

## The Search for Sincerity in the Contemporary Metamodern Sitcom *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020)

*Nehal Amer*

Teaching Assistant,  
Faculty of Al-Alsun,  
Ain Shams University,  
Egypt.

### Abstract

As early as the 1980s, many artists and critics have declared that postmodernism as a cultural paradigm is in its final throes, although the question of what comes afterwards has remained a hotly debated one. Metamodernism is one of the many proposed answers to this quandary, describing an emerging cultural sensibility that oscillates between postmodern and modern sensibilities, ultimately creating something completely new. This paradigm shift from postmodernism is most apparent in sitcoms; a new wave of American television shows has started destabilising the typical image of postmodern sitcoms that heavily relied on cynicism, ironic detachment, self-reflexivity, and parodying the limitations of the medium itself. Drawing upon Timotheus Vermeulen and

Robin van den Akker's, and Alexandra Dumitrescu's conceptualisation of metamodernism, this paper examines Netflix's *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) as a case of metamodern synthesis that combines the conventions of postmodern sitcoms with a more sincere interiority. The paper argues that instead of completely breaking from such conventions, the show employs them to subvert the viewers' expectations and eventually transcend them to provide a critique of celebrity culture and the extreme individualism and lack of sincere connection plaguing contemporary American society.

**Keywords:** Metamodernism, *BoJack Horseman*, postmodernism, American sitcoms, self-reflexivity

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### Introduction

Many theorists have come to agree that the postmodern epoch, with its rejection of grand-narratives and emphasis on the fragmentation of the world and the self, has come to an end. As postmodernism began to prove inadequately dated, attempts to describe what comes next, however, have been themselves nothing but fragmented and indecisive. Various attempts to arrive at a term that describes the post-postmodern age have been made, among the more theorised of which is metamodernism, which proposes a synthesis between postmodern cynicism and modern/pre-modern sincerity. This paper examines manifestations of this emergent metamodern sensibility in the situational comedy (sitcom) genre, with special focus on Netflix's adult animation *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). The paper analyses the sitcom's interplay of narrative levels and its use of postmodern sitcom conventions including self-reflexivity and intertextuality to argue that it departs from the postmodern cynicism of its predecessors and provides a scathing critique of celebrity culture and the fragmentation and lack of connection in contemporary life.

### Metamodernism: A New Paradigm

The term "metamodern" has been in use in writings in various fields since the 1970s. In 1975, it was used by Mas'ud Zavarzadeh to describe emerging aesthetic attitudes in American literature of the 1970s. Zavarzadeh describes the tendency of metafictional and nonfiction novels—which blur the line between the fictional and non-fictional—to "move beyond the interpretive modernist novel in which the fictionist interpreted the human condition within the framework of a comprehensive

private metaphysics, towards a metamodern narrative with zero degree of interpretation" (69). Consequently, Zavarzadeh's definition, which includes an emphasis on parody and irony, as well as the questioning of the "single interpretation of reality" (78, 81), remains firmly in line with postmodernism rather than breaking away from it. Almost three decades later, Furlani proposed a new meaning of the term, indicating the aesthetics that post-date modernism yet employ modernist styles and means (713). Such conflicting meanings would later give rise to today's widely-accepted definition of the term posited by Vermeulen and van den Akker in their 2010 article "Notes on Metamodernism," where they apply the term to certain cultural and artistic trends that emerged with the new millennium.

The two theorists regard metamodernism as a nascent cultural sensibility—which can be observed in contemporary language and arts—that abandons postmodern aesthetics, rather than an established movement or cultural agenda. They call this emerging sensibility an "emerging structure of feeling" ("Notes" 2), a term they borrow from Raymond Williams who uses it to refer to "affective elements of consciousness and relationships" as opposed to more concrete ideology (Williams 132). Nonetheless, while metamodernism arises as a denunciation of postmodernist values, it does not wholly reject postmodernism. Rather, it is in a state of constant re-negotiation with postmodernism and what came before it, combining modern idealism with postmodern scepticism. The complex relationship between postmodernism and metamodernism is further elaborated as more than a mere critique of the former in *Metamodernism*:

*Historicity, Affect, and Depth* (2017), where they argue that since the turn of the millennium, new aesthetic trends have attempted “to incorporate postmodern stylistic and formal conventions while moving beyond them” (3). Hence, metamodernism is not an outright rejection of postmodernist aesthetic values.

Central to their conceptualisation of the metamodern is the image of a swinging pendulum. Such an oscillation does not represent or aim to attain a steady “balance between” the two opposing poles of modernism and postmodernism. Rather, they posit that “it is a pendulum swinging between 2, 3, 5, 10, innumerable poles. Each time the modern enthusiasm swings toward fanaticism, gravity pulls it back toward irony; the moment its irony sways toward apathy, gravity pulls it back toward enthusiasm” (“Notes” 6). Thus, metamodernism does not attempt to arrive at a compromise between modernism and postmodernism, but it represents a constant tension between opposite poles that results in a new, and more sincere aesthetic. The metamodern oscillation includes an oscillation between success and failure in reaching the truth. This is not necessarily negative since the movement itself is the point: “metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find” (“Notes” 5). By stressing the ephemerality of success and the acceptance of “failure” as a chief metamodern attitude, however, they inadvertently cannot escape the postmodernist cynicism they claim to oppose.

