The gorilla refuses to take a break, after having to murder a lion, because he is afraid that he might lose his high function. However, he does not realise this high function is the source of his being miserable. The gorilla has adapted to our society and thus interiorised our general, hyperreal idea of happiness. While it should be something personal, a goal that varies from individual to individual, our society seems to have accepted one singular idea of how to achieve this happiness. It has become a general goal of ours to have a successful career. This is symbolised in the orange ribbon, the gorilla achieves because of his hard work. It is nothing more than a

¹⁰³ "the capsular society", a notion created by Lieven De Cauter, a concept that is also known as "cocooning". In this type of society, people choose to withdraw increasingly more within their own cocoons, i.e. within the safety of their private domain. Source: Keunen, Bart, et al. "Fantasmagorie in de Hoog- en Laatmoderne Literatuur en Cultuur." *Ik en de Stad: Fantasmagorie-, Ideologie- en Utopiekritiek in Literatuur en Cultuur 1800-2010*. Ghent, Academia Press, 2016. Pp 69-104. Print.

symbol. However, the gorilla has been so estranged from his own nature, that he cannot make a distinction anymore between what is important and what is futile.

Chapter 5: Social Critique through a Tangible Anthropocentric Hierarchy in *BoJack Horseman*

The focus of this chapter is how *BoJack Horseman* uses an anthropocentric hierarchy, similar to the one in “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, and anthropocentrism in general to criticise the postmodern condition of man.

In “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, the portrayed society is characterised by an anthropocentric feeling of superiority towards animals. Animals may get the opportunity to become a highly regarded citizen, the process to acquire a high rank is incredibly hard still, to the point where the animal is obliged to behave perfectly human. The “weaker” animals, i.e. those who are not able to abandon their nature, are looked down upon and locked away in cages, where they will continue to exist solely for entertaining humans, or animals who have adapted to become human and now look down upon their former equals. In the novel, this anthropocentric hierarchy is at the centre of the novel. The reader follows the “education” of a gorilla, a process that is designed from a human sentiment of superiority over animals, because the gorilla’s that cannot adapt to human life, are enslaved and locked away for entertainment purposes. The reflections on this process are the essence of this novel. In *BoJack Horseman*, this hierarchy is never in plain sight. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that such hierarchy¹⁰⁴ exists within the series. There is a clear contrast between the animal protagonists and the animals who only appear once in the series. Many of the background animal characters in *BoJack Horseman* serve only comedic purposes. The protagonists – evidently – are thoroughly elaborated. They have jobs, hopes, dreams, etc. and even their philosophy upon life is thoroughly thought through. BoJack, for example, is characterised by a nihilistic view on life, mentions his opinion on philosophers, such as Sartre¹⁰⁵, and has profound philosophical and existential conversations with other main characters. It is no surprise that the main characters are designed in such detail, and the secondary characters less so. However, what IS striking, is that these secondary characters are much closer to being animal than human. While, as mentioned earlier, the protagonist animal characters have lost most of their animal traits and

¹⁰⁴ The term “hierarchy” here is not to be interpreted in the Marxist sense. There is no real class struggle, the hierarchy is merely a tool to sort the animals according to the degree of anthropomorphism they have evolved.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. supra

act as if they were almost completely human, the less important characters have kept most of their animal characteristics. For example, in episode nine of season three (S3E9)¹⁰⁶, the parking valet at BoJack's restaurant is a dog. During an argument, Princess Carolyn throws away BoJack's keys. The dog then runs after the keys, as if he were playing fetch. The relationship between BoJack and the dog is typifying for the anthropocentric hierarchy. The dog, who is presented stereotypically and seems to be much closer to his animal nature than BoJack, works for him in a lower tier job. The more anthropomorphic animal clearly stands above the more animal-like character in this scene. Moreover, the less important character is reduced to a stereotypical representation of his species. The better adapted animals can earn a high rank in society, while more "animal like" characters get lesser paid jobs, smaller roles and are used for puns and sketches, thus, solely for entertainment purposes.

In one episode specifically, there is evidence that the anthropocentric hierarchies of "Geschiedenis van een Berg" and *BoJack Horseman* are vastly similar. In the earlier discussed episode "Chickens" (S2E5)¹⁰⁷, the structure of the hierarchy in *BoJack Horseman* becomes clearer. The chicken farm is managed by a family of chickens and roosters. The father rooster makes a clear distinction between the chickens, meant for consumption, and the more anthropomorphic chickens such as themselves. He tells his children: "these chickens are not like us, they are meant to be eaten." Like in "Geschiedenis van een Berg", there seem to be three to four different "classes" in the social hierarchy in the world of *BoJack Horseman*. First, there are the "normal" humans, who resemble us, citizens of postmodern Western society. Second in the hierarchy, there are the highly anthropomorphic animals, such as ¹⁰⁸BoJack, Princess Carolyn, and Mr. Peanutbutter. However, this second type of character cannot really be perceived as belonging to a different class, as they have the same rights and the same position in society as humans. Their appearance and certain mentality traits are the only things that separate these two types. The third class consists of the animals with lower wage jobs, who are in the series often reduced to mute animals with

¹⁰⁶ "Best Thing that ever Happened." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 9, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073225.

