

The Influence of Visual Narrative in Generating Humour in Tragedy: A Study of the American Sitcom BoJack Horseman

Prachi Behrani¹, Dr. Vinaya Kumari²

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, English, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Uttar Pradesh, India

²Associate Professor, English, Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The American Tragicomedy BoJack Horseman employs different aspects of narrative while also subverting it at the same time. The narrative has been specifically used to produce laughter through elements of humour and comedy in an otherwise tragic tale. Created by Raphael Bob- Waksberg, the show dives deep into the life of its protagonist- an anthropomorphic horse, BoJack Horseman and various other human and animal characters. This study seeks to delineate into the satirical and subversive aspect of humour in order to understand how humour in a visual narrative serves to make the American Sitcom more expressive, more interesting, easier to accept and moralistic. It also examines the linearity and the distortion of narrative as supplements to story- telling.

Keywords: Animation; Comedy; Popular Culture; Tragicomedy; Visual Studies

1. Introduction

Animation or sequential images in motion have known to exist from the late 19th century, reaching the Golden Age of American Animation in the early 20th century. One would usually associate the idea of cartoons mostly with children, due to the presence of colourful images, anthropomorphised animals and objects, immense exaggerations, super human capabilities etc. However, the range and the target audience of animated films, shows and sitcoms has increased largely over the years. In fact, there are a few animated forms of art, made specifically for adults, such as *The Simpsons*, *Rick and Morty*, *Big Mouth*, *Disenchantment*, *BoJack Horseman* etc. Esther Leslie, the author of *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, in an interview with George Souvlis, talks about the animated film, *Walter Benjamin* and his views on animation. She says, “Animation hits out against all restriction. Animation is subversive of order, of logic, of stasis, of all that would insist things are so and must be so.” (2018) In simpler words Animation is known to overthrow the general order of things.

2. BoJack Horseman and Narrative

The American Tragicomedy *BoJack Horseman* plays with different aspects of narratives while also subverting it at the same time. The narrative has been specifically used to produce laughter through elements of humour and comedy. Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, the show dives deep into the life of its protagonist- an anthropomorphic horse, *BoJack Horseman* and various other human and animal characters. One of the most interesting aspects of the show is finding animals and humans co- existing with each other with seemingly no form of difference or discrimination. Having a horse as the lead character battling issues concerning mental- health, relationship and work problems, alcohol addiction and a lot of self- loathing helps in both, alienating the audience from the dark place that the animal is in, and helping the viewers relate better. While the audience begins to connect with *BoJack*'s pain on one hand and lose themselves in his world, they are constantly reminded and distanced from the show on another, by the fact that he's not only an animal, but an animated character as well. The audience, somewhere, may even attain joy by the fact that they're not him. All the three theories of Humour, The Superiority Theory, the Release Theory and the Incongruity theory, come into play here. In line with Plato and Hobbe's Superiority Theory, the viewers laugh at *BoJack*'s supposed inferiority. They laugh because some of them assume themselves to be better than him considering his desolate state. Some who might relate with him, however, laugh at their own selves. Following humour's release Theory, associated with Freud, they seek to release pleasure from areas that have undergone repression. The laugh to seek refuge, using their joy as a mask to hide pain. Majorly, they laugh at the sheer absurdity of an animal having human tendencies, aligning with Schopenhauer's Incongruity theory. Their giggles sprout from a violation to the normal making

the tragic show, extremely humorous. Thus, giving him an animalistic appearance dehumanises him, makes the show easier and funnier to watch, and BoJack easier to like.¹