Drawing upon the theories of Vermeulen and van den Akker yet challenging the aforementioned cynicism and the overemphasis on metamodernism’s oscillating nature, Alexandra Dumitrescu focuses on the re-centring of the subject through self-realisation. She contends in *Towards a*

*Metamodern Literature* that such “reluctance to take a position [...] and hesitations between truths and fear of commitment” signify an inability to break free from the postmodern paradigm or synthesise it into a new sensibility (197). Instead, her work underlines the rediscovery and re-centring of the metamodern subject. This can be observed in her definition of metamodernism as “The search for roots in times of uprootedness. It is the self’s longing for innocence, beauty, and simplicity in times of sophistication, shifting aesthetic standards, and excessive complexity” (19). This definition re-centres the subject, both in relation to itself as well as the world at large, which contests the postmodern scepticism of all grand-narratives, including the subject itself. Nevertheless, this preoccupation with the Self does not mean elevating it in comparison to the Other. Conversely, if the metamodern Self must define itself in relation to the Other, it does so as a way of achieving a connection with it, since “care for *the other* and for the self coexist, without being antinomian opposites, in metamodernism.” (Dumitrescu, “Meditations”). In short, while postmodernism’s fragmentation of identity highlights the isolation of the individual from the group, the Self from the Other(s), metamodernism seeks to affirm the interconnectedness between the two.

### **Metamodern Sitcoms and Depressed Horses**

The shift towards a search of connection, as well as the abandonment of cynical irony in favour of a new sincerity, can be observed in a multitude of genres and mediums; yet, it is most apparent in television, especially in sitcoms, which are built upon eliciting laughter. Such an evolution is the last in a chain of many others that the genre has undergone. The success of *I Love Lucy* in the 1950s was the starting point for the prevalence of American sitcoms. As the genre began

standardising, familiar conventions emerged, including the reliance on sentimentality and didactic lessons, live (or simulated) studio audience with laugh tracks, and the use of a single stage (Wells-Lassagne 2,10). Conversely, postmodern television heavily relies on self-reflexivity, irony, parody, and pastiche—or what Jameson defines as “blank parody, a parody that has lost its sense of humour” (5)—to remind the viewer that what they are watching is not real, and to stress the limits in its ability to reach a coherent meaning, or whether there could be one in the first place. NBC’s *Seinfeld* (1990-1998) famously proclaimed itself to be a “show about nothing,” focusing on the mundane and often meaningless minutiae of everyday life and eschewing the didactic nature of sitcoms prevalent before postmodernism. In the postmodern sitcom, bitter laughter—elicited through a breaking of taboos and a general atmosphere of cynicism and disregard for sentimentality—is the name of the game. By parodying the limitations of the medium, the television programme is positioned as being above judgement, while simultaneously giving the audience a sense of superiority for being in on the joke.

By contrast, there has been a shift in tone in more recent, “metamodern” sitcoms. Rustad and Schwind note that the genre has recently moved towards a “warmer” tone of humour that is “more interested in ‘laughing with’ rather than ‘laughing at’ the butt of the joke” (131). This does not entail a total abandonment of postmodern conventions. In fact, metamodern sitcoms exhibit a myriad of stylistic similarities to their postmodern predecessors. Often, they take the usual postmodern set-up with its irony, cynical self-reflexivity, and even unlikeable main characters as a point of departure to subvert it, or more accurately, transcend it. In metamodern sitcoms, earnestness and an interest in the interiority of their subjects are entwined with the irony

commonly associated with postmodernism to create what Greg Dember terms “ironesty.” This refers to irony or sarcasm presented not for the sake of cynicism, but to express honest, heartfelt emotions (Dember, “How to be Ironic”). Thus, humour does not merely become an end in itself, but a means towards exploring the depth of the characters on-screen.

Netflix’s adult animation TV show *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) exhibits many such metamodern drives. Taking place at the heart of Hollywood celebrity culture (renamed Hollywoo in season one onwards), the show revolves around the eponymous anthropomorphic horse, a washed-up star of a 1990s sitcom that has long since fallen out of cultural relevancy. After his career plateaus, BoJack grows into a self-loathing, bitter, and lonely alcoholic struggling to find meaning in his post-fame life. The show has often been classified as a postmodern one by critics and viewers alike, especially in its earlier days. Such a conclusion is not wholly wrong, especially with how the show often disrupts linear narrative, exhibits different experimental animation styles, and abounds with irony, pastiche, intertextuality, and self-reflexive references. While the case could be made for grouping *BoJack Horseman* along with other contemporary postmodern adult animation shows, there exists a clear “point of distinction between their pronounced seriality and the overarching [narrative]” to which BoJack’s six seasons build up (Falvey 120). This thematic and structural departure has been noted by other studies. Saura, for instance, posits that the series attempts to transcend the restrictions of postmodernism “into a new cultural hegemon different from postmodern values,” yet does not attempt to name it (293). This paper specifically explores how the show can be classified as metamodern, “not by radically parting with [postmodernism’s] attitudes and techniques but by incorporating and redirecting them towards new positions

and horizons” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, *Metamodernism* 10). Its humour, achieved via a reliance on anthropomorphism, self-reflexivity, and intertextuality, becomes a means towards exploring deeper and much darker themes under the veneer of absurdity.

