"Back in the Nineties I was in a Very Famous TV Show": BoJack Horseman and Post-2010 America's Nostalgia[1]

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Abstract

BoJack Horseman, an animated series launched in 2014 by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, achieved massive popularity for its exploration of complex issues such as addiction and mental illness through funny anthropomorphic animals and its references to 90s popular culture. Although *BoJack Horseman* seems to focus on how an individual attempts to reconcile with their past, a closer examination reveals that the struggle is not only personal, but also collective. This paper argues that nostalgia in *BoJack Horseman* reflects the crisis of American culture in the 2010s. Moreover, as a postmodern text, *BoJack Horseman* can be regarded as both a poison and a cure for nostalgia. In dealing with the glory of the nineties, the show surprisingly dismantles the museum-ized and invented past, and at the same time persuades audiences not to fixate on finding an authentic meaning in life, but rather to embrace the flux of the postmodern world.

Keywords: adult animation, nostalgia, American popular culture, the nineties

2010s America: Political Turbulence and the Longing for a Lost Era.

Definitions of nostalgia have changed throughout history. The word is a combination of *nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia originally referred to the medical symptoms experienced by Swiss soldiers who were far away from their native land. In the twentieth century, the word was no longer used in a medical context, as its meaning shifted to denote a sense of longing for a lost time. This theme is prevalent in myriad modernist works, including Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1931) and James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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(1922). One explanation for the modernist obsession with the past is that nostalgia is a response to modernity and is often regarded as an anti-modern sentiment. This is because modernity is commonly associated with an orientation towards future progress, as stated by Bruno Latour (1993) in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

> The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers. Ancients and Moderns (p. 10).

The notion of remembering the past as unchanging and stable is thus essential to nostalgia. The term is also understood as a reaction against the downsides of progress, in which the advent of capitalism and modern technology have alienated people from the possibility of leading a meaningful life. Because the rapid pace of progress has rendered modern life empty and fragmented, people reminisce and imagine the past as a home where things remain unified and intact. This yearning is, therefore, linked to the socio-political atmosphere of the twentieth century, where two world wars and economic collapses left people with a sense of disillusionment with institutions and civilization as a whole. Stuart Tannock, in "Nostalgia Critique" (1995), argues that a closer examination of nostalgic sentiments throughout Western history reveals that nostalgia does not only perpetuate a sense of continuity, but also emphasizes temporal disruption as a vital part.

> In the rhetoric of nostalgia, one finds three key ideas: a prelapsarian world (the Golden Age, the childhood home, the country); a lapse (a cut, a catastrophe, a separation or sundering, the Fall); and a present, postlapsarian world (a world felt to be lacking, deficient or oppressive)[22] (pp. 456-457).

Tannock's (1995) argument about "a lapse" in the conception of nostalgia sheds light on how nostalgia can be perceived in multiple ways—an idea that Svetlana Boym (2001) pushes forward in *The Future of Nostalgia*. In her book, Boym identifies two types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective. While restorative nostalgia seeks to keep the past frozen and unchanging, reflective nostalgia focuses on "other potentialities and unfulfilled promises of modern happiness" (Boym, 2001, p. 342). Therefore, reflective nostalgia does not glorify the past as an ideal refuge from the present, but rather as a place where things could have been done differently for a better present.

Nostalgia for the nineties in American culture during the 2010s aligns with Tannock's (1995) definition of a lapse and the longing for a prelapsarian world. America in the 2010s grappled with the aftermath of consecutive crises. It is clear that the glory of the "American Empire" dimmed towards the end of the 2000s, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack. However, once-dominant American power, which had shaped the world for a century, grew fainter as the country approached the twilight of its global influence in the 2010s. Once perceived as the permanent world power after the Cold War, America faced new threats to its military and economic dominance from China. China's plan to connect Asia and Europe through massive land infrastructure demonstrates the country's attempt to position itself as "the future epicenter of global economic power, while building military bases in the South China Sea that would sever the US military encirclement of the sprawling Eurasian landmass" (McCoy, 2017, p. 23). Faced with these gigantic threats from China, Obama's strategy was not one of aggressive competition against the Eastern empire. On the contrary, Obama's presidency focused on maintaining stability in a country experiencing decline.

In Adam Quinn's article "The Art of Declining Politely: Obama's Prudent Presidency and the Waning of American Power" (2011), the decline of America under Obama is deemed "for real" (p. 804). Quinn (2011) points out that the waning of American power was caused not only by the power shift to the "global East" (p. 806) but also by its fiscal failure. The subprime crisis that unfolded between 2007 and 2010 cost America a quarter of its national net worth. Quinn further elaborates that the bursting of the housing bubble and the country's "rising public healthcare commitments" with the adoption of Obamacare resulted in a financial outlook that can be described as a "downright apocalypse," with "deficits of $US 1.6 trillion and $US 1.3 trillion in 2009 and 2010, respectively" (Quinn, 2011, p. 806). Consequently, the subprime crisis destroyed the American dream of nuclear family life because its dire consequences impacted both housing in America and spending among the American people.

Unfortunately, the subprime crisis was not the last crisis of the decade. The national wound deepened even further from 2010 onwards with the WikiLeaks scandal. Although the rapid growth of technology has boosted American national security in cyberwarfare, the leaks of confidential information between the US government and other world leaders weakened trust in America both domestically and internationally. From 2010 onwards, WikiLeaks distributed several classified documents regarding partnerships and trade negotiations between America and other countries, as well as the release of Chelsea Manning's Afghan and Iraq War Logs. Having worked as an intelligence analyst, Manning had access to confidential databases of the US military and decided to pass information forward to WikiLeaks. One of the leaked pieces of information included a clip of American helicopters firing on

what was claimed to be armed fighters, resulting in the deaths of two Reuters reporters.

In his book *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*, Alfred W. McCoy (2017) criticizes America in the wake of the WikiLeaks events, stating that the scandals exposed the "foundations of the world order that rested significantly on national leaders who served Washington as loyal subordinate elites but were, in reality, a motley collection of autocrats, aristocrats, and uniformed thugs" (p. 61). Apart from the heated debate on national security versus privacy among researchers, the scandal significantly affected the trust American people had in their government. According to a 2022 survey, "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2020" by the Pew Research Center, average trust in the US government during the 2010s, which encompassed the Obama presidency and the time of the leaks, sank to its lowest at 10%, while trust in the preceding administration averaged around 35%. Hence, American people in the 2010s lived in a world where their past glory and ideals were, once again, shattered.

Nineties' Aesthetics in *BoJack Horseman* and 2010s Media's Nostalgia for Itself

In the past few years, we have witnessed the rise of "a nostalgia boom in popular media," in which the aesthetics of the past have become *au courant* again. Digital photography is obsessed with Polaroid cameras and vintage filters. Robin Givhan (2019) wrote an article, "Why Are We So Obsessed With 90s Fashion? The Trend That Just Won't Die," in *Elle* magazine, pointing out how nineties pop culture has permeated contemporary aesthetics, ranging from runways to moving images. Givhan explains that the obsession with grunge fashion or pastel slip dresses has much to do with modern-day ennui. The post-9/11 era is a period of turbulence, and people are now looking back at the nineties as a sweet refuge: "On the business side, the nineties were filled with possibility. Fashion's traditional pop brands got serious, got their house in order, and became publicly traded companies or hooked their wagon onto a big corporation. A lot of struggling designers got a taste of the sweet life back then" (Givhan, 2019, paras. 22). In the motion picture industry, television has recently remade nineties classics such as *Star Wars* or *Dune* or made new shows that appropriate nineties aesthetics, as seen in *Stranger Things*. Amid the craze for the nineties, *BoJack Horseman* made its debut as the first original animated series by Netflix, when the popularity of adult animated shows was dwindling.