¹⁰⁷ "Chickens." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 5, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048080.

¹⁰⁸ "Chickens." *BoJack Horseman*, season 2, episode 5, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 17 July 2015. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80048080.

stereotypical personalities – for example the cynical fast food waitress –, that merely perform their jobs. Finally, the fourth type are the “normal”, or “realistic” animals, i.e. animals as we know them in real life.

This combination of anthropomorphic and realistic animals denotes the absurdity of anthropocentrism. The rooster is highly anthropomorphic and the viewer accepts that he behaves like a human. However, they do not entirely ignore the fact that he is an animal. We still perceive the humanoid rooster as a rooster, regardless of its human traits and actions, because it is difficult to ignore his animal body traits. Yet, this talking rooster believes himself to be above the farm chickens, while they look exactly the same. While we perceive the rooster as an animal that behaves like a human, we think it is strange that he is blind to his resemblance with the farm chickens. How does he not notice that they look exactly alike? *BoJack Horseman* here uses the typical Disney trope of the talking animal, to make ‘man’ rediscover the animal within himself, by taking the perspective of the rooster. We used to be closer to nature and the animal kingdom, yet seem to have forgotten this. By showing another species, a rooster, that has adapted the human mindset and now exploits animals as well, and is even blind to the fact that he resembles the chickens he is exploiting, the viewer understands man’s flawed logic that he would stand above animals in the hierarchy of nature.

So far, it can be concluded that the hierarchy, from the bottom (the animals that have remained animals) to the top (humans), represents a rising degree of anthropomorphism, and thus involvement in modern human society. Through this hierarchy, and the relationships and contrasts between humans and animals, the series wants to criticise the anthropocentric views of post-modern man, on the one hand, and give further insights into the hyperreality of postmodern life, on the other.

5.1. Critique on Anthropocentrism via the Anthropocentric Hierarchy

The first manner by which the hierarchy in *BoJack Horseman* criticises anthropocentrism, is through the names of the animals in comparison to those of the humans. According to Simmel, modern – and implicitly also postmodern – life is not aesthetic.¹⁰⁹ This is one of the reasons why people have become rational and cynic. In *BoJack Horseman*, this is reflected in the names of the characters.¹¹⁰ The two main human characters – Todd and Diane – have fairly normal names. The three main animal characters – Mr. Peanutbutter, Princess Carolyn, and BoJack Horseman – however, have names that speak much more to the imagination. This difference in creativity might be another indication that there is still a distance between the humanoid animals and the humans. The animal characters – though highly anthropomorphic – still carry some reminders of the ‘magic’ of the animal kingdom. Postmodern man has lost his faith in religion and myths, and leads a rational life, without magic.¹¹¹ The animal characters may now greatly resemble humans, their names are still a reminder of nature, to which they were once much closer.

5.2. Critique on Hyperreality via the Anthropocentric Hierarchy

The anthropocentric hierarchy is also a creative device to criticise the hyperreality in our society with. First, BoJack notices this anthropocentric hierarchy. Occasionally, he makes remarks on how the animals have strayed from their true nature to participate in this society that is characterised by hyperreality and hyperindividualism. In the first episode of the first season (S1E1)¹¹², Princess Carolyn makes BoJack aware of the presence of Lenny Turteltaub, a famous Hollywood producer. BoJack notices the ridiculousness of Turteltaub’s appearance, as he is a turtle with hair – most presumably a hairpiece, to make him resemble humans more. He expresses his disdain in the simple sentence “Turtles don’t have hair”. However simple this enunciation may be, it tells us much

¹⁰⁹ Cf. supra, Simmel is regarded as having anticipated postmodernity with his theories.

¹¹⁰ Idea by: Runquist, Karsten. “BoJack Horseman: Addressing Identity / Video Essay /.” *YouTube*, 24 april 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlfczWYrrFQ>.

¹¹¹ Cf. supra, Max Weber

¹¹² “BoJack Horseman, The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter 1.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 1, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298930.

about the anthropomorphism of the characters. It clarifies from the beginning that the animal characters, though being highly anthropomorphic, still identify as animals. Mentally, they have not yet abandoned the idea that they are still animals.

BoJack's statement that "Turtles don't have hair" also comments on the so-called "fake" Hollywood community, which seems to correspond to Baudrillard's "aesthetic hallucination" of reality¹¹³. The animals have adapted themselves, not only to human life, but to a life that goes beyond what is human. Hyperreality is so prevalent in Hollywood, that actors and actresses have to maintain a lifestyle that cannot be considered realistic anymore. They are supposed to have the perfect body type, Hair loss, a perfectly natural and common process, is looked down upon.