*BoJack Horseman* situates itself as different from previous sitcoms through the direct contrast with an earlier—albeit fictional—sitcom. Despite beginning in the late 80s and running throughout the 90s, *Horsin’ Around*, the sitcom-within-a-sitcom that launches BoJack to stardom, is explicitly marked as a modernist sitcom both thematically and stylistically. The metadiegetic sitcom follows BoJack’s character, simply named The Horse, as he adopts three orphans and they form a loving adoptive family, which recalls early sitcoms that “stressed the unity of the family above all other values” (Hurd 765). It is “a show about good likeable people who love each other, where [...] no matter what happens, at the end of 30 minutes everything’s gonna turn out okay” (“The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One” 1:40-01:50). Furthermore, unlike its extradiegetic counterpart, *Horsin’ Around* lacks any overarching arc, with the story “resetting” after every episode or season, which allows the showrunners to exploit its popularity for as long as possible. In one season, for instance, the Horse is elected as U.S. president, but it is revealed in the next season that this arc has all been a dream. Moreover, *Horsin’ Around*, with its reliance on “sentimentality and didacticism,” adheres to the common modernist sitcom formula “that allows the characters to overcome their problems by the show’s ending,” which often offers a moral message in its didactic conclusion. (Hurd 765). This extreme didacticism is satirised by how the sitcom’s ending involves the Horse dying because the children “didn’t appreciate him enough” with them being subsequently handed over to Child Protective Services (“The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One” 17:00-

17:22). The irony is that despite its extreme didacticism, the entirety of *BoJack Horseman* is an exploration of how the cultural context in which the fictional sitcom is situated and the fame it grants its stars are, and always have been, rotten to the core.

The contrast between *Horsin’ Around* and the world of *BoJack Horseman* is also achieved stylistically through the former’s more dated style. This includes its more warm-toned animation style as well as the fact that it is filmed in front of a live audience. “Sabrina’s Christmas Wish,” the holiday episode of the fictional sitcom, begins with its star’s declaration that “*Horsin’ Around* is filmed before a live studio audience” (02:44-02:49), and the audience can often be heard dutifully and robotically laughing at jokes and exclaiming during emotionally charged moments. Yet, while the supposedly postmodern *BoJack Horseman*, with its lack of a live audience or a laugh track, and its protagonists’ extreme nihilism, appears at first worlds apart from its fictional counterpart, the two often bleed into one another. For example, to justify not submitting his memoir on time to his book publisher, BoJack states, “Actually, I’m a very busy guy, I lead an active lifestyle;” but the scene immediately cuts to him sitting on his sofa eating popcorn, as audience laughter is heard (“The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One” 12:50-12:56). The scene then cuts to a shot of his television playing an episode of *Horsin’ Around*, yet the audience’s laughter in this scene is also in part meant to highlight the discordance in BoJack’s words and his actions.

This blurring of the two narrative levels occurs again in the same episode; BoJack, while having a panic attack, mistakenly assumes that he is dying. After his friend tells him “You’re not dying,” the scene immediately cuts to a flatlining heart rate monitor, then a doctor is shown declaring the horse’s death (16:40-16:55).

This is revealed shortly afterwards to be the final scene of *Horsin' Around*, but this momentary blending of the two suggests that they have more in common than their equine protagonists. The stylistic bleed heralds a thematic one, wherein the show is revealed to not be as steeped in nihilism as its first episode suggests. *BoJack Horseman's* oscillation “between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity” suggests that it is not simply postmodern but something beyond that—metamodern (Vermeulen and van den Akker, *Metamodernism* 11).

This blending of postmodern aesthetics with a deeper, more sincere meaning is no more obvious than the representation of BoJack himself. Similar to *Seinfeld's* main character, BoJack is also bitter, narcissistic, and cynical, and his introduction paints him as the quintessential postmodern anti-hero. As the titular character, there would normally exist the implicit expectation of the audience to root for BoJack and morally align themselves with him. However, the show continuously challenges this simplistic reading. The often-drunk and humanly imperfect BoJack is contrasted with a diverse cast of characters whose stories are given as much emphasis as his own, and who are shown to be affected by BoJack's choices and his self-destructiveness. The show becomes a sincere meditation on BoJack's—and the others'—ability to grow and change, while never completely doing away with its irony and absurdity.

The most obvious source of absurdity is the fact that inside the world of the sitcom—which otherwise uncannily resembles the real one—humans and anthropomorphic animals co-exist. In fact, with the exception of a few, most of the main characters are humanoid animals. For instance, BoJack's and rival-turned-friend Mr. Peanutbutter, is a yellow Labrador Retriever whose mannerisms switch from being more human-like to dog-like when

he is either excited or distressed. BoJack's agent and his on-again-off-again lover Princess Carolyn, is a pink Persian cat, and the show likewise often stresses this fact as a source of humour. She has a scratching post in her office, always lands on her feet, and her phone's hold music is a song from Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats*—which likewise features anthropomorphic cats. Yet, this anthropomorphism is never explained within the storyworld of the show, adding to the sense of absurdity.

