TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF ABSURDIST HUMOR: THE EXAMPLE OF *BOJACK HORSEMAN*

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Culture Studies / Performance and Creativity

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September 2022

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Abstract

The only definition of “absurdist humor” can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* and states that it is composed of two essential fields: the rational absurd and the existential absurd. This dissertation intends to construct a genealogy of the concept of “absurdist humor” by exploring the foundations of these two strands and their philosophical relation in depth. It also positions the concept with respect to humor theories, especially incongruity and superiority, and to literary genres, as a kind of humor that fluctuates between the classical notions of comedy and tragedy. Then, I examine a contemporary cultural product as a case study: the TV series *BoJack Horseman* is a comedy show full of nonsensical elements and jokes. However, it distinguishes itself from other comedy shows through the existentialist problem of the main character, driving the show to a great level of complexity and exploring dark themes. Through the close analysis of both text and visuals, I intend to propose a reading of *BoJack Horseman* in light of “absurdist humor”.

Keywords: Absurd; *BoJack Horseman*; Comedy; Culture; Existentialism; Humor; TV Series;

A única definição existente de "humor absurdista" pode ser encontrada na *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* e afirma que o conceito é composto por duas áreas essenciais: o absurdo racional e o absurdo existencial. Esta dissertação pretende construir uma genealogia do conceito de "humor absurdista", explorando em profundidade os fundamentos destas duas vertentes e a sua relação filosófica. Também posiciona o conceito em relação às teorias do humor, especialmente a incongruência e a superioridade, e em relação aos géneros literários, como uma espécie de humor que flutua entre as noções clássicas de comédia e tragédia. Em seguida, examino um produto cultural contemporâneo como caso de estudo: a série televisiva *BoJack Horseman* é uma comédia repleta de elementos e piadas ‘nonsense’. No entanto, distingue-se de outras séries de comédia pelo problema existencialista da personagem principal, conduzindo-a a um grande nível de complexidade e explorando temas pesados. Através de uma atenta análise textual e visual, a dissertação pretende propor uma leitura de *BoJack Horseman* à luz do "humor absurdista".

Palavras-chave: Absurdo; *BoJack Horseman*; Comédia; Cultura; Existencialismo; Humor; Série de Televisão;

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Introduction

In the context of common sense, it might seem a little redundant to use the expression ‘absurdist humor’ or ‘absurd comedy’, since usually the stories one finds funny or ridiculous are also commonly named absurd. However, the word ‘absurd’ has a much more complex meaning than “extremely silly; not logical and sensible” [definition of absurd as an adjective from the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford University Press. n.d)]. The word ‘absurdist’ has been used as an art category or genre (in literature, cinema and, more famously, in theater, due to the movement ‘Theater of Absurd’) whose properties refer back to the meaning of ‘absurd’ in philosophy. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* describes ‘absurd’ as the “term used by existentialists to describe that which one might have thought to be amenable to reason but which turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality” (Honderich 2003, 3) and Chris Baldick, in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, wrote that it is “a term derived from the existentialism of Albert Camus, and often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value” (Baldick 2008). “Beyond the limits of rationality” and “a universe without meaning” refer us to areas of thought where humor finds room and fertility to develop, suggesting that when one searches for a philosophical definition of the word absurd, the connections to humor are almost inevitable. But, is all humor absurd?

According to *The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, “not all humor is absurd, and not all absurdity is funny” (Noonan 2014, 1). This quote is taken from the entry on ‘absurdist humor’, which “can be understood in broad terms as humor concerned with the absence or refusal of meaning” (Noonan 2014, 1). This brief description evidences a strong connection to Albert Camus’s definition of the absurd as the absence of response from the universe when humans try to search for a greater meaning. As Camus wrote, “the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 2013, 84). In the *Encyclopedia*, Noonan argues that the absurd can manifest itself in humor in many ways, although there are two main segments:

> “First, the rational absurd is concerned with the breakdown of logic and exemplified in the technique of *reductio ad absurdum,* in which a logical proposition is led to a nonsensical or contradictory conclusion. Second, the existential absurd is concerned with the apparent meaninglessness of human existence, often associated with French existentialist philosophy and the postwar theater of the absurd” (Noonan 2014, 1).

The author points out that “both strands function as rich sources of humor” and “often occur in combination”. Despite clearly stating the most important components to be taken into account, the text seems to mix two distinct aspects that constitute a joke: what a joke is about and how it is expressed; in other words, content and form. Is the absurd - “the unreasonable silence of the world” - the ultimate message conveyed in an absurd joke or is it just the way the joke is constructed that can be classified as absurd? Is absurdist humor representing the absurd, or creating absurd scenarios for other purposes than portraying the absurd?

In this dissertation, I discuss the themes evoked in this text by Will Noonan. What is the rational absurd and the existential absurd proposed in the definition? How do the absurd and its ‘brother-concept’ existentialism both manifest in absurdist humor? How does *reductio ad absurdum* apply to humor? Answering these questions implies a journey through the conceptions that “absurdist humor” has had, attempting to make this dissertation a genealogy of the term up to contemporary times.