Going back to the age of Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse one might remember the Golden Age of Animation which also focussed on anthropomorphised animals. However, the viewers may wonder why BoJack, is a horse and no other animal? To answer this question one may look at various metaphors and dig for connection. As the old metaphor goes, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink it.”, meaning that one cannot force a person to do something they do not wish to do, even if it is for their own well-being. Similarly, BoJack, a ‘horseman’ throughout the show is advised, told and suggested to become a better person, to give-up drinking, to stop putting the blame of his misfortunes on others. But the viewers only see him going to a rehabilitation centre when he’s ready to build a life for himself. When he actually wanted to drink the metaphorical water, and stop drinking alcohol to begin a new life for himself and establish better relationships with those around him. BoJack until then, never realised his own errors or the flaw in his behaviour. He was a self-righteous person, who could never (as the metaphor states) “get off his high *horse*”. Another saying related to horses that could be related to BoJack’s life is – “To shut the stable door after the horse has bolted.”- meaning that there’s no point in thinking about the prevention after the damage has been done. This is something, which BoJack undergoes time and again. He’s shown constantly hurting people, and then regretting, loathing and wondering if he’s a horrible person, but surprisingly making no change in his path. He runs in circles, unlike a horse who would run straight ahead. In the tenth episode of season three titled, *It’s you*, BoJack has a fight with his human friend Todd (who lives on the couch of BoJack’s house, rent-free) and begins to apologise, to which Todd says, “You can’t keep doing this! You can’t keep doing shitty things and then feel bad about yourself as if that makes it okay! You need to be better!” Thus, reminding BoJack that this constant running in circles and repenting after the deed was done, was doing him and others no good. The metaphor, “A tough as a horse” might imply that individuals who may be physically strong, need not necessarily be mentally fit as well. They might be struggling with their own inner demons, just as BoJack was. This alcoholic Horseman, is the personification of the popular joke, in which a horse enters a bar and the bartender asks him “Why the long face”. BoJack is also known to say ‘neigh’ to most advices. Using familiar metaphors to signify a desolate horse’s humanistic tendencies adds to wit of the sitcom, strengthening the prevalent humour.

Not only BoJack, the show’s narrative has various creative takes on other animals as well. Mr. Peanutbutter, BoJack’s friend and former rival is an anthropomorphic dog. Multiple times in the show, he is seen drinking from a dog- bowl, has a trunk full of balls which would be a dream- come true for any dog and his car’s license plate reads ‘Good boy’, something one would tell their pet dog for behaving well or fetching balls. He’s always excited to have people around him and his ears spike up at the sound of a door bell. While dogs are known to

¹ Morreall, John. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. State University of New York Press, 1987.

be loyal, Mr. Peanutbutter is shown cheating on his partner, Pickles – a pug, with his ex-fiancé Diane, a human. Princess Carolyn, BoJack's agent and former love interest is a Persian Cat. She has a scratching pole at her gym and a mouse hanging on a string on her treadmill to keep her motivated. She gets distracted by yarn and says 'aw, fish' as her pen words. All of this alluding to the love of cats for mice, fish, yarn balls and their habit of scratching. In fact, she also claims that she would always land on her feet. Even if she didn't look like a cat, her behavioural traits are sure to remind one of a feline. The Cow Waitress is seen serving cow products multiple times in the show. Not only does she give steak to a customer (who apologises) but is also seen raising her hand and pumping fresh milk if her customers asked for it. Pinky the Penguin, owns a publishing house, alluding to Penguin Publishers quite directly. A hammerhead shark is shown to be a construction worker who hammers nails with his own head. A cock is shown to deliver wake-up calls every morning and saying 'Good-Morning' as he runs past BoJack's house. One of the most interesting puns could be when at the funeral of BoJack's former friend and director- Herb Kazzaz, a ferret is shut down from conversation and told "I'll let you get back to your business.", and gestured to a group of other ferrets standing aside. The viewers are sure to see the intelligent pun in this one, since a group of ferrets, is called a 'business'. The show has such references in abundance. The narrative not only ensures the alienation and the building of strong connection but also keeps the audience entertained with interesting references, puns which result in great humour. It is interesting to note that first the show gives human like characteristics to animals, and when the people begin to resonate with these animals as other humans, the show reminds us that they are animals and not humans to alienate us from their pain. Then juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar, again, aligns with the Incongruity Theory of humour, presenting an absurd but relatable sight.