Nevertheless, the anthropomorphism of the characters is not merely a source of ironic puns and humorous gags—numerous as they may be. It simultaneously functions, as Dember argues, as “an unabashed, unapologetic showcasing of inner, felt experience” (“After Postmodernism”). The blurring between human and non-human is used as a vehicle towards exploring dark and uncomfortable human truths while allowing the audience to view the story at a safe distance and, paradoxically, relate more to the characters they see on-screen. In other words, it represents “a return to meaning [...], as opposed to linguistic,” or in this case, audio-visual “games for their own sake” (Dumitrescu, “What is Metamodernism”). For instance, the fact that BoJack is a horse calls to mind the double entendre of a horse's “long face” and depression. It also underscores the peculiarity of seeing what is traditionally portrayed as a majestic animal being reduced to a washed up, depressed alcoholic, which stresses the juxtaposition between the appearance and reality of fame, a common theme that runs throughout the show. The anthropomorphism thus “oscillates” between being the beating human heart of the show and an absurdist stylistic choice that exists outside of any symbolic meaning that might be assigned to it.

Crucially, the animal characters are shown struggling between suppressing their animal nature, giving in to it, or

carving a totally different path for themselves. BoJack's depression and deep sense of meaninglessness could be argued to be a direct result of his being a purposeless horse in the modern world which has outgrown any functional use for him. The show, however, neither makes the case for giving in or fighting one's nature. Whereas Princess Carolyn is, perhaps against her feline nature, a career-driven modern woman who values her professional life over her personal one and later comes to regret it when she finds out she is no longer able to conceive, Mr. Peanutbutter's canine obsession with pleasing everyone by offering what he thinks they want often inadvertently hurts them. The anthropomorphism, thus, raises questions regarding nature and nurture, and in turn the ability of people to change and grow despite both/either of them, thereby expressing the metamodern possibility of "the participation of ordinary people in their own individual growth, and in the decisions that shape their own lives" (Dumitrescu, *Metamodern Literature* 27).

### Sitcom Conventions Beyond Postmodernity

The attempt to derive sincere meaning from irony and stylistic absurdity can also be seen in the use of postmodern techniques while still subverting the viewer's expectations. One such technique is self-reflexivity, by which the text highlights its own production to point out its status as an artificial construct. To illustrate, the sitcom includes many meta-jokes on the act of writing and shooting a TV show. For instance, in "The Amelia Earhart Story," BoJack complains to Princess Carolyn that he must learn five pages of lines for a new show, declaring that "No show should have that much talking. TV is a visual medium" (01:16-01:19). Yet, the very next episode largely consists of one uninterrupted monologue. This does not only push the limits of

conventional sitcom episodes, but also, by virtue of the two episodes' proximity, spotlights *BoJack Horseman* as another fictional sitcom with too much talking in it.

The self-referentiality also extends to the visual level. With every detail in the background being carefully constructed, viewers may often find themselves pausing the episode to analyse the backgrounds with their hidden eastern eggs. Yet, the show often breaks the fourth wall by acknowledging its stylistic excess and even making fun of the audience for repeatedly pausing the show to catch such minor details. In "The Amelia Earhart Story," Princess Carolyn passes a t-shirt stall in a flea market. The t-shirts, which have various phrases written on them, are held up and flashed for less than a second at a time, leading the audience to pause to read what is on the t-shirt. Finally, the last t-shirt is shown, with the words "Stop Pausing and Just Watch the Show" written on it (12:35). Such references to the show's artificiality have thematic echoes. In "Downer Ending," BoJack, while trying to write his memoir, takes drugs to help his creative process. This leads him to experience a series of hallucinations, in which he loses his outlines and becomes a two-dimensional drawing rather than a three-dimensional one, which leads him to exclaim: "What the—Whoa! Okay, stay calm. I don't have outlines anymore. That's okay. There's no boundary between me and space" (16:23-16:32). Eventually, he becomes a scribble on a piece of paper before completely being erased by a pencil eraser (see *fig. 1*). This scene not only highlights BoJack as a fictional character in a fictional world, but it also emphasises the meaninglessness of his existence, which echoes BoJack's nihilism, and may align the show—at least superficially—both stylistically and thematically with postmodernism.