Noonan’s entry on this subject reunited the important concepts that I, here, shall develop and integrate in their respective context. In my view, however, Noonan’s definition fails to organize them in a clear approach that could clarify what kind of concept absurdist humor is. Is it based on the categorization of a humorous content (*a priori*) or on the experience it provokes in the audience (*a posteriori*)? Is it restricted to a certain historical period or cultural space? Does it refer to humor reproduced in the performing arts? Or literary? Or both? In what academic fields should one work on it: in philosophy, in humor theories, in genre studies?

My case study is an animated tv series called *BoJack Horseman*. Often described as a dark and existentialist comedy, this is a six-season story about a washed-up actor who is trying to recover his career, confronting several problems such as alcoholism, drug addiction and mental health issues. BoJack, an anthropomorphic horse, is surrounded by a group of characters that also have their existentialist issues. Most of them are anthropomorphic animals as well. These stories are presented in a comic tone, inspired in the sitcom television format, similar to animated comedies such as *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*, but with a continuous story arc that creates more complexities in the show.

What is done in *BoJack Horseman* seems to be an interesting depiction of absurdist humor, even though its mainstream nature points to a resistance. That is, if one understands absurd art

- as in absurd theater or absurd tv series - corresponding to an absolute disruption of the conventional storytelling rules, as the Theater of the Absurd did in its time[1], maybe a tv series written and produced in the context of Hollywood, distributed by one the biggest streaming networks, might not be the best example. For not being an obvious example, I found it more inviting to this discussion. In this sense, it is possible that the case study does not represent a pure absurdist comedy; but it might prove the influence of absurdist humor in contemporary comedy.

Before continuing the analysis, it is important to clarify the difference between absurd and absurdist as adjectives. A look on the dictionary definitions previously mentioned allow me to categorize the three words this way: 1) absurd, as a noun, also applied as 'the absurd', concerns the "confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world", an approach developed by Albert Camus which is going to be developed in Chapter 1 of this thesis; 2) absurd, as an adjective, has the more popular meaning of describing something ridiculous, strange or extremely out of the norm, such as the Oxford Dictionary suggested; 3) absurdist is an adjective and describes something related to the meaning of 'the absurd'.

Still, during the discussion I will refrain from using the word absurd as an adjective when I want to refer to something that does not imply its philosophical meaning, to avoid causing conceptual misunderstanding.

Methodology

I believe that the study of humor has to be conscious of the several dimensions in which it can be scoped: from the "what we joke about", "how we joke", "why we joke", to the "what we laugh at", "why we laugh", and even the several ways of "how we laugh". These are all questions that are commonly answered in the same theory, as if they all belong to a simple and straightforward field. The various angles by which one can analyze a text, such as content, form, context, author, reception etc., are often mixed up and confused to simplify a theory that answers to the humorous phenomenon in a few words. In this discussion on the definition of absurdist humor, I do not only trace the history and the existent literature of the terms that

[1] According to Esslin, "[if] a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these [absurd plays] have no story or plot to speak of" (21)

surround it - such as absurd, existentialism, humor, incongruity, comedy, nonsense and so on - but I also propose the separation of three different frameworks in which Humor Studies can be deepened.

That is, the part I, called 'Absurd and Humor' is dedicated to the theoretical background of these two concepts and is divided in three chapters, which correspond to three different lenses from which one can analyze humor: philosophy, humor theory and genre.

In chapter 1, I provide an outline of existentialism as a philosophical field, using as a main source the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. Then, to examine the concept of the absurd, I look at Albert Camus' work, specifically the essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The philosophical perspectives chosen were developed by the two biggest and most referenced names in the existentialist field: Sartre and Camus. In *The Absurd in Literature*, Neil Cornwell argues that both "are seen as leading exponents in thought" (Cornwell 2006, 3), while Martin Esslin, in the first chapter of *The Theater of the Absurd* (Esslin 2004) also declares the philosophy of Sartre and Camus as the main background for the absurdist plays, part of the Theater of the Absurd. Studying Camus as the 'father' of the conception of the word absurd is also inevitable. On the other hand, the way Sartre and his existentialism theory differs from what Camus argues might reveal an interesting parallel with perspectives on humor. Following that idea, the chapter ends with a critical analysis on the role of art in both philosophical approaches, and thinking of how the Camusean 'absurd' might be a strong inspiration for absurdist humor.

In chapter 2, *reductio ad absurdum* is scrutinized in the context of humor. This discursive tool can have interesting relations to humor theories. I question its presence in the framework of absurdist humor. Then, I cover the field of humor theories, the explanations that several authors have given to humor and laughing throughout history. What humor theories best relate to absurdist humor? And why? Noonan (2014, 1) refers the concept of incongruity, a humor theory which supports that the motive for laughter comes from "a deviation from some presupposed norm—that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be." (Carroll 2014, 90). Regarding this relationship between absurd, humor and incongruity, Immanuel Kant offers an interesting perspective: "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an

affectation arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (qtd in Noonan 2014, 1).

Whether one tends to believe more in incongruity, superiority, or any other humor theory, or even all in tandem, one has to understand what questions these theories aim to answer and what questions they leave aside. Then, one can figure out if they relate or not to absurdist humor.

"Absurd humor in various forms can be found throughout the history of comedy [...] Early examples include the plays of Aristophanes" (*ibid*, 2014, 2), says Noonan. In chapter 3, I shall cover the etymological differences between humor and comedy, trace the theoretical origins of comedy and examine its relationship with tragedy. Then, the discussion will include other concepts that can be connected to absurd humor, such as nonsense, dark humor, tragicomedy and sadcom (see Sawallisch 2021).