5.3. Return to Nature

At the end of season three (S3E12)¹¹⁴, BoJack tries to commit suicide after he goes through a difficult period in his life. He sits behind the steering wheel of his car, driving through a desert, when he suddenly decides to drive the car at full throttle and let go of the steering wheel. He has already accepted that he will die. However, as he takes one last look to the side of the road, he sees something and decides to break. He steps out of the car and looks at a herd of wild horses. The horses run, to no particular direction, and wipe the sweat of their foreheads. This has a great emotional impact on BoJack, who decides to search for his roots in the beginning of season 4¹¹⁵, when he returns to the holiday cabin of his grandparents.

What is interesting about this herd of wild horses, is that they run on two legs and wipe their foreheads, two human actions. This implies that these horses have evolved into the same, high degree of anthropomorphism of the main characters. Apparently, these horses have decided to leave behind postmodern life in the city, to return to nature. This seems to be confirmed by the animation director of the series, Anne Walker Farrell, who commented the following on the scene:

¹¹³ Cf. supra

¹¹⁴ "That Went Well." *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 12, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073228.

¹¹⁵ *BoJack Horseman*, season 4, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 21 September 2017. *Netflix*.

I can sometimes picture scenes in my head while I'm reading the script, and I saw this one crystal clear. As BoJack is leaving Hollywood¹¹⁶, he sees these wild horses running at the side of the highway. It's a silent sequence, and I wanted to do something sweeping, grand, and beautiful, with lots of aerial shots. I was interested in the parallel between BoJack and the human-like animals of Hollywood and these animals who have gone rogue.¹¹⁷

Farrell confirms that the herd of wild horses has "gone rogue", i.e. they have abandoned post-modern life, to return to their original and much simpler lives as "normal" animals.

A possible further interpretation of this scene, is that *BoJack Horseman* here argues that one of the underlying causes of depression in our society, is that 'man' has strayed too far from its nature. Many of the processes we go through to fit more into society, such as the neglect of certain personality traits, the lengths we go to, to keep up appearances, etc.¹¹⁸, are so unnatural that we cannot help but feel estranged from our origins. The constructions we make have become so complex and we understand that they are artificial. We know we have to go against our own nature occasionally to fit into society and this unnatural way of living causes internal struggle. In this sense, the final scene of season three¹¹⁹, would imply that not only BoJack is confronted with his own nature, but 'man' as well faces its origins. Through our anthropocentric mindset, we seem to have forgotten that we originate from primates, and that we used to live among the other animals. Metaphorically speaking, the scene could be translated as man facing a group of wild apes. The show would then plead, evidently not for a full return to nature, but for the abolishment of the most unnatural aspects of postmodern society. This would imply a return to a more interconnected – and thus less individualistic – society, as part of the admiration from BoJack for the wild herd of horses, comes from the fact that they live together in one closely connected group. Just like the

¹¹⁶ "Hollywood" is *BoJack Horseman*'s version of Hollywood. This is a running joke in the series, that refers to episode six of season one (S1E6), after BoJack steals the "d"-panel of the famous Hollywood Sign and the local community decides to rename "Hollywood" to "Hollywood".

¹¹⁷ Pagarán, Michelle. "Animation Director of Netflix's Hit "BoJack Horseman" Fuses Art and Storytelling to Create Poignant Characters." *Orange Coast Magazine*, 16 August 2017, <http://www.orangecoast.com/features/bojack/>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

¹¹⁸ Cf. *supra*

¹¹⁹ Cf. *supra*, *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 4, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073220.

Gorilla in “Geschiedenis van een Berg”, and BoJack in *BoJack Horseman*, man has become estranged from his own nature.

Being an animal, then, is a metaphor for the impossibility of truly being yourself. We are obliged to make a fabricated persona to appear in public. As Marion Gymnich and Alexandre Segão Costa observed in their essay “Of Humans, Pigs, Fish, and Apes: The Literary Motif of Human-Animal Metamorphosis and its Multiple Functions in Contemporary Fiction”¹²⁰: “[..] human-animal transformation may express the fear of encountering the ‘other’ lurking inside the human being behind a façade erected by civilization”¹²¹. The quote implies that in our society, people often have to hide certain personality traits in order to fully fit in with the rest of society. Zygmunt Baumann discusses this in his work “Liquid Life”. He explains how the increasing degree of individualisation in our society leads to radical freedom of choice and radical self-restraint: “To put it in a nutshell, ‘individualization’ consists in transforming human ‘identity’ from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance (Bauman 2001: 144).”¹²² The quote by Gymnich and Segão Costa can also be linked to the idea of “peer pressure”, which obligates young people to conform to a certain taste or mentality, in order to fit in with their peer group. In the article “In Teen Music Choices, Anxiety Rules”, Abigail Baird confirms that “conforming seems to be motivated not by the positive utility of behaving like your peers, but instead out of anxiety and pain at the prospect of being a “contrarian.””¹²³ Thus, starting from a young age already, we learn that we need to conform to certain mentalities and that we need to act according to our role in society. This logically implies that we need to ignore certain aspects of our own identity, to not be regarded as an outsider. This is another aspect of our lives that is criticised by anthropomorphism and the anthropocentric

¹²⁰ Gymnich, Marion, and Alexandre Segão Costa. “Of Humans, Pigs, Fish, and Apes: The Literary Motif of Human-Animal Metamorphosis and Its Multiple Functions in Contemporary Fiction.” *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2006, pp. 68-88.