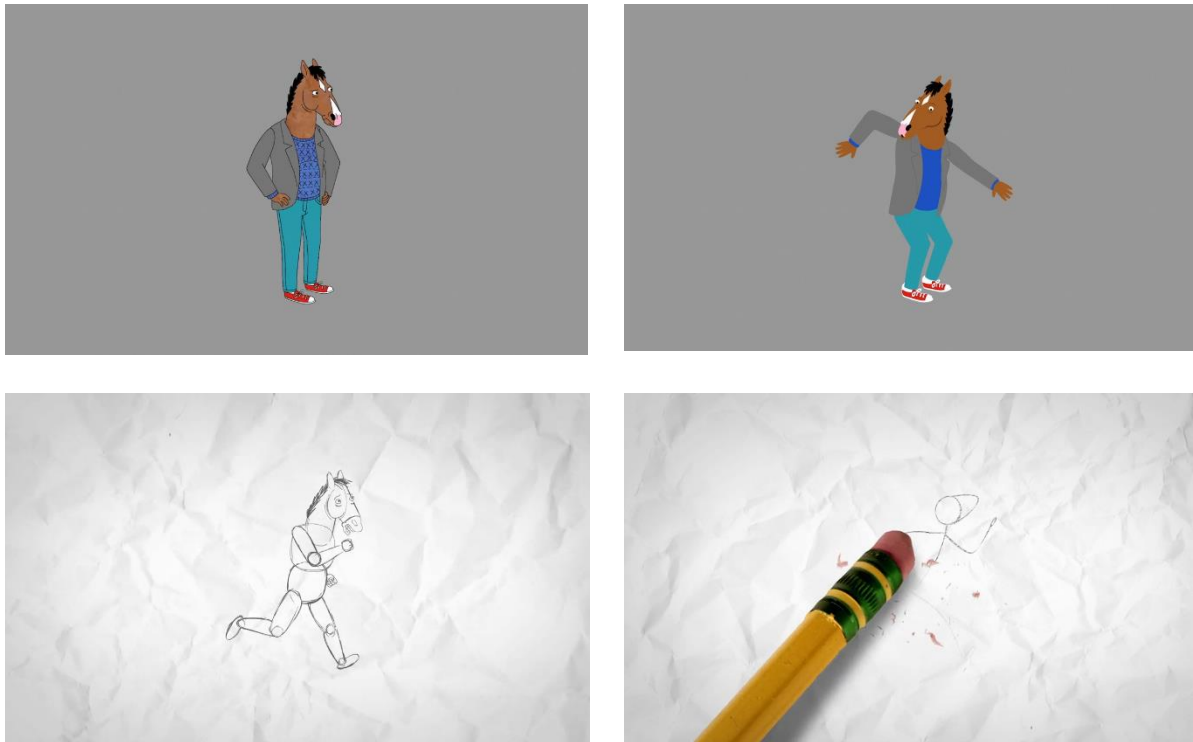


Fig. 1: BoJack's gradual loss of his outlines.

Nevertheless, the self-reflexivity goes beyond reflecting the protagonist's nihilistic tendencies and adopting them as the show's own. Instead, it directs the viewer's gaze towards the artificiality of not only the show but also the industry and the city it inhabits. In one episode, BoJack narrates the beginning of his career in the 80s to Diane, the writer he hires to ghost-write his memoir. Then, a flashback shows him driving while singing along to a fictional song, aptly named "Generic 80s New Wave" ("Telescope" 02:38-02:52). The song, whose lyrics include the lines, "This is a song from the '80s. / The decade which it currently is" serves as a tongue-in-cheek signal of the shift in the diegesis while also parodying how commercial music produced during the same era tends to adopt a similar aesthetic. By disrupting the audience's immersion via self-referentiality, the show underscores and parodies the lack of originality that causes all cultural productions to become imitations of one another to approximate the formula of whatever is profitable at the time of creation.

As a show set in and centred mainly around "Hollywood," *BoJack Horseman* repeatedly parodies the entertainment industry and highlights its hypocrisy. Such jokes are self-reflexive in nature, since the show is part of the industry it parodies. This includes focusing on the brutal process of artistic production and its myriad complications. Such frank portrayal allows the self-reflexive show to "demystify fictions, and our naïve faith in fictions" (Stam xi). Furthermore, Hollywood is portrayed as the quintessential "postmodern city, in which the individual lives a secluded existence, [...] sorely cut off from the rhythms of nature" and thrust into a highly artificial and derivative reality (Dumitrescu, *Metamodern Literature* 168); this representation is not only realistic but oftentimes also extremely bleak and critical, with most of the characters suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, and/or self-image issues often directly linked to their involvement in their exploitative industry. Thus, even if the show employs various postmodern techniques, the way by which they are



used leads to a drastically different—and more sincere—result, since “the metamodern comic sensibility is not so much a question of a distinct style, but is rather defined by the tone of humour and the meaning the stylistic tropes are imbued with” (Rustad and Schwind 136). While employing self-reflexivity, the show nonetheless tonally subverts the expected tone in favour of a much darker one to elicit a different type of audience engagement which goes beyond laughter for its own sake.

Additionally, intertextual references are employed to a similar effect. These range from an impressive list of Hollywood star cameos to numerous references to other TV shows, films, and literary works. The sheer volume of intertextual references almost strips intertextuality of its intended purpose of mediating the text’s meaning through references to other texts. Instead, the intertextual excessiveness that a single viewer would never be able to fully parse circles back to meaninglessness. The only achieved meaning appears to be the complete oversaturation of the world, to the extent that the characters can no longer express themselves or their genuine feelings without resorting to a pop cultural allusion or media reference. Nonetheless, its intertextuality also functions as a means of engaging with its themes on a deeper level. As Vermeulen and van den Akker contend, “[w]hereas the postmodern ‘recycled’ popular culture, canonised works and dead Masters by means of parody or pastiche,” the metamodern work opts to engage with older works on a deeper level that is not always—or at least exclusively—parodic in nature (*Metamodernism* 10). One notable example is how the sitcom features famous paintings by artists such as Botticelli, Monet, Klimt, Picasso, and Warhol, either as is or by turning their human subjects into humanoid animals in a pastiche that still maintains the artists’ personal styles.