In part II, I present my case study: the series *BoJack Horseman*, a six-season animated comedy often described as dark, tragic, absurd and existentialist. Several authors - as shown ahead in *BoJack's* state of research - have dedicated their work to discussing the features that make *BoJack* a unique tragicomedy. In this discussion, the series is included in order to investigate how the aspects of absurdist humor are operating in contemporary content, particularly in a contemporary TV series. *BoJack* appears to be proof that the fundamental features of absurdist humor are still alive, however, the show might also be a way of understanding how those fundamental features are applied in today's content.

The series sparked my interest not only because it greatly impacted me and is artistically inspiring, but also because of the kind of analysis that has been given to the series on the internet and the media[2]. These reviews and content analysis usually highlight the existentialist imprint of a show that appeared to be light and childish, which then triggered the thought that absurdist humor could be the connection between the nonsensical bright tone and dark existential subject.

I start by presenting the series and its influences and precursors regarding its main features. Then, in chapter 4 part II, the show is analyzed taking into account three different components:

[2] Here, the Wisecrack digital platform, which I will mention in the "State of Research of *BoJack*", had particular importance in introducing me to the relation between the series and existentialist philosophy. In the bibliography, the sources are Bauer 2016, Bauer 2018 and Luxemburg 2019.

Hollywoo, a running joke on the show which symbolizes the absurd reality in which the characters live (as, at the same time, comments on Hollywood and western society); one of the main characters, named Todd, who presents the most random behavior and apparent flat arc; and a suicide scene that opens the last episode of the first season, a heavy moment portrayed with humor in a very dark manner.

The separation of fields done in part II is quite questionable, as the different dimensions of humor tend to be intrinsically related. Confusion over what is, for example, the subject of a joke, the intention or even the target of a joke, often leads to fervent public debates that develop around misunderstandings. What I am proposing here, with this threefold framework, is a separation in substance, structure and context when analyzing humor: 1) Substance: the 'what the joke is or is about'. In absurdist humor, every joke has its own topic, but also has this philosophical approach behind it. Do absurdist jokes and texts say something about the meaninglessness of the universe that Camus called 'the absurd'? 2) Structure: as in how a joke is made or constructed. What makes a joke work regarding its form? This, I believe, is explored in some humor theories. In this respect, Elliot Oring argues that "there is no structural difference between ordinary humor and what has been called 'absurd' or nonsensical humor. Every joke is in some sense absurd in that it rests upon a violation of logic, sense, reality, or practicable action" (14). 3) Context: in what genre is this joke or humorous text integrated, or how this joke or humorous text relates to other texts.

State of Research on Humor

As Patrick O'Neill recalls, research on humor is still in its "infancy", and "[perhaps] the most striking symptom of this infancy is the continued lack of any generally accepted taxonomy" (O'Neill 2010, 80). Ricardo Araújo Pereira[3] writes that humor is contradictory, ambiguous and resistant to comprehension. That is the reason, according to him, why there has not been much attention paid to studying this phenomenon.

[3] Ricardo Araújo Pereira is a Portuguese comedian. Born in 1974, he is known for the success of his group *Gato Fedorento*, with three other comedians, who have written and performed several TV shows. In recent years, Ricardo Araújo Pereira has been writing newspaper columns between Portugal and Brazil, presents a satirical TV show and participates in several talks, conferences and podcasts to speak about humor and literature. In 2016, he published one of the few existing Portuguese books on humor theory, called "A doença, o sofrimento e a morte entram num bar" (Araújo Pereira 2016).

In this dissertation, I hope to contribute to the development of the field, studying it from the perspective of Culture Studies. The word 'culture' is understood here as a concept related with the "works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity" (Williams 1983, 90). This expression comes from Raymond Williams' approach to the term 'culture', where he explains how complicated it is to define it due to the variety of different meanings which have been given to it. In the modern world, Williams recognizes "three broad active categories of usage", being the other two the "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" and "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general" (*ibid*, 90).

Humor becomes relevant to Culture Studies, if they are considered the study of artistic representations of our society and way of living. That is, humor speaks of our present-day culture like any other artistic product does. One can analyze social issues of a certain period or community through their humorous content, but also take some conclusions of the kind of humor that is done in that context.

Although the study of humor often shifts our attention to several different (sometimes seemingly unrelatable) disciplines, I have tried, throughout this dissertation, to keep a special focus on the starting point, that is culture studies. This meant that entry into other fields of knowledge only served to enrich my cultural reading of absurdist humor.

Is humor an underdeveloped field of study which is still in its infancy? If one thinks of the texts and the writers that have, over the years, dedicated their time to thinking about this topic, from Plato, Aristotle, to Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Sigmund Freud and many others, one can conclude that the theme has always been addressed by scholars, even though at the time there was not continuous and organized attention that puts the texts in an appropriate dialogue. Also, the quantity of texts dedicated to this field was not representative of the relevance that humor has in social interactions between human beings. Salvatore Attardo writes in the introduction to *The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*: "In the 1980s, one could, with some degree of reasonableness, aspire to read all that was being published in humor studies. Nowadays, this is no longer feasible at the level of a single discipline, such as psychology, within humor studies, let alone the entire field. Dissertations on humor studies are written and defended all the time". (Attardo 2014, xxxii).