However, what sets *BoJack Horseman* apart from other shows is that the plot itself is nostalgic, as nostalgia and longing for the past form the core of the show. The titular protagonist constantly yearns for the nineties, when he was a Hollywood celebrity after his debut in the sitcom *Horsin' Around*. The reference to sitcoms in *BoJack Horseman* is significant for understanding nostalgia, as the nineties were undoubtedly the golden decade of situational comedy television

shows, after television became an essential commodity in every American household.

Noel Murray (2016) elaborates on how the nineties marked the golden era of American sitcoms, with *The Simpsons*, first airing in December 1989, as the pioneer, and *Friends* (1994) as a symbol of nineties comedy. Murray argues that the use of three-camera cinematography in nineties comedies was "smart and amiable in ways that the edgier modern single-cams often fail to be. They functioned as a more polished version of the workplace and family sitcoms that sprung up in the early '70s" (Murray, 2016). Furthermore, the structure and characteristics of television shows allow the audience to explore multiple dimensions of nostalgia (Niemeyer & Wentz, 2014, pp. 129-130). In the article "Nostalgia Is Not What it Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series", Niemeyer and Wentz (2014) explain that television is a crucial object in nostalgic studies due to its seriality, as well as the use of "flashback episodes, where the characters remember the series' past" (p. 135). By reminding the audience of the series' past or other related cultural jokes from the past, television shows are considered nostalgic in themselves.

Similarly, the format of *BoJack Horseman* can be regarded as an appropriation, if not a satire, of nostalgia towards a renowned sitcom of the nineties, *Friends*, in which the story revolves around friendships among different kinds of individuals in a big city. The audience would also notice cameos of nineties celebrities such as Zach Braff, Jessica Biel, or Naomi Watts, as well as nineties movies with a twist of animal puns, such as *Krill and Grace*, a parody of *Will and Grace*. Moreover, the homage to sitcoms of the nineties lies specifically in the cinematography of the show itself. *BoJack Horseman* is portrayed in a stylistic choice resembling sitcoms from the nineties. A constant switch between a wide-angle and a close-up shot is a result of a production technique called the "Three-Camera System," which is one of the main features of sitcoms (Dalton & Linder, 2005, p. 88). In *BoJack Horseman*, the wide-angle perspective resembling a wide-angle main camera is constantly used in the main settings, such as BoJack's living room. At the same time, the cinematography jumps to close-up shots of characters in the same settings before moving back to the prior wide angle. The function of a wide-angle camera is to highlight the overall atmosphere and antics of the characters, while close-up shots are often used to highlight the expressions or reactions of the characters.

Figure 1: *A living room shot in Friends*

Figure 2: *A living room shot in BoJack Horseman*

The settings also invoke the atmosphere of sitcoms, with a focus on BoJack's living room where every main character gathers together, following a sitcom trope of friendship in the city. Therefore, the form of the show brings back a familiar atmosphere and inevitably triggers the audience's nostalgia, as mentioned in several articles, including Patrick Marlborough's article in *Vice*. In "Why 'BoJack' Is a Show About the Feedback Loop of Memory", Marlborough (2017) interviewed the director of the show and wrote about the nostalgic elements in the show itself. He points out the significance of the show's theme song, which "condenses this atavistic desire to criticize and praise sitcoms into a 90-second gag: 'laughin' and livin' and lovin' a lot, every day is a dreeeeam!'".

However, the appropriation of nineties sitcoms does not merely cater to the audience's desire for childhood entertainment. It is also a reflection of the media's longing for its past glory. Niemeyer (2014) elaborates on the media's nostalgic desire, explaining that the incorporation of the past is a tool "through which media can be used as ersatz stand-ins for former rituals, feelings, or past, without actually replicating them exactly. The repetition and reiteration of past aesthetics in a digital practice might also indicate a new kind of ritual and the habits that come along with it" (p. 12). Her argument resonates with the contemporary period where digital entertainment has completely replaced analog forms. In the wake of Netflix and a swarm of other platforms, broadcast networks are in decline, with an increasing age gap between television and online content viewers. Television attracts fewer millennials and teenagers, whose preferred platforms are online. The decline of the television industry is so severe that the only solution for television sales is to include digital platforms (Koblin & Maheshwari, 2018). Furthermore, the very nature of television itself has to do with lost time. Amy Holdsworth in *Television, Memory, and Nostalgia* stated that the serialization and rerunning of television "generates our obsession with commemoration and anniversaries, through its repetition and continual re-narrativization of grand historical narratives, for example, of world wars and world cups" (Holdsworth, 2011, p. 2).

At the same time, television contributes to what is called "amnesiac culture" due to its inability to archive everything. The constant stream of content

in this visual medium, Holdsworth argues, has propagated a culture of forgetting, as some content is lost forever. The theme of amnesia and the attempt to recover lost time are also prevalent in *BoJack Horseman*. While television shows and the television itself are regarded as representations of objects from the past, in the first episode of *BoJack Horseman*, the audience sees the opening sequence of *Horsin' Around*, a show BoJack once starred in, on a videotape with a lot of image noise. Throughout the entire show, BoJack repeatedly plays the grainy videos of his old shows and recites his lines while trying to make sense of the past, some of which he has completely forgotten. Thus, BoJack's amnesia is discussed in tandem with the object he adores the most: video tapes of his old shows. Moreover, the reproduction of the stylistics reflects television's nostalgia for itself by reimagining its glory days, and at the same time, the analog quality in a contemporary digital present emphasizes that television is a product of an obsolete analog world. In this way, the show not only engages with nostalgia as a theme, but also as a commentary on the nature of television and media itself, and their role in shaping our collective memory and cultural identity.

The media's nostalgia for itself can be traced back to the show's character format as well. One striking element in *BoJack Horseman* is the contrast between its child-like form and its dark content. Although adult animated television shows are not new, what distinguishes *BoJack Horseman* from other adult series such as *South Park* or *Rick and Morty* is that the show appropriates a classic genre popular among children since the advent of motion pictures. While the style of illustration in many adult animated television shows, such as *South Park* or *King of the Hill*, is often crude or grotesque, *BoJack Horseman* portrays troubling themes through funny-looking talking animals.