They, however, tend to be relegated to the background of scenes, and can be easily missed by viewers if they do not know where to look. This reduction of “high art” into mere background aesthetics is thematically relevant as a commentary on the state of this fictional world—and by extension, the real one—where possession of art is only important as a status symbol.

This is not to say that the show never engages closely with any of its pictorial intertexts. Even if missing such references may not diminish the viewers’ understanding and enjoyment of the unfolding events, they nonetheless offer new insights into the world of the show by “pick[ing] out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present” (Vermeulen and van den Akker, *Metamodernism* 10). For instance, one of the few paintings that maintain their human subject is John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851–52), shown in “That’s Too Much, Man.” The painting is hung over the bed of Sarah Lynn, the troubled former child actress-turned-pop sensation who stars alongside BoJack in *Horsin’ Around* as the Horse’s adoptive daughter. The painting, which portrays Ophelia’s death, foreshadows Sarah Lynn’s demise as well as the two women’s loss of narrative agency.

In Shakespeare’s play, Ophelia dies off-stage, and her death is only relayed to the audience and the other characters by Gertrude, who purposefully obfuscates the gruesome details of her death. Similarly, Sarah Lynn dies of a drug overdose with only BoJack on her side, and his later narrative of what transpired during their ill-advised bender is meticulously crafted to conceal his guilt. Thus, like Ophelia’s death whose truth is forever left ambiguous, the truth behind Sarah Lynn’s death is lost to the unreliability of BoJack’s narration. Furthermore, the model’s face in the animation’s version of the Pre-Raphaelite painting is replaced with that of Sarah Lynn herself. This raises

a comparison not only with the fate of the fictional Ophelia but also with that of her model, Elizabeth Siddal, who struggled throughout her adult life with addiction, a lack of artistic recognition, and severe mistreatment by the male artists whose works she featured in and elevated. Such struggles would follow female creatives to the present. Sarah Lynn's life follows an eerily similar trajectory as that of many Hollywood child stars, whose life typically goes through a downward spiral due to being thrown into the spotlight for public consumption long before they can decide for themselves, but only until an arbitrarily decided age after which they are discarded for the next public sensation.

Another notable intertextual reference is the nod to Andy Warhol's art, which likewise signals the often poisonous artificiality of contemporary celebrity culture. The opening credits up until the sixth season feature a triptych of three horseshoes in a style heavily reminiscent of Warhol's "Multiples" hung over BoJack's bed. The choice to highlight Warhol's art is a notable one, with its reproductive and derivative nature underscoring the duplicability and artificiality of the contemporary image, whose innumerable recursions lead to a total loss of sincere meaning. This makes them a fitting choice for inclusion in a show which takes place in a "universe that [...] is, ultimately, a simulacrum of pop culture" (Falvey 120). The artwork also repeatedly appears throughout the show in contexts that directly relate it to the aforementioned idea. For example, in "Downer Ending," it appears as BoJack attempts to write a second version of his memoir after rejecting Diane's draft. Whereas Diane's version begins with a discussion of BoJack's traumatic childhood and how it led to his flawed personality, BoJack's failed autobiographical attempt hinges on painting an alluring, if completely false, picture of his perfect childhood. This sense

of extreme artificiality evoked via the reference to Warhol is built into the structure of the show with its hyperreal animation and its talking animals.

This artificiality of public life is frequently referenced by the characters themselves. Echoing Sarah Lynn's numerous laments for the lack of sincerity in her public life, BoJack likewise expresses a similar sentiment. In "Xerox of a Xerox," he gives a supposedly heartfelt televised interview where he admits to feeling like an inauthentic copy of something that may not exist:

I came from a broken home, and I used to feel like my whole life was an acting job, doing an impression of the people I saw on television, which was just a projection of a bunch of equally screwed-up writers and actors. I felt like a xerox of a xerox of a person, you know what I mean? (06:37-06:35)

This interview, titled "The Real Story of the Last Days of Sarah Lynn," takes place after news of BoJack's possible involvement in the death of Sarah Lynn comes to light. Whereas the interview is advertised as a raw glimpse into BoJack's life, this is far from the truth; the interview is staged as if taking place inside BoJack's residence to give the viewer a false sense of intimacy. What BoJack should and should not say is also meticulously arranged by his team and even his interviewer, with the interview's questions being designed specifically to paint him in a good light to salvage his public image. However, after this attempt at damage control initially succeeds, he starts falling back into his old habits and accepts a second interview that does not go as planned and marks the beginning of his downfall. In other words, he relapses into his biggest addiction: not drugs—though those also follow—but fame and attention, a drug that he resorts to as a poor

substitute for any genuine human connection.