¹²¹ Gymnich, Marion, and Alexandre Segão Costa. “Of Humans, Pigs, Fish, and Apes: The Literary Motif of Human-Animal Metamorphosis and Its Multiple Functions in Contemporary Fiction.” *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2006, pp. 68-88.

¹²² All information and quotes of Baumann: Keunen, Bart. “Moderniteit, Moderniseringsprocessen, Moderne Esthetiek.” *Literatuur en Maatschappij*. Ghent, Ghent University, 2017.

¹²³ From: Keunen, Bart. “Moderniteit, Moderniseringsprocessen, Moderne Esthetiek.” *Literatuur en Maatschappij*. Ghent, Ghent University, 2017.

hierarchy in *BoJack Horseman*. As we see animals, beings which are usually close to nature, acting against their own nature after having adapted the same degree of individualism as us humans in real life, we understand how far ‘man’ has gone to fit in with the rest of society. Will Arnett, the voice behind BoJack Horseman, refers to this phenomenon as he asked about the narcissist aspects of BoJack’s identity:

We live in an age where a huge percentage of the population can be accused of being narcissists. We’re kind of encouraged to be: *Take care of yourself, make sure to look after yourself first ... You can’t be in a relationship unless you are whole and you can put your whole self first.* Everybody is a narcissist by that definition. It’s more of the rule than the exception.¹²⁴

He also explains that BoJack has surpassed this state of narcissism, as he realises that he is a narcissist¹²⁵, as well as the idea of having to conform that causes this narcissism to be the norm in our society. A moment in the series where BoJack realises how he has abandoned his true identity to conform to society, can be found in the final scene of season three.¹²⁶ As BoJack witnesses how a group of horses has returned to nature – presumably¹²⁷ after being disillusioned by life in post-modern society – he rediscovers who, or what, he really is. In this scene, he realises that he has adapted his identity radically to conform, and, being confronted with what he and his species used to be like, he realises the absurdity of this alteration of his identity.

The three main animal characters – BoJack, Mr. Peanutbutter, and Princess Carolyn – all show how they struggle in our human society as well. We, as viewers, notice the flawed logic of these animals, who should normally be closer to nature than us humans, losing touch with nature. In the final

¹²⁴ Arnett, Will. “BoJack Horseman’s Will Arnett on Why We’re All Narcissists.” Interview by Ellen Killoran. *Vulture*, 22 July 2016, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/07/will-arnett-bojack-horseman-why-were-all-narcissists.html>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

¹²⁵ Arnett, Will. “BoJack Horseman’s Will Arnett on Why We’re All Narcissists.” Interview by Ellen Killoran. *Vulture*, 22 July 2016, <http://www.vulture.com/2016/07/will-arnett-bojack-horseman-why-were-all-narcissists.html>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

¹²⁶ Cf. *supra*

¹²⁷ This is implied in Farrell’s quote, cf. *supra*: “I was interested in the parallel between BoJack and the human-like animals of Hollywood and these animals [the herd of wild horses] who have gone rogue.”

episode of the first season (S1E12)¹²⁸, Princess Carolyn has trimmed her whiskers, “I’ll walk into everything, but at least I’ll look sexy.” The unnaturalness of Hollywood’s obsession with beauty becomes more intelligible to the viewer when they see how an animal goes against her own nature in an attempt to appear more attractive. Whiskers are a sensory tool that helps cats navigate in the dark and be aware of predators.¹²⁹ However, in Hollywood, beauty prevails over function, nature, and health. In this sense, we can compare Princess Carolyn trimming her whiskers to actors who use botulinum toxin to make their faces appear younger. In essence, they are injecting poison in their skin. Though, the use of this toxin for beauty purposes has become so widespread, people might have become accommodated to this process, and perceive it as a normality. By showing animals – in reality highly functional creatures – that go through similar processes to enhance their appearance, the viewer’s ideas on various beauty trends, and commensurately on the hyperrealism in postmodern society, might be subverted.

¹²⁸ “Later.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 12, Tornante Company/ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298941.

¹²⁹ Palermo, Elizabeth. “Why do cats have whiskers?” *Live Science*, <https://www.livescience.com/44196-why-do-cats-have-whiskers.html>. Accessed 5 August 2018.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *BoJack Horseman* is a postmodernist series that comments on the current state of postmodern society. The series takes a sceptic and ironic stance towards postmodernity, which is characterised by rapidity and dynamicity, consumerism, globalisation, and is a type of society where mass media carries much power. The series mainly transfers its critique towards postmodernity through humour and subversion of the expected, most noticeably implemented in the creative choice for an animated series where the main roles are played by highly anthropomorphic animals, a typical Disney trope. By creating Disney-like characters that struggle with sombre philosophies on life and struggle to maintain their happiness, the series poses a paradox that makes the viewer reflect on the negative aspects of postmodern life.