The use of talking animals is a classic form of narrative that can be traced back to the days of Aesop's fables. The anthropomorphic animals in the fables represent human traits and flaws, and aim to teach children moral lessons. The appearance of animals in moving images began with Eadweard Muybridge's invention of the Zoopraxiscope, a device used to project moving images of a galloping horse in 1879. The Zoopraxiscope had an impact on early animated shows, which often featured animals or attempted to reanimate animals (Lippit, 2000, p. 185). *BoJack Horseman*'s use of anthropomorphic animals is also nostalgic in that it pays homage to *Looney Tunes*, a classic animated television program of the twentieth century. In an interview with the production team and Bob-Waksberg in *Vox*, the crew expressed their desire to add depth to animated shows by incorporating tropes from several classics, such as Lost in Translation. They also wanted to highlight the influence of animal cartoons, especially *The Looney Tunes* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, to "really focus on the visual comedy and the visual beauty" of *BoJack Horseman* (Framke, 2016).

Looney Tunes is considered a symbolic icon of cartoons in the analog era. Although Warner Bros began production in 1930, it reached the peak of its popularity again in the nineties when its animated movies were released as a move that threatened "the hegemony of Disney" (Grainge, 2007, p. 119). *BoJack Horseman*'s appropriation of talking animal characters yields the same effect as in *Looney Tunes*. According to Laura Schmuck in "Wild Animation: From the *Looney Tunes* to *BoJack Horseman* in Cartoon Los Angeles" (2018), the use of anthropomorphic animals in both shows is homely and unhomely at the same time, as the animals serve as a classic laughingstock and also remind the audience of the animality in humans: "the humanness we imagine in our true nature is not expressed unless humans are made unrecognizable" (Schmuck, 2018, p. 5).

Animal characters *in BoJack Horseman* are anthropomorphized; at the same time, it can be argued that the characterization of the show animalizes human characters. In spite of the dark and depressing message, *BoJack Horseman* employs tropes commonly used in *Looney Tunes* and old comedy. The audience can see slapstick humor and witty yet violent scenes in the series. However, the disturbing atmosphere is more intense in *BoJack Horseman* than the slapstick violence in *Looney Tunes* because *Looney Tunes'* use of animal characters and the exaggerated violence ridicule and hinder the impact of violence on the audience. In contrast, the demarcation between animal and human in *BoJack Horseman* is always unstable. While the characters contain complex emotions and foibles like humans, there are several scenes where these characters behave the way their species destines them to. For example, a dog character named Mr. Peanutbutter will drool and scratch himself once in a while, or BoJack himself neighs at times in the show. The return to animality when these characters are not aware of themselves reminds the audience of the animality within humans.At the same time, the blurred demarcation between animality and humanity in the show reminds the audience about how nostalgia is commonly conceived. Drawing upon the notion of "lapse" by Tannock (1995), nostalgia is considered a past untainted by discontent with the present. The prelapsarian world is considered the world we are unable to retrieve. By destabilizing the line between animals and humans, *BoJack Horseman* stresses the core of the show – our own instability and the instability of our memory of the past.

In fact, animal characters in *BoJack Horseman* can be traced back further than the time of *Looney Tunes*. Akira Lippit (2000) in *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* emphasizes the connection between nostalgia and animals. He coined the term "animetaphor" to analyze the relationship between animals and the moving image industry. Lippit (2000) argued that the re-animation of animals reflects modern malaise owing to the disappearance of a natural landscape (pp. 189-190). Therefore, the incorporation of wilderness in cinema,

to a certain extent, represents the attempt to recreate a pastoral atmosphere associated with the prelapsarian world. The world on the screen has become an escape from reality, where natural disasters and global warming have brought about the deterioration of the earth and the decline of wild animals, or what is called "techno-apocalypse." The 1990s was a time when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was established to monitor environmental impact. However, climate and environmental issues at that time were far from being labeled a crisis or becoming the center of the world's attention until the release of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2007. The 2010s were a decade when the world recognized the magnitude of environmental issues but struggled to find a sustainable solution. Therefore, the animal characters in *BoJack Horseman* symbolize a multifaceted nostalgia in the show, one towards the natural world and the other towards the golden era of cinema. *BoJack Horseman*, on one hand, reflects the yearning for the pastoral world; on the other hand, the settings of Los Angeles reflect a longing for the golden era of Hollywood, while the contemporary world is filled with myriads of competing entertainments, over which the internet reigns supreme.

Schmuck (2018) also points out that the setting of Los Angeles in *BoJack Horseman* is significant because the city is considered a *topoi* for memory and the cultural history of cinema: "Mechanisms of mass cultural memory are at work in the cinematic history of Los Angeles, and animals are the projections of those memories" (p.2). In the modern world where people are obsessed with online entertainment and social media platforms, the glorification of Hollywood culture is dying; Los Angeles has become a relic of the fading glory of the old world. Not only do the settings in *BoJack Horseman* focus on the sense of a prelapsarian past, but the design of the protagonist also stresses the obsession with the old times. The titular character is characterized as a horse, an animal associated with an obsolete world since the animal was at first linked with chivalric values and later on was transformed into animals for work and racing. In the series, BoJack was hired to star in a movie adaptation of a real racehorse during the 80s called Secretariat, a horse considered to be the greatest racehorse in history. In an era where interest in horseracing is waning, this reference to Secretariat helps underline the main theme of the show, which centers around nostalgia for the irrevocable past.

Apart from Hollywood culture in the Los Angeles landscape and the *Looney Tunes*-esque characters, *BoJack Horseman* reminds the audience of another soon-to-be distinct media, i.e., American gag comic strips. The use of gags in the show functions as comic relief to lighten the mood while, at the same time, paying homage to classic twentieth-century cartoons. The strongest characteristic of old cartoons seen in *BoJack Horseman* is the gag plot, meaning that there is no plot development of the whole show. Each episode ends in itself and thus can be watched separately and in a random sequence. The use of gag

plots was popularized in America by *Peanuts*, a strip that ran from 1950 to 2000. Despite the main storyline, *BoJack Horseman* is comprised of several episodes that function like gag shows, in which the story ends in itself without connecting to the main storyline. Moreover, it directly pays homage to *Peanuts* in "Downer Ending" (S1:E11) when BoJack struggles with writer's block and decides to contact his former co-star whom he sees as a substitute daughter, named Sarah Lynn. The encounter with Lynn leads to drug use and BoJack's series of hallucinations, one of which is an imaginary scene in which Diane, his close friend, becomes a character in a Charlie Brown-style setting.

Figure 3: *Diane as a character from Peanuts*

References to famous comic strips and television shows of the twentieth century, again, emphasize the show's nostalgia for a homely past, a safe haven for adults who are suffering from the turbulent present. Moreover, throughout the series, there are several scenes where the audience can notice the distortion of character design and the appropriation of techniques commonly used in the past. In the episode "Fish out of Water," the entire episode is silent. This episode received high praise from critics for its creativity and also its homage to classic cartoons and films of the past. In an article, "How BoJack Horseman's Gorgeous Underwater Episode Came Together, Explained by the Show's Creative Team" from *Vox*, Lisa Hanawalt, the show's production designer, points out the nostalgic qualities of this episode as it is "really tied into the history of animation in a nice way." (Framke, 2016). In the interview, Hanawalt recounts the production process, which aims to pay homage to several classics. The episode makes direct reference to a famous *Looney Tunes* cartoon called *Who Framed Roger Rabbit, w*hile the silence in the episode makes double references. The first homage is to silent animation, which is regarded as the first kind of moving image that gave birth to screen entertainment as we know it today. The second reference is to the famous 2003 movie titled *Lost in Translation*, which deals with the sense of alienation and loneliness resulting from an absence of

communication. In other words, BoJack Horseman is a visualization of cultural nostalgia. The series attempts to incorporate significant figures, movies, and cultural references to remind the audience of the past.