The field might be growing and becoming more robust as the interest in this topic increases and scholars communicate more effectively among themselves. However, I believe that it has not recovered the backlog yet, if one considers that humor, as a practice among human beings, is almost as old as the comedies of Aristophanes - 405 B.C., and only in 1976 did we have the first conference centered on humor research. (*ibid*, xxxi).

A symptom of this infancy, apart from the "lack of any generally accepted taxonomy", mentioned by Patrick O'Neill, has to do with society's behavior towards humor. As the progress of humor research in academia will eventually impact society, it is hard to see any consequence of this progress regarding humor and comedy. On one hand, people consume a lot of humor, in the form of tv shows, movies, live performances and several types of content available on the internet; however, very few know that humor theories exist, that humor is an academic field of study, that humor has more dimensions than just a social one, or a psychological, or a literary one. Throughout this year that I have been writing this thesis, many people did not understand how - and why - I was studying humor. The reaction always denounced skepticism about the possibility of studying it. When reading the introduction to *The Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, I found a similar thought: "Most people, when first encountering humor studies, react with incredulity. Humor appears to be so *simple,* so easy. Surely it can be defined and explained in a few well-chosen sentences" (Attardo 2014, xxx).

My motivation to write this dissertation, despite my personal interest as an artist in this type of humor, is to contribute to the knowledge of a cultural object which has always been a part of our social reality for such a long time in history.

State of Research on *BoJack Horseman*

Although its production is still quite recent, the *BoJack Horseman* series has already been widely studied by the academic community and other interested people. One of the catalysts of this dissertation is the work of *Wisecrack*, a digital platform of videos and podcasts about cinema and television. *Wisecrack* has done several videos about *BoJack Horseman* in which they offer a brief philosophical reading of the show that unveils the topics of existentialism, nihilism and absurdism in the series (See Bauer 2016 and Bauer 2018).

In the academic field, to date, more than twenty texts[4] exclusively dedicated to the analysis of the series can be found, with many others referring to it, indicating the plurality of themes that are worked on and developed in the series. In the next paragraphs I am going to list the existing literature on the TV series, their respective topics, as well as a summary of their contribution to my research.

In *"Horsin' Around"? #MeToo, the Sadcom, and BoJack Horseman*, Nele Sawallisch explores features such as the "awkward and cringe humor with communal suffering in order to illustrate the recent classification of the show in popular media as a 'sadcom'" (Sawallisch 2021, 2). The author has contributed to my research with her reading of the sadcom genre as a great tool to portray Hollywood's "fake and performed" personalities. The article then dives into the question of authenticity that affects the behavior of the big figures in Hollywood and influences western society at large. By emphasizing the complex aspects of a life that purports to be a model for audiences, *BoJack* deconstructs an ideal of perfection that sitcoms usually portray. And *Horsin' Around*, the fictional sitcom that the character BoJack once starred in, highlights that difference of approaches.

Alissa Chater (2015), in *From Real Housewives to The Brady Bunch: BoJack Horseman Finds Its Place*, analyzes the *Horsin' Around*'s integration in the series "to consider how BoJack Horseman seeks to differentiate itself from the traditional family sitcom". This article was also an important contribution to read *BoJack Horseman* as a subversive sitcom and as a TV series that plays around its own format and principles.

Also, regarding the subversion of traditional sitcoms, Bradley Simpson (2020, 1) states that "contrary to the traditional view of the situation comedy as a media oriented towards escapism, *BoJack Horseman*'s realistic outlook serves as a way for viewers to confront painful emotions and better understand how to deal with them". In her dissertation called *More Man Than a Horse? BoJack Horseman and its Subversion of Sitcom Conventions in Search of Realism*, Simpson situates the show in the "ironic, nihilistic comedies of the postmodern era" (2020, 4), a contextualization that I shall develop when discussing the show's precursors.

[4] Barranco 2020, Chater 2015, Chep 2019, Cochran 2021, Falvey 2020, Haridha et all 2021, Pabst 2017, Parashar 2020, Pöyhönen 2020, Quintas 2019, Sánchez Saura 2019, Sawallisch 2021, Schmuck 2018, Sherman 2021, Simpson 2020, Szöllősi 2021, Terrone 2022, Weronika 2020.

In *Situating Netflix's Original Adult Animation: Observing Taste Cultures and the Legacies of 'Quality' Television through BoJack Horseman and Big Mouth*, Eddie Falvey elaborates the "developments occurring within the sitcom format post-TV III" (2020, 116), using Bojack as one of the case studies. One of the features of those developments is the "perceptive deconstructions of genre" (2020, 117). Finally, the paper *There's Always More Show: The Impossibility of Remarriage in BoJack Horseman*, that sees the show as a challenge to the "comedy of remarriage", a subgenre from American films of the 30s and 40s. BoJack: "the impossibility of remarriage in BoJack Horseman is related to the capacity of the medium of television to enable self-defeating fictions which challenge fiction as a cultural institution" (Terrone 2021, abstract).