BoJack, the title character of the series, is introduced to the viewer as someone who lives in the past, perpetually commemorating the days when he was still a famous Hollywood actor. He copes with depression, mainly caused by his nihilist belief that life is “meaningless”, i.e. that ‘man’ has no greater purpose in the universe than solely to exist. This nihilist philosophy on life is mainly caused by his “disneyfied” perception on life, as he searches repetitively for sustainable romantic relationships¹³⁰ and “closure”. Further, he is highly individualistic, as he can hardly live together with the people he values, often doing them wrong.

A deeper understanding of what caused BoJack’s depression, has been achieved by focussing on specific theories on postmodern society, the series often – subtly and sometimes less subtly – criticises. A first theory, that explains BoJack’s behaviour towards others, is Georg Simmel’s notion of “hyperindividualism”, which implies that someone has become so numb to the many stimuli in our society of spectacle, that he or she has adapted a character typified by cynicism, extreme rationality, and a general lack of passion in life. BoJack has even surpassed this, and has reached a state of “total reserve”, where the characteristics of hyperindividualism are amplified, to the point where he has become socially and morally indifferent.

¹³⁰ This is the case only in the first two seasons. In the third season, he has come to grips with the fact that he cannot establish such relationship, as he explains to Princess Carolyn in the ninth episode of the third season (S3E9): “You know that I don’t do the whole love thing.”

A second aspect of postmodern society that is often criticised in the series is hyperreality. This concept, created by Jean Baudrillard, implies that the perception of reality is always subjective, and that what we think of as reality is often only an “aesthetic hallucination” of reality. A form of hyperreality that is prevalent in the series, is “disneyfication”. This notion can refer to many phenomena, the most relevant of which being the perception that our lives are shaped similarly to Disney films, on the one hand, and the censorship of entertainment to become less poignant and critical, on the other.

The critique on these concepts is mainly achieved by two main tools: the representation of animals, and the existence of an anthropocentric hierarchy in the series. The critique through animals is mainly achieved through subversion. Mr. Peanutbutter is a dog, who is supposed to be enthusiastic all the time, but instead is often faced with the difficulties of postmodern life, which has left him with a nihilist interpretation of life. Princess Carolyn is a cat, who is stereotypically supposed to seek attention from friends and family, while sleeping many hours a day, but instead chooses to focus on her career, abandoning her plans to start a family. The critique inherent to BoJack’s being a horse, on the contrary, is not achieved by subversion. BoJack is a horse, because he symbolises the great number of people suffer from depression. The horse used to be an important part of society, as it was once the only fast means of transportation and a military status symbol. In the present, they do not serve any significant purpose anymore, which could be thought of as a metaphor for people who are depressed and might feel obsolete.

Another aspect of postmodernity that contributed to a deeper understanding of *BoJack Horseman*’s critique, is the concept of anthropocentrism, which has almost become self-evident in our society. This critique on anthropocentrism is also conveyed by Peter Verhelst’s novella “Geschiedenis van een Berg”. The subtler critiques on postmodern society, are implied by the tangible anthropocentric hierarchy that is implemented in *BoJack Horseman*’s society. This idea of a hierarchy where the more anthropomorphic animals are higher in class than animals who have stayed closer to their nature, was discovered by further reading the series in the light of “Geschiedenis van een Berg”. The hierarchy that is at the centre of the novella, brought interesting new insights into the society of *BoJack Horseman*, as in the series, there is evidence of the

existence of such hierarchy as well. In this hierarchy, the most important “classes” are the humans and the highly anthropomorphic animals, such as BoJack, Mr. Peanutbutter, etc. The less esteemed classes are those of the animals that have remained closer to their nature and the “normal” animals, i.e. animals as we know them in real life. Finally, the novella also stands critical towards the hyperindividualism and hyperreality that are so present in our society.

The final chapter contained an interpretation of *BoJack Horseman* through “Geschiedenis van een Berg” and focussed on the anthropocentric hierarchy that is present in the fictional Hollywood of the series. First, the hierarchy implies ecocritical comments on postmodern society, thus criticising the perception that humans are superior to animals. Furthermore, the implementation of the hierarchy offers a critique to the hyperreality postmodernity implies. The series achieves these critiques by showing how an anthropomorphic horse that has lived in postmodern society his entire life now realises that he has abandoned his true nature. This is shown most clearly at the end of the third season (S3E12), when BoJack is confronted with a herd of wild horses, that are implied to have abandoned postmodern society themselves to return to their natural habitat. By showing an animal that understands the ill logics of our society, ‘man’ who is essentially an animal himself, begins to understand how far we have strayed from our own nature, and how we often submit ourselves to a lifestyle that, at times, goes against that nature. An example of such occurrence, is how we wish to conform to the exaggerated beauty standards of our society, by injecting a toxin into our skin. Another example is how we adapt our behaviour and suppress our identity, in order not to be perceived as being “contrarian” and thus not fit into society.