Another nostalgic device throughout the show is the use of watercolors. Despite being created and animated using computer graphics, there are several scenes in *BoJack Horseman* where characters are portrayed in watercolors with grain and blotches. This technique adds an element of nostalgia by evoking the aesthetics of traditional, hand-drawn animation from earlier periods of cartoon history. By incorporating watercolor visuals, the show connects with the audience's memories and associations with older, classic cartoons, further enhancing the theme of nostalgia that runs throughout the series.

Figure 4: *Mr. Peanutbutter and BoJack with a watercolor texture against a computer graphic background*

The distortion of character design in *BoJack Horseman* aligns with recent trends in digital photography. According to Dominik Schrey (2014) in "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation", there is a trend called "analog nostalgia," referring to the process of making digital photos look analog with grain and grittiness. He argues that these "textual ruins" (p. 35) are more than mere references to old technology; these splices and grit connote unique characteristics of each photo while simultaneously deepening appreciation by constructing an artificial "process of aging that has not happened yet, and never will happen" (Schrey, 2014, p. 35). Moreover, the obsession with the analogization of photos emphasizes the opposition between the "old/authentic and the new/superficial" (Schrey, 2014, p. 33). The process of creating artificial analog features in digital media can be similarly applied to the use of watercolor texture in *BoJack Horseman*. The digital characters rendered in watercolor are represented in a familiar texture that appears susceptible to decay. However, the artificial potential to decay makes the characters more relatable and even homely for the audience.

BoJack Horseman and Problematic American Nostalgia: Clinton's Third-way Politics and the Façade of Family Values

Longing for the nineties in *BoJack Horseman* extends beyond the realm of media. The characters in the show represent America's collective nostalgia for its past political climate. With the plot revolving around Hollywood in the nineties and the present, references to popular culture from that time are ubiquitous. Although there is no direct mention of legislative politics in the nineties, the show's characterization of the two protagonists, BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter, reflects and dismantles the myth of the glorious decade. America in the nineties was generally recognized as the sole world power after the Cold War, and the country is seen through retrospection as existing in a prelapsarian time, with the "lapse" being the 9/11 terrorist incident. However, *BoJack Horseman* emphasizes that the prelapsarian world of the nineties never truly existed. By exploring the complexities, flaws, and struggles of the characters, the show challenges the idea of an idealized past and underscores the notion that nostalgia can be a distorted and selective interpretation of history.

The root of nineties nostalgia, as explained by Colin Harrison (2010) in *American Culture in the 1990s*, is the common contemporary perception of the past. Harrison (2010) categorized the major perspectives towards the country in that period into four aspects: 1. The decade of Clinton, 2. The new economy, 3. The years of technology, and 4. The "End of History" (p. 4). The last perception clearly derives from Francis Fukuyama's seminal essay "The End of History?" (1989), in which he argues that there will be no further ideological clashes after the victory of America over the Soviet Union, representing "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (p. 4). Thanks to the assumption that the Cold War was the final ideological battle between world powers, America recognizes the nineties as a period of calm after turbulence. The optimism of the country also came with the presidency of Bill Clinton in 1993. Clinton's victory in the presidential election marked a shift for the Democrats, as he introduced a new kind of centric politics that seemed to work well with the post-Cold War atmosphere. His slogan "We will put Americans to work" emphasized his aspiration to merge the private and public sectors, and to prioritize the middle class. Clinton's privatization of public services was based on the assumption that there were certain things that "the private sector could do better" (Romano, 2006, p. 62).

Clinton's third-way politics seemed miraculous at first. His deregulation and tax cuts policies resulted in what is generally called "The New Economy." This model attempted to reconcile the opposing stances of the two political parties by encouraging collaboration between the government and business sectors. With intervention from the private sector and a boost in technology investment, the economy and population soared during the early years of

Clinton's presidency. According to the government census published in 2001, population growth skyrocketed between 1990 and 2000. The census reveals that "32.7 million people between 1990 and 2000 represent the largest census-to-census increase in American history" (Mackun & Perry, 2001, p. 1).

The impact of population growth also affected the collective ideology of American people in the nineties because the notion of family life is a foundation of American nationalism. The growth of family life during the Clinton years resonated with the evangelical values of the early settlers, who integrated a warm family life into the American dream since the early days. A typical image of a perfect American family always contains a middle-class heterosexual couple whose roles and duties are clearly separated. The husband is the breadwinner of the house while the wife wears a feminine dress and bakes at home. They live in a suburban house with a front lawn and a garage, surrounded by friendly, church-going neighbors. This perfect suburban family was fortified during the 50s as an ideological attack against the USSR. The famous "Kitchen Debate" at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 shows how the portrayal of this family life is imbued with American nationalist values against the perception of communist ideology as the destroyer of a warm and tender family life. The family ideology was passed forward to President Jimmy Carter during his 1976 presidential campaign against Gerald Ford.

In "Family Policy Past As Prologue: Jimmy Carter, the White House Conference on Families, and the Mobilization of the New Christian Right", Leo Ribuffo (2006) analyzes Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign and suggests how Carter devised an American family rhetoric to appeal to right-wing voters. Ribuffo cites Carter's statement: "entire history of the human race teaches us that the family unit is the best way to raise children, and the only solid foundation on which to build a strong nation" to illustrate Carter's attempt to bring traditional family values back in the context of the rise of feminism, the LGBTQ movement, as well as abortion rights, which conservatives saw as threats to American integrity (Ribuffo, 2006, p. 320). This ideal was on the rise again during the nineties, when President Clinton advocated the strengthening of American families as a pretext for his privatization policy. With a report from The New York Times article "Traditional Family Stabilized in the 90's, Study Suggests", the number of households with two parents and children increased while the divorce rate decreased in the 1990s' (Holmes, 1996). Therefore, the notion of conservative family life has become more deeply rooted in American culture in the past two decades of American history and has continued to contribute to contemporary nostalgia through an obsession with what is termed 'wholesome'. A *Vox* article titled "The Past 20 Years of Culture Wars, Explained by the Word "Wholesome" written by Constance Grady (2018) links the popularity of this loving internet phenomenon to traditional American family values. The word has become trendy since 2016 with the growth of memescape

on the Internet. Despite the absence of a clear definition, wholesome memes are roughly defined as "post-ironic, meaning that they convey love, affection, and genuine friendship by recontextualizing classic meme formats" (Framke, 2016). Grady explains the opposition between typical memes and wholesome memes that if conventional memes are considered a reflection of the frustrated society that seeks connection through mutual suffering, these wholesome memes that display warmth and care represent an attempt to foster connection through mutual love and compassion. Aja Romano (2018) in "The Rise of the Wholesome Internet Meme" discusses the development of wholesome memes and how the love for "cinnamon rolls and hopepunk" has extended to the realm outside the Internet world. They argue that this cultural trend of embracing wholesomeness and traditional values reflects a collective longing for a simpler time and the desire to find solace in the face of contemporary challenges. Swarmed by myriads of political crises, Internet users tend to shift away from cynical dark "dank" memes to something more heartwarming and homely. Therefore, the appropriation of the term can be considered as evidence of the collective discontent with the present moment and the desire to bring the values of the past back to the cynical present time.