Still within the area of television studies, one finds articles such as *The Visible Screenplay in BoJack Horseman,* an essay on how BoJack writers subvert television rules by playing with the show's own fictional mechanisms, and *Wild Animation: From the Looney Tunes to Bojack Horseman in Cartoon Los Angeles*, a paper on the use of animals as characters with "psychoanalysis, the emergence of cinema, and modernism during the early part of the twentieth century" as background.

Meanwhile, looking at BoJack Horseman with a semiotic approach, there is *Leading a Horse to Water: Investigating the Semiotic Motif of Water and Drowning in BoJack Horseman*. Researchers in the field of translation have also addressed the series, in articles such as: *An Analysis of The Translation Procedures in The Spanish Version of Bojack Horseman*, *Translating Puns and Wordplay - The Analysis of Netflix's BoJack Horseman* and *QUE SERA, QUESADILLA! - Translating puns in BoJack Horseman*.

Other subjects that have been studied with the series support are existentialism, in *Existentialism as Portrayed in the Netflix Series Bojack Horseman,* postmodernism, in *Bojack Horseman, or the exhaustion of postmodernism and the envisioning of a creative way out* and *Animals and Social Critique in BoJack Horseman,* posthumanism "*Neigh Way, Jose": Posthuman Communication in BoJack Horseman*, and mental health, in *Horsin' Around: An autoethnographic critique of trauma in BoJack Horseman through abject and affect*, *Bojack Horseman and Mental Health An Academic Exploration of Existentialist Themes, Mental Health Theming in BoJack Horseman* and *Why the Long Face? Narratives of Depression in Netflix's BoJack Horseman*.

Part I: Absurd and Humor

Chapter 1: “Existential absurd”

As presented by Will Noonan (Noonan 2014, 1), absurdist humor is inevitably connected to the idea that human existence does not have a prior meaning, therefore individuals are free and responsible for creating their own purpose and meaning. This belief, that gave rise to a philosophical field known as existentialism, can be interpreted and defended from several approaches. However, this dissertation will only focus on two of the most influential ones: the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and the absurdism of Albert Camus (1913-1960).

The work of one was not ignored by the other. Indeed, Sartre and Camus met at the height of their careers after reviewing each other's works “with a shared mix of admiration and reserve” (Forsdick 2007, 120). During the following ten years, which coincided with the end of the Second World War, the rise of Soviet communism, and heated political discussion about the ideals of freedom, both thinkers made their ideological differences public and evident (Forsdick 2007, 120). Before we understand how those initial similarities have shattered over time, we shall consider the philosophical underpinnings of each author.

1.1 The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre

In 1946, Sartre published the essay *Existentialism is a Humanism*, based on a lecture he gave a year before, whose main goal would be “to defend existentialism against some charges which have been brought against it” (Sartre 2004, 341).

These accusations come from communists and christians, and some of which were shared between both groups. For instance, both claimed that existentialism had been ignoring “human solidarity, with considering man as an isolated being” (*ibid*, 341). According to Sartre, the communist critics add that existentialists support their theories in “pure subjectivity” (*ibid*, 342) and that christians would emphasize this individualistic feature arguing that existentialism denies “the reality and seriousness of human undertakings” (*ibid*, 342). For the communists,

one of the major issues is the people's inaction and "desperate quietism" (*ibid*, 341) that existentialism seems to encourage. As for the christians, existentialists tend to disregard "the gracious and beautiful, the bright side of human nature" (*ibid*, 341).

Looking at these arguments, Sartre assumes that there is a misunderstanding related to the meaning of existentialism. The title *Existentialism is a Humanism* is intentionally provocative in order to prove that this philosophical field is much more optimistic and revolutionary than it seems to its critics. Before diving into direct responses, Sartre explains the basic belief that is at the basis of existentialism: existence precedes essence. Thomas Flynn summarizes it this way: "What you are (your essence) is the result of your choices (your existence) rather than the reverse. Essence is not destiny. You are what you make yourself to be" (Fynn 2006, 8). Sartre, in his lecture, gives a practical example:

> "Let us consider some object that is manufactured, for example, a book or a paper-cutter: here is an object which has been made by an artisan whoose inspiration came from a concept. He referred to the concept of what a paper-cutter is and likewise to a known method of production, which is part of the concept, something which is, by and large, a routine. Thus, the paper-cutter is at once an object produced in a certain way and, on the other hand, one having a specific use (...) Therefore, let us say that, for the paper-cutter, essence - that is, the ensemble of both the production routines and the properties which enable it to be both produced and defined - precedes existence" (Sartre 2004, 344).

Unlike a paper-knife or a book, human beings do not have a manufacturer. For a long time in history, theistic perspectives did not allow any deviation from 'essentialism', in other words, the opposite principle: essence precedes existence. God, or the Gods in politheistic societies, were the creators of humans and, therefore, it seemed logical that an essence, whatever it might be or mean, preceded existence. Sartre says that "if God does not exist there is at least one being whom existence precedes essence, a being who exists before he can be defined by any concept, (...) this being is man" (*ibid*, 345). Later, he adds: "Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be after this thrust toward existence" (*ibid*, 345).