Anthropomorphised animals are not a new concept however, and have been a part of the literary narrative since the times immemorial. The ancient Indian collections of *The Panchatantra*, *The Jataka Tales* and a lot more stories use animals to put forth a certain fable. Probably, because these tales were meant mostly for children, and it becomes easier for them to understand a particular moral lesson. It is because of these tales that certain characteristics have been attributed to particular animals; dogs are loyal, owls are wise and fox are clever and a lot more. George Orwell's 1945 novella *Animal Farm* presents an allegorical representation of animals to criticise the dictatorial regimes following the Russian Revolution. The novel is a satire on the way power leads one to corruption and oppression. By using animals instead of humans, the novel puts forth critical ideas without inhibitions and makes it easier for people to see the flaw in their action. Watching and learning from animals is easier to gulp than looking at humans committing such mistakes. This method works as a moral lesson without seeming like a personal attack on a person or a group. Satire, as discussed by Rachel E. Hile, works to create a certain 'allegorical connection' to the real-world using allusions, symbolism and analogy. By presenting serious matters through humorous representations, the fables are better grasped. (2017)

Dialogue is an interesting aspect of narrative and helps in understanding the traits of various characters. BoJack Horseman plays around with this aspect as well by having two episodes, one completely devoid of dialogue, and one made up entirely with a monologue. Talking about the format of the narrative in an interview, Raphael Bob- Waksberg states, "One way

that I really enjoy telling stories or thinking about telling stories is through format. What is the means in which we are telling this story?” (2020) The two landmark episodes that I’d be referring to here, are – *Fish out of the Water* (Season 3, Episode 4) and *Free Churros* (Season 5, Episode 6)

In *Fish out of Water*, BoJack is sent to an underwater film festival to promote his new film in the Pacific Ocean City. BoJack understands that speaking underwater is inhibited due to the helmet the people were wearing. He is uncomfortable to find the former director of the film present there too, who he was responsible for getting fired. He wishes to apologise to her but fails due to the inability to speak. He tries to write a note but is unable to give it to her. He also helps a male seahorse give birth and is shown envying their family life. However, in the end he realises that all he had to do to talk, was press a button on the helmet. The no- dialogue narrative of the episode is sure to make the viewers resonate with BoJack, and the silence that one hears underwater. His inability to speak could also allude to the lack of communication he has been facing all his life. The button on the helmet may represent that there’s always a way to communicate with others, and all we have to do is find the right way. Despite being devoid of dialogue the episode tickles the funny bone of the viewers through the visual form of slapstick comedy where actions are exaggerated, dialogues are not needed and humour is produced through blatant body movements. (Fowkes, 2012, 187-96)

Free Churro, on the other hand, is full of a complete monologue of BoJack delivering a eulogy on his mother’s funeral. After the long twenty minute speech, he opens the casket and gets shocked. He takes out a pamphlet from his coat, looks at the fellow mourners, only to realise that they are lizard people. The episode ends with him asking if he was in the right funeral parlour. Meaning, that the cathartic monologue when he could finally express himself and talk about his relationship with his mother, was talking to a complete stranger. Funny, because once in the speech to express his anger towards her he says, “The woman at the Jack in the box didn’t even know me!” Quite literally. This ironic representation is familiar to the viewer, but oblivious to BoJack, making the audience laugh first at their own superiority of knowing something which the protagonist didn’t, second due to the sheer irony of the situation.

The show has a non- linear narrative with constant flashbacks to the past. Though a lot of episodes keep showing historical narratives in the past, a particular episode is located completely in the memories. *Time’s Arrow*, (Season 4, Episode 11), through the memories of BoJack’s mother Beatrice Horseman shows the audience how and why she became so bitter and crass. Beatrice was bullied as a child, lived in an extremely patriarchal house-hold where her parents did not share a happy relationship, and was pushed towards a romantic suitor at a party by her father, in the interest of good business. It is interesting to note that in her memory of the party, she could only recall her parents, the suitor and Butterscotch Horseman’s face (whose child she gets pregnant with and eventually marries), while the rest of the guests appeared faceless. This shows how memory works, in fragments, we remember what is important to us, while everything else is a fuzzy blur. After her marriage turns unhappy, Beatrice begins to blame BoJack. She has extremely high expectations of him being worth enough for her to put up with his father. She even points out once, that he wasn’t worth it. A montage occurs to show the next three decades of her life, ending to show Henrietta a