BoJack Horseman tackles the concept of political nostalgia and American yearning for family ideals through its form and characterization. The use of the sit-com format not only harks back to mainstream entertainment of the past decade, but also reminds the audience of the typical subject-matter of those 90s sitcoms. In *BoJack Horseman*, BoJack made himself famous from the nineties sitcom titled *Horsin' Around*, which revolves around the family life of a horse as a surrogate father who adopts three children. The episodes in the show are about quotidian problems and reconciliation among family members. The soundtrack and settings of *Horsin' Around* appropriate those of sitcoms in the nineties and each episode seems to offer a moral lesson that family is a wholesome social unit and an integral part of American life. However, *BoJack Horseman* deconstructs the facade of that wholesome family life America tried to propagate by juxtaposing the life of the cast in the show and that in real life, especially the lives of BoJack and Sarah Lynn.

Throughout the whole show, BoJack tries to reconnect and make amends with those he wronged in the past. Among those characters, Sarah Lynn plays the biggest role and becomes the biggest source of conflict in the last season. In *Horsin' Around*, Sarah Lynn starred as Sabrina, the youngest child in the family and the one who is closest to The Horse, played by BoJack. In *BoJack Horseman*, The Horse's fatherly love and care for Sabrina in *Horsin' Around* is constantly juxtaposed with what happened behind the scenes. Although the two are close, BoJack is obviously a toxic surrogate father who is verbally abusive to Sarah-Lynn and abandons her when she needs him. Despite being abusive, BoJack tries his best to reconnect with her when she grows up and becomes a

celebrity. It is clear in the show that BoJack wants to keep Sarah-Lynn around and takes responsible for her mainly because taking care of her reminds him of his golden days as a sitcom star. He spends most of his free time binge-watching *Horsin' Around* with Sarah-Lynn and always talk to her as if she did not grow up and were still his co-star in *Horsin' Around*. The conversation between BoJack and Sarah-Lynn at times is either about what happened with other cast members in the show or what is taken from conversations between The Horse and Sabrina.

At first glance, these traces of *Horsin' Around* in *BoJack Horseman* seem to represent BoJack's longing to redeem his past and his love for his former co-star. However, the uncanny appearance of the past reflects BoJack's attempt to freeze Sarah-Lynn as an eternally young girl. BoJack's unusual yearning for the past culminates in his sexual advances toward Sarah Lynn. His affair with Sarah Lynn is both immoral and at the same time reflects BoJack's fetish with the past. BoJack's obsession with Sarah Lynn is not a result of his guilt or fatherly love, but rather a reflection of his attachment to the glory in the nineties as she is the sole remnant of his success and power. Similarly, fetishism with a selective past and glory has often fed the political rhetoric for right-wing political campaigns such as Donald Trump's successful motto "Make America Great Again". This motto utilizes the past as evidence of the power and glory of the nation while removing misdeeds and traumas the past America inflicted or that were inflicted on America.

BoJack Horseman's portrayal of BoJack's romantic relationships further emphasizes the dangers of fetishizing nostalgia and relying on an idealized past for personal or political purposes. BoJack's attempts to reconnect with former love interests such as Charlotte and Wanda are driven by his desire to recapture a time before Hollywood corrupted him. Before BoJack returns to Sarah Lynn's life, he returns to his old crush Charlotte in New Mexico after breaking up with his girlfriend Wanda. Although Charlotte is happily married, BoJack stays with her and her family for two months. He even attempts to make a move on Charlotte, thinking that it will bring back the glorious time in the past before he was corrupted by Hollywood culture. This very same pattern applies to Wanda, another lover of his. She is characterized as an owl who was in a twenty-year coma and thus has no memory of what happened when BoJack was living his Hollywood fame. However, this romance pattern ends when both women remind him that what he is looking for in them is not really what they are.

The show uses BoJack's relationships and his pattern of seeking solace in the past to criticize the notion of viewing history through "rose-colored glasses" (S02:E10). As Wanda's comment on the unreliability of perception highlights, romanticizing the past can lead to an incomplete or distorted understanding of history. BoJack's obsession with people from his past not only damages his personal life but also serves as a cautionary tale about the

consequences of clinging to an artificial narrative. The idea of rose-tinted glasses and the romanticization of the past is what Raphael Bob-Waksberg constantly interrogates in *BoJack Horseman*. BoJack's pathological obsession with people from the past reinforces the central message of the show about revisiting history. While BoJack's career rises again from his role in the adaptation of *Secretariat*, a famous racehorse in American history, his personal life spirals down because of his fixation on the past. In a similar manner, the political rhetoric of nostalgia can be deemed dangerous, if not myopic, since it connotes the retrieval of the non-existent prelapsarian world and unintentionally erases what was happening in history. America's invocation of its golden days is nothing but an attempt to hold on to an artificial narrative, making one forget the nation's past crimes.

In *BoJack Horseman*, the narrative often vacillates between the present and flashbacks. The characters' wavering thoughts represent both American nostalgia and the haunting trauma of the unresolved past. Although BoJack sees the past as the golden time of his life when he was an A-list celebrity, a deeper dive into the past reveals that his memory of the past is selective and at times misleading. His regressive nostalgia for the kind and innocent women in his past represents America's collective nostalgia, aiming to glorify the past by looking at it as a perfect, unchanging prelapsarian moment in time. However, the stark contrast between what BoJack perceives and reality shows how problematic regressive nostalgia can be.

The nostalgia he has for those around him results in his toxic behaviors towards them and his refusal to accept change and growth in other people. He refuses to accept that Charlotte has moved on from him and settled down with a family, decides to stay in a relationship with Wanda because of her loss of memory, and grooms Sarah Lynn to be dependent on him so that she can remain his surrogate daughter forever. Moreover, another piece of evidence for how a fixation on the past results in abuse is when BoJack sabotages his friend Todd's career growth. When Todd decides to pursue a career as a rock-opera musician, BoJack distracts him so that Todd has to remain in BoJack's house and be codependent on him as before. BoJack's actions towards those around him are, on one hand, a reflection of his selfishness. On the other hand, his attempts to prevent everyone from outgrowing him reveal his insecurities towards the present and the future, and thus his fixation on the seemingly stable past.

The fixation on the past also leads to self-destruction and the destruction of relationships with other people. For example, BoJack's decision to stick around Charlotte results in his trying to get intimate with her daughter, upsetting Charlotte and driving her to banish BoJack from her life permanently. Wanda eventually breaks up with BoJack because she realizes his bitterness is not compatible with her naivety after being in a coma for twenty years. Todd and Diane, his close friends, decide to cut ties with him since they realize BoJack is

too toxic to be around. The worst consequence of BoJack's attempt to freeze time is the death of Sarah Lynn. Fearing that Sarah Lynn might become sober and independent after rehab, BoJack decides to drag her back into the party life, with both of them spiraling into the world of drug abuse and resulting in Sarah Lynn's death. Another pitfall of BoJack's holding on to the past is that the more he clings to it, the more past traumas resurface to haunt him.