BoJack ultimately is the character that best understands how we often go against our nature. In the first episode, he already makes remarks on how animals have adapted thoroughly to human life.¹³¹ However, only in the final episode of the third season¹³², as he is confronted with the herd of wild horses, he truly begins to realise how far he has digressed from his nature, and that this digression to postmodern society is ultimately what causes his deep sorrow.

¹³¹ “BoJack Horseman, The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter 1.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 1, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298930.

¹³² “That Went Well.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 12, Tornante Company/ ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073228.

On a final note, while *BoJack Horseman* is a series that harshly criticises postmodern society, and portrays a rather dark philosophy on life, the series still sees consolation for human society. Before *Horsin' around* was broadcasted, Herb Kazzaz and BoJack made the promise that they would celebrate their success at the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. At the end of the first season (S1E12)¹³³, when BoJack realises his lifelong dream of playing the role of Secretariat, his lifelong hero, however, the viewer is presented with a scene which implies that he realises that the role did not bring him happiness at all. BoJack is standing at the Griffith Observatory all by himself, while his former friend Herb is laying in his death bed. Their relationship was ruined years before, after a betrayal by BoJack. This is one of the moments where BoJack begins to realise that neither consumption nor successes in his career bring him happiness in life. The scene implies that all of that is worthless if you have no person to share your happiness with. This melancholy scene ironically is an example of the most positive reflection the series offers on life. It argues that post-modern society offers many distractions – in the form of consumption, media, celebrity adoration – that erect a hyperreal layer upon our perception of life. These distractions present themselves as being much more important than they truly are. What truly matters, according to the series, are the people we meet and the relationships we form, or as BoJack formulates this: “In this terrifying world, all we have, are the connections that we make.”¹³⁴

¹³³ “Later.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 1, episode 12, Tornante Company/ShadowMachine, 22 August 2014. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/70298941.

¹³⁴ Quote from S3E4: “Fish out of Water.” *BoJack Horseman*, season 3, episode 4, Tornante Company/ShadowMachine, 22 July 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80073220.

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Appendix: Dutch Summary – Nederlandstalige Samenvatting: Dieren en Maatschappijkritiek in *BoJack Horseman*

In deze thesis ben ik op zoek gegaan naar het antwoord op de vraag: “Hoe levert de Netflix-serie *BoJack Horseman* kritiek op de postmoderne samenleving door het gebruik van dieren als personages?” *BoJack Horseman* is een animatieserie waarin mensen en dieren op vrijwel gelijke voet samenleven. De dieren die de hoofdrollen verzorgen, zijn zeer antropomorfe wezens: behalve enkele fysieke kenmerken en enkele dierlijke karaktertrekken, zijn ze vrijwel volledig mens geworden. Doch, zo zal blijken in deze thesis, zijn er meer verschillen tussen dieren en mensen in de serie dan op het eerste gezicht kan lijken.

In het eerste hoofdstuk heb ik getracht het karakter van titelrolspeler BoJack op een gevatte manier te tekenen. BoJack is een personage dat kampt met een hevige depressie en de serie volgt hem in zijn zoektocht om de “zin” van zijn leven terug te vinden. In het eerste seizoen is BoJack een acteur wiens gloriejaren reeds ver achter zich liggen. Hij spendeert zijn dagen in zijn overdreven grote villa, waar hij zich elke dag bezat en mijmert over het verleden – meer bepaald de jaren negentig – toen hij nog een beroemde Hollywood-ster was. Verder is hij ook enorm egoïstisch, wat zich zelfs vertaalt in het saboteren van zijn geliefden, om hen dichterbij zich te kunnen houden. Zijn levensfilosofie is gekenmerkt door nihilisme: over de verschillende seizoenen van de serie slaagt hij er weliswaar in om zijn carrière nieuw leven in te blazen, maar zelfs wanneer hij de rol van zijn jeugdheld Secretariat kan spelen en er een Oscarnominatie voor Beste Acteur voor in de wacht sleept, vindt hij nog steeds geen voldoening in zijn leven. BoJack is zich bewust geworden van de schone schijn van Hollywood en vraagt zich af of er niet meer is in het leven dan roem en geld.