housemaid in dialogue with Beatrice. Henrietta's face is covered with harsh scribbles and violent lines, as if Beatrice had tried hard to suppress the memory of her face, as if it was a face that Beatrice did not want to remember or think about, even in her dreams, and she had succeeded. This could be because of the fact that years ago, Butterscotch Horseman had confessed to her that he had made Henrietta pregnant, and Henrietta too reveals to Beatrice the way he was extremely nice to her. Beatrice is surprised by the fact that he tried to woo Henrietta exactly how he had tried to woo her years ago. The scene cuts to Beatrice in hospital with Henrietta while she's giving birth, then to a flashback of Beatrice in the hospital about to give birth, then to another flashback of Beatrice as a child sleeping while her servant is taking away her doll, then back to her giving birth to BoJack and again to Henrietta giving birth to a child who we later realise is Hollyhock. The oscillations between the memories continue only to show Beatrice's doll thrown into the fire by her father when she was a young girl, and Beatrice walking away with Henrietta's child without even letting her hold it. The juxtapositions show both of them losing their children, Henrietta is shown screaming and crying with the lines on her face constantly increasing to fill up the screen and Beatrice is shown crying for her doll as a little girl. Her father tells her not to be consumed by her womanly emotions and that all of this would be a pleasant memory someday. Clearly, not the case. Beatrice's harsh life experiences turned her into an uncaring mother, bitter and a stoic woman. The flashback narrative ends with her slightly recognising BoJack amidst her partial memory loss.

Ruthie (Season 4, Episode 9) is another episode which utilises the narrative to its fullest. Essentially an imagination, this episode functions as a dream narrative. Princess Carolyn daydreams about her future descendent, a young cat girl called Ruthie, talking about her in class. While on one hand Princess Carolyn proceeds with her day, Ruthie continues to talk about it simultaneously in her class. Carolyn has a bad day; she gets to know that she has miscarried again, what she had believed to be her family heirloom was a fake necklace, she fires her amazing assistant Judah and she breaks up with her boyfriend. When BoJack calls her to tell her about his terrible day, she who had one of the worst days possible states that every time she has a bad day, she imagines her great- great- great- great granddaughter talking about her in the future and she feels better. Thus by not only fitting a dream narrative in the show, but also addressing its importance in the actual narrative plays a major role in helping the audience to relate with the characters. She is not only giving advice to BoJack, but also to her audience, appearing more real. The viewers are sure to share her pain and feel the intensity of pain that she would have. The oscillation between the present, the future, the present again, the past and again the past is majorly painful but mildly funny due to its absurdity.

Another important aspect of narrative that we see- is that of a show within a show. BoJack Horseman is known to be a popular actor of the 90's show *Horsin' Around*. This sitcom is used in the show as a contrast with his own life full of bad relationships, a lot of self-loathing and extreme nihilism. While in the show, he had a cheerful family life with happy endings, his life, in real, was full of complexities, broken relationships, and the need of a family life. It isn't a straight line of series ending in a happily ever after, but a curve of problems, solutions and a series of positive and negative moments in life. Thus, proving to be more real than any other show. This contrast also helps us relate to the characters better and

believe that they are not made-up cartoons but characters which undergo real life problems and character developments just as we do. However, constant parallelisms with the show and BoJack's life humorously announce how different real life is from television shows thus alienating the viewers from the show.