Despite his adoration of the past, BoJack's glorious years were, in fact, corrupt from the beginning. Towards the end of the show, the audience realizes that BoJack's fantasy about the past is selective. He chooses to muse over his victories and fame rather than his faults and pain in the past. However, the series demonstrates that there is no escape from the past. While reflecting on his old days, BoJack has to face the fact that his past included both good and bad days. He might have been a celebrity in the nineties, but he lost his true friends, abused a minor, and left his mother at a nursing home without once paying a visit. These people from his past return to his life, but not in the way BoJack wants them to. Charlotte moves on and has her own family, his mother with Alzheimer's comes back to live with him. He even discovers he has a half-sister, Hollyhock, who he once thought was his daughter. The return of people related to his past does not bring BoJack joy but rather sorrow and guilt. Therefore, the past BoJack conceives is not reality but rather a distortion of his memory or false memories he creates to make him feel happy or at home.

Again, BoJack's downfall due to his fixation on the past serves as a caution for contemporary American politics. In "Making America Great Again? National Nostalgia's Effect on Outgroup Perceptions", Anna Maria Behler et al. (2021) examine the danger of nostalgia in American political campaigns. The country has always utilized nostalgia to advocate a sense of nationalism and the desire to bring the country back to being the sole world power once again. However, Behler's statistics reveal that people who are affected by nostalgia are prone to violence and exclusion against outgroups since they are blamed as a factor contributing to the country's current deterioration (p. 2). Moreover, the research reveals that people who are affected by political rhetoric of nostalgia regard history in a highly selective manner, resulting in the distortion of history and the conception of outgroups as a threat.

Another character that represents American nostalgic ideals in the show is Mr. Peanutbutter. He is characterized as an optimistic, wholesome retriever who seems friendly to everyone. The animal choice for Mr. Peanutbutter's characterization is crucial to the discussion about American values, as the breed itself symbolizes a perfect American family. Besides its friendliness, the image of the breed is tied to the image of an American suburban family, as seen in several vintage advertisements such as a Seven-Up advertising poster in 1949 or a 1959 RCA washing machine advertisement.

Figure 5: *A Seven-Up advertisement featuring a family doing home gardening with their Retriever.*

In "Family Togetherness and the Suburban Ideal," Laura Miller (1995) explains that the American concept of family life incorporates suburban family ideals in which members can do outdoor activities together in a neighborhood with detached houses and front lawns (p. 402). The detached house with a lawn has thus become a crucial element in the construction of American domesticity, with a dog as another family member as well as a shared responsibility and activity for all family members. Moreover, many American households own dogs and consider them family members. This family-friendly characteristic is often portrayed through the depiction of Mr. Peanutbutter throughout the show. He is a person who enjoys everything and embraces every new opportunity. For example, in the second season of the show, Mr. Peanutbutter partners with his friend Todd in a new business venture. He asks Todd to give him business advice, although it is clear that Todd has no experience or knowledge of business at all. As a result, every business project of theirs fails. However, Mr. Peanutbutter is not daunted and insists on initiating new businesses despite disapproval from those around him. He even accepts Katrina's offer to support him as a gubernatorial candidate, despite knowing nothing about politics or running a political campaign.

The amicable and outgoing personality makes Mr. Peanutbutter resemble Clinton, who is defined as another "iconic Baby Boomer cartoon character Bugs Bunny, dodging disasters—many of his own making" (Troy, 2015). Both can be seen as the epitome of a stereotypically good American man, who is apparently

outgoing, energetic, outspoken, and optimistic. The similarity is also emphasized in Aubrey Immelman's article "The Political Personalities of the 1996 U.S. Presidential candidates Bill Clinton and Bob Dole". Immelman (1998) collected biographical materials of the two candidates and analyzed them with personality profiles using Millon's diagnostic criteria. She points out that the profile of Clinton is "consistent with a presidency troubled by ethical questions and lapses of judgment" (p. 335). However, Immelman also highlights the personality strengths of a "predominantly charismatic/extroverted" person. These personalities are termed "frontier mentality". The concept of frontier mentality was initiated by Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) in an essay named "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". Turner argues that the concept of the frontier and frontier mentality is vital to the shaping of the American identity, defined as "lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier" (Turner, 1893). Although the concept was introduced far back in the nineteenth century, the frontier mentality has been intertwined with the notion of the American dream and American expansionism, which still resonates today.

However, these characteristics can be regarded as negative traits. His optimistic personality is heavily associated with naiveté and cluelessness, as evidenced by his four failed marriages. On the surface, Mr. Peanutbutter seems like a typical "nice guy" who sees the good sides of everything and is open to every new possibility. But a closer look at the characterization shows that Mr. Peanutbutter is a critique of American optimism. Throughout the show, his overt cheerfulness often leads to destructive consequences for himself and other characters. His business venture with Todd as a partner, named PB Livin', is a series of startup projects doomed to failure since Mr. Peanutbutter is too optimistic to calculate any risks involved with each project. Several comical incidents in the show during the time Mr. Peanutbutter runs PB Livin' feature accidents to people in LA from these ventures, such as a Halloween store with a hole in front of it, causing many to fall and get injured, or when he leaves an unbelievably large amount of spaghetti strainers at home as part of his unplanned business. Although there are several scenes where Mr. Peanutbutter's spontaneous projects benefit the public in the end, such as when the strainers save the LA coast from the sinking of a spaghetti ship, it is mostly by luck. Moreover, his friendly personality hurts those around him since he says yes to everything and thinks his acts of love are harmless. His good intentions leading to bad consequences are at their peak when he decides to throw a surprise birthday party for his wife Diane, who hates parties. This consequently leads to

an argument in which Mr. Peanutbutter does not understand why his goodwill makes his wife upset, resulting in their divorce at the end of the episode.

This cluelessness and overt confidence are the other side of how Americans are generally perceived. According to Mark Abali's article in *Business Insider* (2018), Americans are considered as people lacking awareness of differences, especially cultural differences. This cluelessness about other cultures is associated with American nationalism, which has been promoted since the early days of European settlement and has been prolonged even during the 90s. Although President Clinton is also known for his racial initiatives in 1997, his policies have been criticized by scholars as polarizing the whites and the blacks, and surprisingly, he did not take any side in this polarization: "Keenly aware of the racial breach in public opinion, Clinton dared to tackle it because he was confident that he could find a way to please blacks and whites at once" (Kim, 2002, p. 56). In Claire Jean Kim's "Managing the Racial Breach: Clinton, Black-White Polarization, and the Race Initiative" (2002), Clinton's third-way politics have become mere rhetoric to gain popularity and support from both the conservatives and the progressives. Clinton uses the initiatives as management strategies by "an initial electoral strategy of courting white support, in part through the symbolic rejection of blacks; and second, an adjusted governing/reelection strategy of pleasing whites with substantive action on racial policy issues and placating blacks with largely symbolic gestures of support" (Kim, 2002, p. 57). Clinton's "non-partisan" policies are mocked in *BoJack Horseman* when Mr. Peanutbutter accidentally runs for the governor of California. His race against Woodcharles Coodchuck-Berkowitz is a juxtaposition between a qualified politician who is knowledgeable and responsible, and Mr. Peanutbutter, who knows nothing about politics and does not even have a political stance. The stark differences between Mr. Peanutbutter and Woodcharles Coodchuck parallel the personality juxtaposition between Bill Clinton and Bob Dole in Immelman's article. She points out that while Clinton was found "primarily asserting/self-promoting and outgoing," Senator Dole was primarily "controlling/dominant and conforming/dutiful" (Immelman, 1998, p. 335).