The use of these arguments may suggest that existentialism denied the existence of God. In fact, as Sartre explains, there is an atheistic existentialism and a theistic existentialism. Once again, the idea that founds existentialism is that human beings do not have a purpose before they come to exist, but from that, one can argue the human ability and freedom to create his own essence (make rational choices, become any sort person, impact the world around him/her) has to derive

from a divine entity, and other would say it is just a product of nature. Theists believe in the first option, arguing that "atheism degrades the true worth of the human being by reducing him or her to a mere product of nature, without intrinsic value or ultimate hope" (Fynn 2006, 54). "They (theistic existentialists) view the world and our existence as a gift and an invitation to a loving response. Our resultant attitude should be one of what Gabriel Marcel calls 'creative fidelity' to this gift" (Fynn 2006, 55). A gift presumes the existence of a giver; one that, for theistic existentialists, does not decide the purpose of the gifter.

Turning back to Sartre and his lecture will allow us to dive deeply in this "gift", or in other words, the concept of freedom. So, the principle 'existence precedes essence' assumes the human's purpose and destiny as a sort of blank piece of paper where the human is free to write. Critics reproach this postulation by arguing that this is a very self-centered and individualistic view for a world of social interactions, where human freedom is exclusive to a small percentage of humans. However, Sartre clarifies that: "When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men (...) Subjectivism means, on the one hand that it is impossible for man to transcend human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism" (Sartre 2004, 346).

The term 'responsibility' appears in Sartre as a complement inseparable from the notion of freedom, but there is a deeper dimension here that one must take into account. One might think of the relationship between freedom and responsibility in a behaviorist perspective, popularly expressed with the biblic adage "with great power comes great responsibility", given that 'power' translates as the freedom to make decisions. However, the freedom/responsibility in Sartre is also a metaethical statement: "To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose; because we can never choose evil. We always chose the good, and nothing can be for us without being good for all" (Sartre 2004, 346). That is to say, humans are fully responsible for the current state of humankind in regards to the limitations of freedom of other beings and the moral code that preserves this state of affairs. If there are humans unable to pursue their own purposes, the responsibility of this fault must fall on humans. And they are the only ones who can change this, since there is no God or divine entity interfering with human's essence, ethical principles and moral conduct: "Therefore, I am responsible for myself and for everyone else. I am creating a certain image of man of my own choosing. In choosing myself, I choose man" (*ibid*, 346-7).

Over the years, Sartre's existentialism would evolve into an active revolutionism, proving that the previous accusations of "inaction" and "quietism" were a misinterpretation of his thoughts. Moreover, by arguing that humans can make a change, Sartre is also giving an optimistic message, because the power to change is the power to change for good.

Having discussed how Sartre answered the accusations and how his existentialism[5] is almost a call for action, we shall now go back to the analysis of freedom or, as Sartre would name it, 'radical freedom'. To oppose the optimistic and revolutionary tone emphasized before, there is a more unsettling side of freedom that does not invalidate the previous arguments but makes the human being a little less comfortable (or motivated) with the existentialist position. Sartre explains: "The existentialists say at once that man is in anguish. What that means is this: the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility" (*ibid*, 347).

The feeling of anguish or anxiety at the realization that we are in a position of responsibility will not be unfamiliar to any reader. Sartre reinforces this less enjoyable side of freedom by quoting Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century thinker who had already written about this topic and introduced the term "anguish" related to existentialism, but from a Catholic perspective.

Then, Sartre formulated a phrase that would become popular and forever associated with him: "(...) man is condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (*ibid*, 350). Sartre is now presenting the same freedom, the same responsibility, but intentionally using the word 'condemned', which automatically leads us into a territory of restrictions and limitations on freedom. What seems at first sight a paradox is in reality the explanation for the discomfort and 'anguish' that comes from freedom. If humans fail to be the "proper person", if they fail at their individual and collective goals, if they are unable to create a fair society, they

[5] It is important to stress that I am referring to his perspective on existentialist questions, and not to a common thought among existentialists, for as we shall see later, the confusion between questions and reflections can be problematic.

cannot hide behind the ‘excuse’ of a divine will or any other determinism. Human beings are condemned to be responsible for everything their actions cause, whether good or bad. We can decide on everything, except on our own responsibility.

1.2 The Absurdism of Albert Camus

Albert Camus shared the same questions and concerns as Sartre about human existence and the lack of purpose human beings are born with. However, their answers to this philosophical problem, as similar as they may seem, were not exactly compatible. The careless use of the word ‘existentialist’ to describe Camus leads us to think that these philosophers offered similar views. I will look into Camus’s thoughts about existence and then critically remark on their differences.

The Myth of Sisyphus was published in 1942. It is a long essay by Albert Camus explaining his theory of the ‘absurd’. As mentioned in the introduction, for Camus “the absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus 2013, 84).