Another way in which the show plays with narrative, is by showing how simple narrations get distorted. To explain this, I would like to quote a few examples. While guiding the printer to make a certain banner, Mr. Peanutbutter gives a series of instructions. However, instead of understanding the instructions, the printer writes them on the banner itself. A few instances of the same are: banners stating, "Congrats Diane and Mr. Peanut Butter, Peanut Butter is one word.", "Happy Birthday Diane and Use a pretty Font", "Hooray for Woodchuck! And if he doesn't win write sorry woodchuck.", "Welcome home little bro! Oh, also I have agroupon." It is to be noted that these errors are never pointed out in the show and just act as visual jokes only visible to the audience paying utmost attention. The show also breaks the fourth wall in a very subtle manner. In the fifth episode of the fifth season, Princess Carolyn is shown passing a t-shirt stall in a flea market. The graphic t-shirts have various phrases written on them, which an Opossum keeps holding up and flashing for less than a second. The audience, in order to read the phrases, would pause, obviously. Then comes the last graphic t-shirt which states, "Stop Pausing and Just Watch the Show. Not only does it build a better viewer-sitcom relation but also makes the viewers laugh at the subtle humour employed. The audience laughs at the sheer stupidity of the printer who is unable to comprehend simple instructions, and at the absurdity of the funny banners. The flashing t-shirt phrases make the viewers pause due to their extremely fast pace. The moment the reader stops, he is asked to stop pausing. This incongruity with the normal breaks a wall between the viewer and the show, resulting in countless chuckles.

Apart from the public narrative, *BoJack Horseman* also deals with the theme of personal narrative. In the episode *Stupid Piece of Shit* (Season 4, Episode 6). The episode begins with BoJack in his bed with a train of thoughts. His mind spirals into a series of emotions and thoughts which call him 'a stupid piece of shit'. It is to be noted that his thoughts consist not only of words but of disoriented and distorted cartoon-like images. His daughter tells him that they need milk, and that mere piece of information makes him worry about a series of things. He begins to form permutations and combinations wondering if he should let Hollyhock (his daughter) go alone, or should he be the one going to fetch milk. He worries that his mother would poison his daughter against him. BoJack spends the entire day berated by his thoughts that he has no control over. He is constantly worried about hurting everyone he loves and wonders if he deserves the love that he receives from Hollyhock. He often tells his intrusive thoughts to quiet down, but they don't. In fact, towards the end of the episode his daughter reveals to him that sometimes she has a voice inside her head that tells her that people hate her, and they're right to do so. She asks him, "That voice, the one that tells you you're worthless and stupid and ugly? It goes away, right?" BoJack lies, and says that they do. The episode does a great job to put forth the struggles that people with mental-health issues go through every day. Often, struck by intrusive thoughts, we can't push away certain emotions, or beliefs no matter how hard we try. And there's always a voice inside, telling us that we're not good enough, or in BoJack's words- 'a stupid piece of shit.' What it also does, is normalise mental-health issues. Though BoJack might have believed that he was

the only one with intrusive self-loathing thoughts, his young daughter felt the same way. Which could help the audience to not only relate with the characters but to also understand that they're never alone. Not only does the show portray mental-health issues but also provides relief and makes them re-affirms their belief, that they're not alone.

Another episode which focuses on the internal narrative, is *Good Damage* (Season 6, Episode 10). The episode talks about Diane, a friend of BoJack, and her struggle with depression and to write her memoir. Her thought process while writing is shown through images in her mind. In her imagination, she is portrayed like a cartoon character. She also seems to have trouble recalling the order of certain incidents from her life due to her anti-depressant medicines. She's constantly distracted. Her memory appears distorted and foggy. However, she believes that by writing a memoir about her struggles with abuse, neglect and depression, she would be able to put her damage and trauma to good use by helping other little girls feel like they aren't alone. Which is something the show does extremely well. By putting forth the struggles of different characters and their stories with a unique narrative style, the show makes sure that it touches the heart of as many people as it can. Almost everyone can find themselves in one or the other characters. However, the incidents showcased never put forth a particular solution, but only instances to connect from. There exists a gap that the show expects us to fill for ourselves, which is truly different for everybody. . As Iser puts it, "Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The "stars" in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable." (1972, 279) Meaning, that we are not the only ones reading a text, the text also reads us and helps in filling the gaps in ourselves. "The opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections-for filling in the gaps left by the text itself." (1972, 279) The scenes would touch different people differently, also every time a person re-watches the same scene again, the impact created would be different. The stars, or the scenes, are fixed, our opinions and assumptions are what vary. Some gaps fill overtime, and some need a lot more filling to be done. The show is here, to assist.