The greatest irony is that while BoJack withholds crucial information related to the Sarah Lynn's death during the interview, the fears he divulges are true, as the viewer follows him battling his inner demons that can be traced all the way back to his childhood over the course of the show. In other words, BoJack—flawed as he is—is proven to be capable of sincerity, even when he continues to succumb to the lure of publicity and fame. It is precisely this constant oscillation “between attempt and failure,” that renders BoJack as a metamodern character (Vermeulen and van den Akker, “Notes” 8). The horse, who is neither a misunderstood genius nor a completely irredeemable villain that the audience cannot help but root for, is simply a flawed *human*, whose struggles, imperfections, and even failures find their echoes in the story arcs of all the other characters. It becomes, however, particularly damning of Hollywood and the artificial world it produces that the only characters who manage to achieve any semblance of an equilibrium are those who completely escape the toxic culture that commodifies humans—or in this universe, anthropomorphic animals—for entertainment.

### Human Connection and the Metamodern Subject

If Hollywood's artificiality is a negative influence, the show argues that simply removing people from their toxic environment is not the answer, or at least not the full one. Rather, transcending the extreme individualism of this postmodern life can only be achieved through an inner desire to change and “establish interconnections in the face of fragmentation” (Dumitrescu, *Metamodern Literature* 113). Nonetheless, changes in locale often function as catalysts—albeit incomplete ones—for such transformation.

The first of such attempts occurs in the aptly-named episode “Escape From L.A.” After successive personal and professional failures, BoJack flees Los Angeles to New Mexico to seek Charlotte, a woman from his past to whom he was not brave enough to confess his love. When BoJack arrives there in the hopes of rekindling their relationship, he discovers that she already has a family. The rest of the episode follows BoJack as he bonds with Charlotte's family in an exaggerated sitcom-like manner, which relies on a tone of humour reminiscent of that of *Horsin' Around*, which is also cued by the episode's different intro sequence. While this implies that BoJack is in a wholly different world from his L.A. life, the episode's extreme reliance on traditional sitcom tropes paradoxically signals that he has not in fact escaped the toxicity—mostly inner—that triggers his escape in the first place.

BoJack attempts to adjust to life in New Mexico while going through implausible sitcom-like scenarios that suggest his reluctance to truly make a fresh start. This includes teaching Charlotte's daughter, Penny, how to drive and taking her to prom where he performs a failed musical number and encourages the students to release balloons with glow sticks attached to them—something that he did with Charlotte and their friend in the 80s but which modern-day Charlotte finds environmentally irresponsible. This sitcom logic is juxtaposed with bleak real-life consequences; a student gets alcohol poisoning from BoJack's whiskey, and he flees the scene to escape responsibility. He also irreparably damages his relationship with Charlotte when she discovers Penny and BoJack in the latter's bedroom, seemingly about to undress. In short, if his life in L.A. stunts his own emotional and intellectual growth, the show equally holds him responsible for not making a true effort to meaningfully connect with others in any way that is not self-serving.

Another notable exodus out of Los Angeles occurs in “Fish Out of Water,” which sees BoJack travelling to an underwater metropolis to attend a film festival to promote his recent film. Stylistically, the episode is a departure from the usual structure of the rest of the show, with its muted sound design and almost complete lack of dialogue, as humans and other non-aquatic animals are forced to wear a helmet to breathe, which complicates the process of speaking, thereby evoking a deep sense of alienation. This is further compounded by the undersea inhabitants’ different language, which makes the setting appear nearly nonconductive to any sort of communication or connection. The difference in language and culture signals a more existential type of isolation that is further highlighted via the homage to Sofia Coppola’s film *Lost in Translation* (2003), which likewise uses language as a tool of isolating its protagonist, a faded movie star who travels to Tokyo for work. This is most obvious in the episode’s first segment, where BoJack wanders around the high-rise, high-tech city, as well as his taxi ride at the end of the episode paralleling the film’s first minutes. BoJack’s failure to communicate with the sea creatures, like a lonely traveller traversing a foreign land, becomes an apt metaphor for BoJack’s inability to form meaningful connections.

This failure in communication is crystallised through BoJack’s inability to express his regret over, once again, hurting someone. BoJack finds out that Kelsey Jannings, a film director whom he indirectly caused to get fired, is also in attendance. BoJack attempts to apologise to Kelsey for jeopardising her career, yet his attempts are hampered by his inability to draft an apology letter and his mistaken assumption that the helmet prevents him from speaking—a misconception that is only corrected in the final second of the episode. It is only after a further

underwater odyssey, where he must care for a new-born seahorse that gets separated from its family, that BoJack is able to finally compose the letter. Yet, once back in the city and the film festival, he is lulled back into the familiarity of his old vices, which causes him to not seek Kelsey immediately. By the time he sees her leaving the hotel and hands her the letter, the ink has been smeared, and she angrily leaves him behind. BoJack’s struggle with composing and delivering the letter to Kelsey stems from a long history of leaving things unspoken or until it is too late, which costs him numerous relationships, both personal and professional. This failure in sincerity is once again closely tied to the artificial world that BoJack inhabits; although he is not in Hollywood, he is still as close to it as he can be in a foreign world.