This sentence deserves a lot of attention in the way it is formulated in order to understand the idea behind it and not draw premature conclusions. It assumes that there is a problem that derives from a need of the human being. This need is the desire to know the answers to 'what the meaning of life is', and other questions which inevitably take us to a metaphysical field. The “unreasonable silence of the world” expresses our knowledge limitations, our failure in understanding certain issues that have been the object of thought and discussion for centuries. We might think that the ‘absurd’, as a philosophical field, is an answer to the problem. "Existence precedes essence" is in a way a resolution to the problem, since it explains why there is no meaning. We would expect absurdism to be similar, but the sentence alerts us that it does not. The ‘absurd’ is the problem itself. Sartre is straightforwardly explaining why the problem exists with an answer, while Camus is emphasizing the impossibility of answering. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* accurately explains this as paradox:

> "The essential paradox arising in Camus's philosophy concerns his central notion of absurdity. Accepting the Aristotelian idea that philosophy begins in wonder, Camus argues that human beings cannot escape asking the question, 'What is the meaning of existence?' Camus, however, denies that there is an answer to this question, and rejects every scientific, teleological, metaphysical, or human-created end that would provide an adequate answer. (...) This paradoxical situation, then, between our impulse to ask ultimate questions and the impossibility of achieving any adequate answer, is what Camus calls *the absurd*. Camus's philosophy of the absurd explores the consequences arising from this basic paradox." (Aronson 2011)

From this point only, one can see how Camus and Sartre were very different philosophers. One can even question if Camus was a philosopher in the strict sense of the word, given that: "the apparent unsystematic, indeed, anti-systematic, character of his philosophy, has meant that relatively few scholars have appreciated its full depth and complexity. They have more often praised his towering literary achievements and standing as a political moralist while pointing out his dubious claims and problematic arguments" (Aronson 2011)

While admitting that Camus's thought is less systematic than, for instance, Sartre's existentialism, it is important to take it into account as the philosophical foundation of the absurdist movement. Throughout this dissertation, it will become clear how the philosophy of the absurd has influenced a stream of literary texts. Before, one shall look at *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

The title of Camus most important book makes a direct reference to the ancient Greek myth of the character Sisyphus. In this story, a mortal figure named Sisyphus was "condemned by the gods to push a stone up a mountain only to see it roll back down repeatedly for all eternity" (Flynn 2006, 47-48). The reasons behind this punishment are not consensual[6]. However, none of them matter for Camus's point. He is focused on the endless task that Sisyphus must perform, and exclusively worried about the moment when the convicted "watches the stone rush down in a few moments towards that lower world whence he will have to push it up again towards the summit. He goes back down to the plain" (Camus 2013, 188). "It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me", says Camus (*ibid*, 188).

[6] "According to Apollodorus and Pausanias, Sisyphus revealed to Asopus, the river god, that Zeus had carried off and seduced his daughter Aegina. For this crime, Zeus consigned him to Tartarus and imposed an arduous punishment on him. […] In other accounts, Sisyphus earned that punishment for cheating death; he managed to convince Hades to let him go back to the world of the living, then refused to return. In another version, Sisyphus captured Thanatos (Death), and while he held Thanatos imprisoned, no one could die. Thanatos was finally rescued by Ares." (Roman and Roman 2010, 444).

When he sees his task undone in seconds, realizing that he will have to complete it again and that the outcome will be the same, Sisyphus is commonly thought to be desperate. Camus uses this myth as a metaphor for human existence, an accurate visual representation of "the ultimate futility of life" (Fynn 2006, 48). At first, it seems a sort of tragic approach to our existence, almost forcing us to infer that human life is a kind of punishment to be carried out. Camus explains that "if this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?" (Camus 2013, 188). Then, he adds the parallelism with humans, arguing that "the workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks and this fate is no less absurd" (*ibid*, 189).

Yet Camus finishes the book with the statement "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*ibid*, 192). The consciousness that the eternal task will be forever useless is the same consciousness that can make Sisyphus deal with fate. Accepting his powerlessness will lower his expectations on a change, and what was once a punishment becomes an unquestionable fate. Flynn sums Camus's argument, saying that "our only hope is to acknowledge that there is no ultimate hope. Like the Ancient Stoics, we must limit our expectations in view of our mortality" (Fynn 2006, 48).

Therefore, the human being is free and capable of making his/her existence delightful, even though it is subjugated, like Sisyphus, to the same cyclical sequence - being born, live, die - that all human beings are in, and from which it is impossible to escape.

1.3 Existential and Absurd Art

Both Camus' and Sartre's ideas have inspired works of art that are commonly categorized as existentialist. By works of art I consider literary texts, films, or any other artistic product which raises and works on the question of the meaning of life. But what are the differences between a Sartrean and a Camusian work of art?

By critically analyzing both theories, one distinction appears to be related with ethics. For instance, the Oxford Companion to Philosophy argues that Sartre "explicitly presents existentialism as an ethical doctrine" (Honderich 2003, 280), due to the free exercise of choice

given by the absence of a primary essence. Sartre's philosophy underlines the word 'responsibility' which leads us to conclude that human choices must be purposeful in order to do justice to this increased responsibility. On the other hand, Camus did not ignore the importance of ethics, but if we think exclusively of his idea of absurd and the myth of Sisyphus, we note a preference for the 'philosophical question' rather than the 'philosophical answer'. Sartre presents what he considers the next step, after the absurd realization. Camus presents an existentialist question, but does not develop an existentialist philosophy. One might conclude that an existentialist work of art, one influenced by Sartre's theory, has a strong ethical sense. It is conscious of its responsibility and will probably assume more than an aesthetic purpose. A piece of art theoretically more close to Camus seems to be more ambiguous, contained in its artistic condition, and not very philosophically ambitious.