The most important aspect of the narrative to be seen in the show is the way it uses humour. Based on the issues of mental-health the show is sure to get too dark and heavy for the viewers to handle. But by the subtle use of humour by means of animal puns, slapstick comedy, distorted banners and side jokes, as mentioned earlier, the show makes the episodes easier for the audience to take in. The humour provides relief and a mechanism to cope with pain to the audience when the woeful sights get too much for the audience to carry. Freud in his book *-Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) states,

"Tendentious jokes are able to release pleasure even from sources that have undergone repression. If, the overcoming of external obstacles can in this way be traced back to the overcoming of internal inhibitions and repressions, we may say that tendentious jokes exhibit the main characteristic of the joke work-that of liberating pleasure by getting rid of inhibitions more clearly than any other of the developmental stages of jokes" (1905, 115)

In simpler words, certain jokes are created with the aim to release emotional energy and convert it from pain to pleasure. This aligns with the Relief or the Release theory of humour,

and shows how laughter helps in the release of built up emotions during testing times. As Avner Ziv observes,

“Humour exposes ugly human phenomena to mockery, in the hope of thereby eliminating them. Man makes a mockery of man. In his efforts at changing and improving mankind, man turns matters he thinks grave into absurdities. He does this sometimes with delicate casualness, sometimes with disrespect, and sometimes with ferocity. The laughter that derives from the perception of absurdity reforms the world.” (1988. 356-60)

Meaning, that humour may also work as a social corrective to show the people what is absurd and must be reformed. The use of humour keeps a text, which could've turned very morbid, into a light and a relatable piece of art.

3. Conclusion

The investigation of the specific episodes mentioned in the show may lead one to delineate that the juxtaposition of dark and light moments, of tragedy and comedy, of animals and humans, of sense and non- sense, of dialogue and silence, of past and the future and of pain and pleasure, makes this show an interesting watch for people trying to understand the human psychology and the narrative that surrounds it. However the show is sure to appeal everyone differently, and every time a person re-watches it, he would undergo a new experience depending upon the phase of life as he's in. The lines are ours to connect, and the gaps, ours to fill.

Acknowledgment

This paper is an output of the enthralling experience that the audience undergoes while watching the captivating American Sitcom- BoJack Horseman created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg.

References

- An oral history OF BOJACK horseman: Creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg Talks ORIGINS, Landmark episodes, and the Series' Legacy.* Rotten Tomatoes Movie and TV News An Oral History of BoJack Horseman Creator Raphael BobWaksberg Talks Origins Landmark Episodes and the Series Legacy Comments. (2020). Retrieved September 30, 2021, from <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/an-oral-history-of-BoJack-horseman-creator-raphael-bob-waksberg-talks/>.
- Behrens, L., Rosen, L. J., & Ziv, A. (2018). Humor as a Social Corrective. In *Writing and reading across the curriculum.* essay, Pearson.
- For a MARXIST poetics of Science: An interview with esther Leslie.* Versobooks.com. (2018). Retrieved September 30, 2021, from <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3550-for-a-marxist-poetics-of-science-an-interview-with-esther-leslie>.
- Fowkes, K. A. (2012). The Silence of Slapstick: The Physical Comedy of Silent Cinema [Review of *Slapstick Comedy*, by T. Paulus & R. King]. *Studies in American Humor*, 25, 187–196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42573647>
- Freud, S., & Strachey, J. (2001). *Jokes and their relation to The Unconscious: (1905)*. Vintage.
- HILE, R. E. (2017). Spenser's satire of indirection: affiliation, allusion, allegory. In *Spenserian Satire: A Tradition of Indirection* (pp. 38–63). Manchester University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wn0s03.6>
- Iser, W. (1972). The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach. *New Literary History*, 3(2), 279–299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468316>
- Morreall, J. (1987). *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. State University of New York Press.
- R. Bob-Waksberg, N. Bright, S. A. Cohen, B. Fetter, J. Wiseman, W. Arnett, A. Paul, & A. Weil (Executive Producers), *BoJack Horseman*. Tornante Television; Boxer vs. Raptor; ShadowMachine.