The political race between the two characters further highlights the resemblance between Clinton and Mr. Peanutbutter. Running as a candidate who supports fracking, which is a method of extracting oil from rocks, Mr. Peanutbutter knows nothing about what fracking is and what consequences it may lead to. Since he does not know about fracking, he reluctantly agrees to put a fracking drill in his backyard when asked by an interviewer, which later causes the collapse of his mansion in season four. In a similar manner, Clinton's attitude towards environmental problems is deemed problematic. Like Mr. Peanutbutter, Clinton came up with catchy and optimistic mottos to tackle environmental problems such as "It's the Environment, Stupid!" and a "green

but not mean" strategy. However, Clinton's desire to appeal to both sides in a third-way politics style results in dissatisfaction from both sides. In Martin A. Nie's article "It's the Environment, Stupid! Clinton and the Environment" (1997), Clinton's environmental policy was doomed to fail from the start as the president tried to please the private sector by minimizing regulations while attempting to please environmentalists by trying to enact something (Nie, 1997, p. 42).

Moreover, Peter Edelman (1997), in an article in *The Atlantic*, "The Worst Thing Bill Clinton Has Done", harshly attacks Clinton's slogan to promote financial independence among American families as a lie. Edelman explains that Clinton's slogan to "end welfare as we know it" did not uplift the living conditions of American families. On the contrary, the reform resulted in an increase in unassisted poor people. Edelman further elaborates that Clinton's assistance to poor families was under block grants, meaning that each state would receive financial aid for poor families, but "there would be no federal definition of who is eligible and therefore no guarantee of assistance to anyone" and "each state will get a fixed sum of federal money each year, even if a recession or a local calamity causes a state to run out of federal funds before the end of the year" (Edelman, 1997)

The similarities between Mr. Peanutbutter and Clinton, including their sexual scandals, shed light on the complex and flawed nature of their characters. Under the guise of a wholesome and loving husband, President Clinton was accused of having a sexual affair with an unpaid intern, Monica Lewinsky, who mysteriously got promoted to an assistant to the Pentagon spokesman within a year. The "Monicagate" scandal debunked the image of Clinton as a loving husband, with Hillary Clinton as an equally respected wife. Clinton's sexual misconduct parallels Mr. Peanutbutter's affairs with Pickles, a waitress twenty-four years his junior, right after his divorce from his wife, Diane. Apart from dating a young woman right after his divorce, Mr. Peanutbutter cheats on Pickles with Diane several times but does not admit or confess it to her until he cannot tolerate the guilt anymore. He then asks Diane to tell Pickles for him since he is not good at "giving bad news".

Mr. Peanutbutter's excuse to soften his crime resembles Clinton's verdict in the matter of the allegations of an affair with Monica Lewinsky. In Peter Tiersma's article "Did Clinton Lie?: Defining 'Sexual Relations'" (2004), he explains how Clinton manipulated the definition of "sexual relations" to at first deny his alleged misconduct with Lewinsky. Clinton avoided committing perjury at the court by defining the word as an activity that must involve sexual intercourse. As a result, Clinton managed to evade the charge of making a false statement, although the affair between him and Lewinsky was true, and he eventually admitted the misconduct afterward.

Thus, under the façade of family-oriented politicians and celebrities, neither Clinton nor Mr. Peanutbutter genuinely commits to doing what they preach. The flaws of the two personas reflect the fractured American ideal of a warm, evangelical family life, which was once at the root of American culture. The portrayal of these characters in popular culture serves as a critique and exploration of the complexities behind the image of the "perfect" American figure and the often-hidden realities that contradict these ideals.

Postmodern Comfort amidst the Turbulence: Redefining Hope and Home in BoJack Horseman

Although contemporary society with the logic of late capitalism and the postmodern condition is commonly conceived as the main source of collective discontent and longing for the past, the postmodern condition can, ironically, be regarded as a way out of this affliction. Some scholars juxtapose postmodernism as an opposition to nostalgia. For example, Fredric Jameson (1991) in his essay "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" states that "a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos" (p. 156). It is undeniable that *BoJack Horseman* is indeed a postmodern television series. Not only does it discuss the human condition in the seamless capitalist world, but it also tackles the idea of history -- be it personal or political. Apart from the parody and irony, which are two essential elements of postmodernism, *BoJack Horseman* questions the authenticity of identity and history.

Towards the end of the show, BoJack is interviewed by a reporter about the death of Sarah Lynn. When asked if he repents and wants to fix himself, he simply answers, "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?" (S06:E12). The remark "xerox of a xerox" is not only an homage to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) when the protagonist muses over his insomnia: "Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (Palahniuk, 1996, p. 10). But it also reflects the nihilist core of the show. As a result, BoJack Horseman does not invite the audience to dismantle our postmodern society. In contrast, *BoJack Horseman* invites the audience to see the postmodern condition in a more optimistic way. Rather than presenting postmodernism as a source of despair and disillusionment, *BoJack Horseman* encourages its audience to explore the potential for growth, self-discovery, and healing within this context. By examining the struggles of its characters in navigating their lives in a postmodern world, the show illustrates the importance of embracing the uncertainty, complexity, and fluidity of human history and human existence.

The postmodern, cynical yet optimistic characteristics of the show challenge the way nostalgia can be conceived. Nostalgia, as a juxtaposition between the past as wholesome and homely and the present-future as unsatisfactory and forlorn, is later questioned by scholars. Since nostalgia is closely tied to modernity, media as a means of mass communication in the modern era undoubtedly influences how the past is conceived. According to Katharina Niemeyer (2014) in *Media and Nostalgia*, nostalgia is always "a mediated process" that can appropriate, trigger, and dismantle nostalgia (p. 7). Media's ability to preserve and, at the same time, reproduce the past undermines the veracity of nostalgia. The past is not only mediated but also commodified and reproduced according to the market.

The reproduction of memory in a capitalistic postmodern world is articulated by Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1994). Baudrillard points out that contemporary society, with media culture, has destroyed the authenticity of meanings and thus rendered the world a space in which meanings depend entirely on signs and symbols: "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). Therefore, nostalgia no longer signifies a yearning for a continual and stable past. The countless fabrications of nostalgia unveil the temporal convolution of the word. In this light, the meaning of nostalgia transcends mere obsession with the homeland or time in the past. It is no longer just a backward-looking dream, but rather a manifold desire imbued with layers of despair and hope, the then and the now, as well as the impossibility and the new possibilities.