In het tweede hoofdstuk ben ik op zoek gegaan naar de oorzaken van BoJack’s duistere levensfilosofie. Daarvoor heb ik eerst de begrippen “postmoderniteit” en “postmodernisme” kort toegelicht. Om de kritiek op de postmoderne samenleving af te bakenen en theoretisch te kaderen,

heb ik me vooral gericht op de theorieën van Baudrillard en Simmel¹³⁵. Aan de hand van Simmel's "totale reserve" heb ik BoJack's karakter gedefinieerd. De totale reserve is een figuur die door het overaanbod aan prikkels in onze samenleving, op moreel en maatschappelijk totaal onverschillig is geworden. Één van de belangrijkste verdere oorzaken van BoJack's depressie, kan worden aangeduid met het begrip "hyperrealiteit" van Jean Baudrillard. Hyperrealiteit houdt in dat men niet de objectieve realiteit waarneemt, maar dat de ervaring van de werkelijkheid volledig subjectief is. Baudrillard hanteert het begrip "simulacra": beelden van beelden. Bovenop het beeld van de werkelijkheid plaatst men vaak een tweede, subjectief beeld. Een voorbeeld is de stad Venetië: men scheidt zich vaak een bepaald beeld van de stad voordat men die bezocht heeft. Wanneer men zich dan in die stad begeeft, gaan ze er vaak bewust naar op zoek om hun vooraf bepaalde visie bevestigd te zien. Dit is een oorzaak van BoJack's depressie, omdat hij die hyperrealiteit – die in Hollywood in overvloed aanwezig is – doorziet. Een derde begrip, dat verwant is aan hyperrealiteit en het concept van de simulacra, is disneyficatie. Dit begrip kent vele interpretaties, waarvan de relevantste voor deze paper is dat we onze levens mentaal voorstellen als waren we hoofdrolspelers in onze eigen Disneyfilm. Verschillende waarden van dergelijke films zijn doorgaans onder andere: de trope van de held, de mens die zichzelf ziet als zijnde de held in zijn eigen leven; het geloven in "happy endings" in het dagelijkse leven; en de gedachte dat een familie oprichten het ultieme doel is in het leven. Daarbij kan ook nog toegevoegd worden dat de typische Disneyheld steeds een duidelijk doel voor ogen heeft, iets waar het BoJack aan ontbreekt in het dagelijkse leven. De duidelijkste commentaar op disneyficatie in de serie ligt in het feit dat de serie gebruik maakt van pratende dieren en animatie, twee typerende elementen van de Disneyfilm, om de "Disney-tendensen" van onze maatschappij te bekritisieren.

Vervolgens wordt in hoofdstuk drie de brug geslagen naar het gebruik van dieren in de serie en de vraag: "Hoe becommentariëren deze zeer antropomorfe dieren de postmoderne samenleving?" Bij de eerste twee hoofdpersonages, de hond Mr. Peanutbutter en de kat Princess Carolyn, is het antwoord duidelijk: subversie. Mr. Peanutbutter wordt aanvankelijk stereotiep voorgesteld als de vrolijke hond, maar occasioneel blijkt dat de postmoderne samenleving ook hem doet nadenken

¹³⁵ Simmel's theorieën dateren van voor de postmoderne samenleving, maar Simmel wordt algemeen gezien als iemand die de postmoderne samenleving anticipeerde.

over zijn existentie. Princess Carolyn is een kat die niet elke dag – naar menselijke stereotypen – de rust en de liefde van haar familie opzoekt, maar net heel hard aan haar carrière werkt, zelfs in die mate dat ze geen tijd heeft om haar eigen gezinnetje te stichten, iets waar ze nu, op veertigjarige leeftijd, bijwijken met spijt in het hart naar terugkijkt. Waarom BoJack een paard is, is een vraag die iets minder voor de hand ligt. Een zeer aannemelijke theorie – die niet door mezelf is bedacht – is dat het paard haar relevantie verloren heeft in het dagelijkse leven. Waar het paard vroeger noodzakelijk was voor transport, en zelfs een militair statussymbool was¹³⁶, heeft het nu haar echte nut verloren. Dit is niet enkel symbolisch voor BoJack, die zijn relevantie als acteur verloren heeft en nu doelloos door het leven dwaalt, maar ook voor de mens in het algemeen, daar zo'n driehonderd miljoen mensen vandaag de dag met een depressie kampen.

In het vierde hoofdstuk maak ik de inleiding naar een tweede kritiek via dieren in *BoJack Horseman*. Aan de hand van het boek "Geschiedenis van een Berg" van Peter Verhelst, heb ik nieuwe inzichten over de maatschappij binnen de serie verworven. In het boek van Verhelst wordt een maatschappij geschetst die opvalt door een "tastbare", waarneembare antropocentrische hiërarchie. Het boek begint wanneer een gorilla vanuit zijn habitat in Afrika naar Droomland wordt gebracht. Daar leert hij, samen met de andere gorilla's, hoe hij een mens kan worden. Door middel van een indoctrinatieproces krijgen ze elk de kans om de hoogst mogelijke rang te bereiken: die van "mens". De gorilla's die falen worden overgebracht naar dierentuinen, waar ze zullen dienen ter vermaak van de mens. De antropocentrische gedachtegang van de mens ligt aan de basis van deze maatschappij: de gorilla's die er het beste in slagen om menselijke eigenschappen aan te leren, worden met meer respect – doch, vaak blijven de gorilla's aanzien voor minderwaardig – behandeld dan de gorilla's die zich niet hebben weten aan te passen aan het menselijke leven.