Nevertheless, BoJack manages to form a genuine bond in the episode, but only when he ventures further into this foreign world. After accidentally taking a bus travelling outside the bounds of the city, BoJack encounters a seahorse and helps him give birth to several babies. After one is accidentally left behind, BoJack goes on an episode-long chase in an attempt to return the seahorse to its father. The chase, which is stylistically reminiscent of cartoon chases, transcends its traditional narrative purpose to symbolically become a “chase after meaning” for BoJack, who finds in this alternate universe “an alternate self—a seahorse, who, by nature, even as a man, can bear his own children and happily love them” (Schmuck 9). This meaning is only found after BoJack embraces selflessness to safeguard the infant, who comes to regard him as a parental figure.

This sequence exists in direct contrast to BoJack’s failure as a parental figure to children, both real and imagined. As the show’s production designer Lisa Hanawalt notes, the design of the seahorse bears a striking similarity to that of

Harper, BoJack's imagined daughter with Charlotte in one of his drug-induced hallucinations where he concocts a happier life for himself (qtd. in Framke). Only after completely departing the toxicity of his world is BoJack able to achieve a semblance of parental connection with a child that does not end in tragedy, a common theme in his life that has its echoes in his troubled relationship with his parents. The underwater world, where BoJack mistakenly believes he cannot speak, paradoxically becomes a "global village, [...] characterised not by individualism and fragmentation, but by interconnections and a sense of community" (Dumitrescu, *Metamodern Literature* 168). Unable to resort to his usual method of talking or even shouting his way out of problems, BoJack is forced to interrogate his loneliness and improvise new ways of communication that transcend language altogether. Only by doing so is he able to gradually form a genuine unspoken bond with the seahorse that helps him, albeit briefly, understand his shortcomings and correct them.

The show's central and extremely metamodern thesis is that personal progress is often non-linear, but that it is ultimately possible and should be striven towards. While the entire show follows the ebb and flow of BoJack's growth, the sixth and final season is where this possibility of change is best crystallised. The season begins with BoJack's attempt to better himself in rehab, but he is confronted in the second half with the harsh truth that he can never outrun his past, and that his actions have lingering consequences. This fact sees its most literal manifestation in the season's penultimate episode, "The View from Halfway Down," which revolves around a vision of a dinner party that includes deceased people from BoJack's past. The dinner party becomes a means of making sense of all the harm that he has endured as a child but also caused others. At the end of the episode, it is

revealed that the dream is a vision created by BoJack's dying brain as he drowns in the pool of his house of which he lost ownership after a relapse, which would violently clash with the hope the show has built up to up until this point. Crucially, however, it does not conclude with BoJack's supposed suicide in the penultimate episode, but by the mundanity of him waking up only to realise that the world moves on, and that as long as one lives, there remains a possibility to try again.

The true ending comes in the form of an understated conversation between BoJack and his once-friend Diane, sitting on a rooftop after years of depression and aimless drifting in and out of each other's lives, wordlessly enjoying each other's company, most likely for the very last time ("Nice While it Lasted" 16:40-26:00). Even with the tacit understanding that their friendship is over, the conversation symbolises the metamodern idea that self-realisation is possible but can only occur through establishing connections with others. The slightly awkward conversation recalls an earlier rooftop one between the two in the first season's finale, which marks the beginning of their friendship ("Later" 20:40-22:20). The rooftop, thus, becomes a symbolic site of connection—a "vantage point from which both complexity and simplicity can make sense, coexist, and complement one another" (Dumitrescu, *Metamodern Literature* 19). The message that the viewer is left to contemplate is that salvation—or the closest possible approximation of it in a disjointed, hyperreal world—is possible as long as one reaches out to others and attempts to find genuine human connection, transient as it may be.

## Conclusion

Sitcoms are fertile ground for assessing the metamodern creative desire to move beyond postmodern nihilism and cold irony for their own sake. Netflix's *BoJack*

*Horseman* (2014-2020) is among the contemporary sitcoms which have started forgoing laughter at the expense of the Other in favour of laughing with the Other at the incomprehensibility of the world and finding meaning and joy through this very act of connection. It does so by synthesising irony and thematic sincerity; its characters' anthropomorphism humorously defamiliarises the story's universe, but paradoxically makes its commonalities with ours all the more apparent, leading to its rich examination of human nature and people's ability to grow. This is also evident in how self-reflexivity and intertextuality are employed, which stylistically aligns it with other postmodern sitcoms, but also serves—in a clear departure from its predecessors—as a vehicle for exploring its overarching story and themes. Therefore, it provides a critique of the vacuity of postmodern life and the extreme artificiality characterising celebrity culture, which proves to be at the heart of the characters' emotional troubles.

In doing so, it slightly departs from Vermeulen and van den Akker's descriptivist metamodernism into prescriptivist territory, but it nonetheless shares the metamodern enthusiasm and belief that the world is not only broken but ultimately *fixable*. The six-season-long oscillation between opposite, supposedly irreconcilable poles—between the postmodern and the modern, and between a deconstruction of old orders and a construction of new, more sincere ones—leads to a final release that exemplifies what Dumitrescu identifies as the metamodern desire to recapture meaning in a world lacking meaning, and connection in a world that is simultaneously hyper-connected and woefully unconnected. Yet, to establish the legitimacy of this emerging cultural paradigm, it is essential to thoroughly examine its sensibilities across multiple works. Accordingly, there remains a wide avenue for future research on the subject.

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