In *BoJack Horseman*, Raphael Bob-Waksberg invites the audience to embrace the uncertainty of the postmodern world and points out that the world has always been uncertain. This notion is succinctly summed up by Mr. Peanutbutter, the most cheerful character in the show, who says, "The universe is a cruel, uncaring void. The key to being happy isn't the search for meaning; it's just to keep yourself busy with unimportant nonsense, and eventually, you'll be dead." (S01:E12). His statement renders his character a foil to BoJack, who keeps searching for meaning and spirals down into despair. It also adds a layer to Mr. Peanutbutter's seemingly simple character. Interestingly, the nihilistic statements throughout the show serve as encouragement and empowerment to the characters. When BoJack starts jogging to stay fit for his upcoming film and is on the verge of giving up, a professional runner approaches him, saying, "Every day it gets a little easier… But you gotta do it every day—that's the hard part. But it does get easier." (S02:E12). The concept of running and keeping on running is probably the most obvious motif in the show, with the main protagonist as a horse running away from reality and currently acting in a movie about a famous racehorse. In *BoJack Horseman*, there are several incidents forcing the characters to move on without getting any closure. For example,

Diane never gets to reconcile with her family, and BoJack does not get to reconcile with Herb Kazzaz, his former best friend and mentor who worked as a producer on *Horsin' Around*. When BoJack visits Herb to apologize for betraying him when he asked BoJack to threaten the executives to quit the show after Herb was exposed by the media as gay and under pressure of being fired, Herb does not accept the apology. The reason behind Herb's rejection of BoJack's apology is that he does not want BoJack to have a sense of closure. The same lack of closure occurs at the end of the show when BoJack gets to meet everyone again at Princess Carolyn's wedding after he is temporarily released from prison. Meeting everyone, BoJack realizes that his friends are no longer the same. The show ends with a conversation between the two protagonists - BoJack and Diane, who talk about their lives, concluding that "sometimes life is a bitch, and then you keep on living" (S06:E16) before an awkward silence between the two extends until the end of the show. The lack of closure between the two former close friends after what they have been through signals that the characters have to move on with their lives without reconciliation, and it is unlikely that they will meet again.

Nihilism as consolation for the vacuity of the world is emphasized by BoJack's last attempt to console Sarah Lynn before she dies: "We're not doomed. In the great grand scheme of things, we're just tiny specks that one day will be forgotten. So, it doesn't matter what we did in the past or how we'll be remembered. The only thing that matters is right now, this moment. This one spectacular moment we are sharing together."(S03:E11). The twist from postmodern despair to nihilistic happiness is associated with Linda Hutcheon's argument on nostalgia and postmodernism. In an essay about her conversation with Mario J. Valdés titled "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern: A Dialogue (2000), she argues that the very nature of postmodernism is nostalgia since "in the postmodern… nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, and ironized" (Hutcheon & Valdés, 2000, p. 35, which is the main theme of *BoJack Horseman*. Throughout the show, the audience gets to see characters longing for the past, inventing the past, as well as the parody of the past in tandem with that of contemporary popular culture. Although the show shatters the American family ideal, it offers a postmodern way to redefine home and family. In *BoJack Horseman*, the concept of home is always in flux. Despite the main setting at BoJack's apartment, resembling a typical sitcom trope, the comfort of this home is constantly destabilized. While the theme of most sitcoms in the 1990s is about family life or friendship that takes place and gets strengthened in a house, BoJack's house in Los Angeles functions as both public space where people come and go and as intimate space where bonding grows. There are various characters that come and go throughout the four seasons of *BoJack Horseman* and most of them leave the place permanently. Some characters such as Todd and Hollyhock first visit BoJack's house as unwelcome guests, but later on are

appreciated by BoJack. On the other hand, BoJack's mother's reunion with BoJack in this house does not lead to a reconciliation between mother and son. She never apologizes for abusing BoJack when he was young and secretly puts diet pills in Hollyhock's food so that she can lose weight without her knowing. Different kinds of relationships take place in this venue ranging from parties to intimate relationships, which shows that the meaning of this place varies depending on time and on residents.

The instability and search for comfort in instability are also revealed in the characterization in the show. All the characters in *BoJack Horseman* are flawed, and they are all aware of their flaws, although some do not manage to fix them. Characters in *BoJack Horseman* that represent the traditional family turn out to be toxic. BoJack's parents are verbally abusive and absent. Diane has an abusive father who treats his daughter as an inferior member of the house. Diane never receives praise for attending Boston University and becomes the only family member who has a job. Her brothers also make fun of her and exploit her to support the whole family. Moreover, when she travels to Vietnam to reconnect with her own roots, she discovers that she feels even more alienated in Vietnam than in Los Angeles. Sarah Lynn's mother Carol treats her as a source of money since she forces Sarah Lynn to become an actress, although Sarah Lynn wants to be an architect when she grows up. Moreover, it can be implied from Sarah Lynn's conversation that Carol's new husband sexually assaulted Sarah Lynn when she was young. Even Mr. Peanutbutter, who seems to have had a happy childhood, rarely talks to his brothers and gets upset when Diane asks him to. These examples show that every character in *BoJack Horseman* struggles to come to terms with their own family, and most of them do not get to reconcile with their family members or their own past.

However, *BoJack Horseman* asks the audience to revise the notion of family. First of all, by using human characters and animal characters in the same show, the audience gets to see diversity from the beginning, with human characters having relationships with animal characters. This diversity not only challenges the right-wing political rhetoric that employs nostalgia to stress racial prejudice, but it also points out how collective sentiments or bonds can be made among diverse groups of people. Moreover, the show points out that family is no longer defined by kinship. BoJack treats Hollyhock as a daughter figure even though she is not his real daughter. Princess Carolyn adopts a daughter after she has a miscarriage and learns that she cannot have another baby. At the end of the show, Diane gets engaged to her colleague Guy, who is divorced and has a son living with him. Diane's bonding with Guy's son and finally seeing him as her own son after she has got divorced and had an abortion shows how the notion of family can be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

Therefore, the meaninglessness of the world in *BoJack Horseman* does not imply that humans suffer for nothing or that life is not worth living. On the

contrary, the void of meaning in this world allows everyone to recreate and redefine their own lives. The lack of closure at the end of the show might not satisfy the audience who are looking for a happy ending like in sitcoms, but the lack of a definite ending leaves room for the characters, as well as the audience, to construct their own paths afterward.

Conclusion

In spite of its bleak and cynical content, *BoJack Horseman*, with its humor and brilliant screenwriting, offers an optimistic yet realistic solution to the collective pathos of modern people. The show unfolds the layers of nostalgia, where personal longing for the past collides with longing for political nostalgia through the media. The characters' obsession with the golden days of the nineties reflects the political rhetoric of nostalgia that invokes the past to instigate right-wing sentiments, which results in prejudice and discrimination against those deemed outsiders in a prelapsarian America. However, as a postmodern television series, *BoJack Horseman* does not persuade audiences to search for meaning in their lives or look back to the past in order to bear the weight of the present. Instead, *BoJack Horseman* functions as a postmodern poison and cure for nostalgic affliction by invoking, ironizing, and mocking the past. Its obsession with the 1990s turns out to debunk the wholesome myth of the era itself. The show invites the audience to revisit their own memory on a personal and a political level, pointing out that the belief that the nineties was an era of political stability is misguided and selective. Furthermore, the characterization and plot of the series suggest that audiences not seek a finite meaning in their lives, but rather embrace and make themselves at home in the maelstrom of the contemporary world.

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