Een interpretatie van de maatschappij van *BoJack Horseman* in het licht van die in "Geschiedenis van een Berg", leverde enkele interessante bedenkingen op, die een nieuw licht wierpen op de maatschappijkritiek door middel van dieren in de serie. Net als in de roman, bestaat er in *BoJack Horseman* een antropocentrische hiërarchie. Er zijn drie verschillende gradaties in het

¹³⁶ Ik refereer in de tekst naar het bekende schilderij "Napoleon Steekt de Alpen Over." van Jacques-Louis David, waar Napoleon op een imposante manier met zijn paard poseert.

antropomorfisme van de dieren: de uiterst antropomorfe dieren, zoals BoJack; dieren die, hoewel ze ook een zekere graad van antropomorfisme bereikt hebben, nog steeds veel van hun dierlijke kenmerken behouden hebben; en tot slot de dieren die nooit antropomorf zijn geworden – met andere woorden dieren zoals wij ze kennen in de realiteit. Deze antropocentrische hiërarchie zorgt voor enkele opvallende impliciete kritieken, op het antropocentrisme van de postmoderne mens, enerzijds, en op de hyperrealiteit die de postmoderne maatschappij typeert, anderzijds. Ten eerste wordt het antropocentrisme belaagd in een scène waarin een familie uiterst antropomorfe kippen zélf kippen fokt, die zullen opgegeten worden als ze voldoende gegroeid zijn. Het bevreemdende beeld van de kip die zijn eigen soort kweekt ter consumptie, kan de kijker doen nadenken over de foute logica van het antropocentrisme. De antropomorfe kippen nemen zelf een antropocentrische houding aan, wanneer ze op mentaal gebied vrijwel volledig mens zijn geworden. Het feit dat ze nog steeds op kippen lijken, doet ons beseffen dat het antropocentrisme niet logisch is, daar ook wij dieren zijn en ooit dichterbij de natuur leefden. Ten tweede bevindt zich ook een kritiek op antropocentrisme in de namen van de dierlijke personages. Mr. Peanutbutter en Princess Carolyn, bijvoorbeeld, zijn namen die veel meer tot de verbeelding spreken dan vb. “Diane” – één van de menselijke personages –. Dit impliceert dat de dieren nog steeds dichterbij de “magie” van de natuur staan dan de mens. Volgens Mandel heeft de mens zijn banden met de magie van mythen en religie volledig verbroken, wat er mede toe geleid heeft dat we massaal beredeneerd en koel geworden zijn. De dieren in *BoJack Horseman* vertonen hier en daar nog tekenen van die door de mens verloren magie.

Vervolgens wordt ook het concept hyperrealiteit bekritiseerd via de antropocentrische hiërarchie. Een voorbeeld is hoe Lenny Turteltaub, een schildpad, erg begaan is met zijn uiterlijk. Ondanks het feit dat schildpadden gemiddeld ouder worden dan mensen, en hij er door zijn imposante leeftijd ook minder goed uitziet dan de mensen waarmee hij samenwerkt, laat hij merken dat hij er nog steeds even jong als hen wil uit te zien. Deze spanning tussen mens en schildpad becommentarieert de noodzaak om de hyperreële schijn van de schoonheid hoog te houden.

Een laatste manier waarop de antropocentrische hiërarchie de postmoderne samenleving bekritiseerd en aanmaant tot verandering, kan worden teruggevonden in de laatste aflevering van

het derde seizoen. In de allerlaatste scène tracht BoJack zelfmoord te plegen door het stuur van zijn auto los te laten, wanneer hij door de woestijn rijdt. Hij staat op het punt om te sterven, maar als hij een laatste keer naar de weidse natuur kijkt, stopt hij de wagen plots en stapt uit. Voor zich ziet hij een kudde wilde paarden. De scène impliceert dat deze paarden ooit deel maakten van onze postmoderne samenleving, maar dat ze die hebben achtergelaten om terug te keren naar de natuur, waar ze thuishoren. Metaforisch zou BoJack een mens kunnen geweest zijn, die naar een wilde apenkolonie kijkt. De serie pleit hier niet per se voor een totale terugkeer naar de natuur, maar eerder voor een samenleving waar de mens terug meer leert samenleven met zijn naaste en minder individualistisch in het leven staat. De thesis wordt dan ook afgesloten met een positieve boodschap die *BoJack Horseman* naar voren draagt, ondanks de vele negatieve levensvisies die in de serie naar voren komen: “In this terrifying world, all we have, are the connections that we make.”¹³⁷ Niet succes, rijkdom en roem zijn belangrijk, maar het samenleven met anderen *an sich* is wat het leven echt zin geeft.

¹³⁷ Vrij vertaald: “In deze beangstigende wereld zijn de verbintenissen die we met elkaar aangaan, het enige wat het leven echt “zin” geeft.”