In the article *Absurd Creation: An existentialist view of art?,* Guy Bennett-Hunter (2009) presents the differences between Sartre and Camus perspectives' of the concept of absurdity, and concludes that Sartre's approach offers a stronger philosophical justification of art in the face of the apparent meaningless of the universe. For Sartre, the absurd realization does not imply that the human experience is fully deprived of meaning. As absurd as the origin, or the original question, may be, "human action and human life are inescapably significant" because human experience is constructed under meanings. The author argues that Camus "fails to justify philosophically artistic creation for the (on its own terms, very good) reason that art, along with everything else, is absurd anyway; it is 'absurd creation'" (Bennett-Hunter 2009, 52). This view is heavily dependent on the belief that the work of art necessarily carries a meaning, according to the author statement that "people go to see the play [Waiting For Godot] in order to find meaning, not the lack of it" (*ibid*, 51). The article offers interesting and persuasive arguments that weakens Camus's theory of the absurd. It concludes that "both projects [Sartre's and Camus' approaches] take seriously the notion of absurdity but it is clearly only the latter version of the concept which lends art any philosophical credibility" (*ibid*, 56).

As mentioned before, Camus did not consider himself a philosopher and this is a point that, despite being clearly considered by Bennet-Hunter, seems to be forgotten in the article's main argument. It seems unfair to criticize Camus for not giving a strong philosophical justification of art when his only philosophical argument is the impossibility of finding those kinds of justifications. Evidently, this 'absurdism' suffers from a lot of argumentative diseases, one of them being paradoxical. However, the absurd, as it was presented by Camus, did not attempt

more than a description of an intellectual condition. The absurd did not aim for "philosophical credibility", but rather for a more rational description of the anguish felt by humans.

Therefore, the absurd creation might be a translation of this feeling into art. No one can avoid people from taking meanings out of an absurd play like *Waiting for Godot*. However, the absurd relies on a very common divergence of meanings, because the ultimate one does not exist. The absurd creation aims at no "philosophical credibility" in a sense of meaning creation or meaning clarification. The absurd creation, if one considers the word absurd in a Camusean sense, seems to be playing with meanings, subverting them, because it is conscious of the absence of an ultimate one.

Lastly, consider this excerpt from Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, on a chapter about Samuel Beckett: "When Alan Schneider, who was to direct the first American production of Waiting For Godot, asked Beckett who or what was meant by Godot, he received the answer, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play'" (Esslin 2004, 44). As Esslin goes on to explain, it is not possible to sum up a work of art like a Beckett play to a "key" meaning. In fact, one can even take a tree for a forest and argue that a work of art is never just a "clear-cut philosophical or moral conception" from the author, because it is always open to interpretations, according to Esslin (2004, 44). In theater, the interpretations will influence the form in which the text is presented, therefore changing its meaning. In literature, the author seems to be more in control of the form but he/she is not free from, for instance, temporal or local divergences between the moment of creation and the moment in which it is read.

The impossibility of creating or translating a key meaning is influenced by the belief in the absurd. This argument does not intend to encompass all authors, artists, or works of art, it merely proposes to explain absurd art and absurd artists. I argue that the absurd artist is conscious of his/her limitations regarding the creation of meaning. The absurd artist is aware of the ultimate absence of meaning and the artist sees his work as a possible portrait of reality, not a definite one. The absurd artist does not aim to convince an audience of his/her views, since he/she does not consider himself/herself a philosopher or a holder of a truth. The absurd artist merely presents his/her subjective reality.

In regards to the discussion between Sartre and Camus, and which author is more influential to absurd art, one can now state that 1) the ambiguous and paradoxical positions of Camus, not

very valued in a scientific sphere, seem to translate more accurately the role of art mainly - not exclusively - for aesthetic purposes; 2) Sartre's ethical existentialism is relatable to an intervening role of art in society, but the assumption of this role is at the same time running away from the evidence of the absurd. Hence, classifying an absurd work of art as existentialist can cause false interpretations and conclusions, which I hope to have clarified in this chapter.

I have been referring to the artist and the work of art in general, even though this discussion was meant to be about humor. So far, we can easily substitute the word art for comedy, and the word artist for comedian. When saying 'for aesthetic purposes', in humor, we might be talking exclusively about laughter, or saying 'to generate laughter'. In the next chapter, I will briefly discuss *reductio ad absurdum*, and how this discursive tool is used in humor.

Chapter 2: "Rational Absurd" and Humor Theories

Back to the definition of absurdist humor by Will Noonan (Noonan 2014), we find the second main strand of absurd humor which is the 'rational absurd': "the rational absurd is concerned with the breakdown of logic and exemplified in the technique of *reductio ad absurdum,* in which a logical proposition is led to a nonsensical or contradictory conclusion" (*ibid*, 1).

2.1 Reductio ad Absurdum

The 'reductio' technique is commonly used in argumentative speech. Daniel Dennet explains it this way: "You take the assertion or conjecture at issue and see if you can pry any contradictions (or just preposterous implications) out of it. If you can, that proposition has to be discarded or sent back to the shop for retooling" (Dennett 2013, 74). Reductio is seen as a clear and easy-to-use tool for rational thinking and discussion. The formula consists in: to prove *p* / assume not-*p* / argue that not-*p* will lead to *q* / given that *q* is false (or absurd) / therefore, not-*p* is false, so, *p* is true.

A simple example would be arguing that the *Earth is not flat*: to prove that *Earth is not flat* / assume that *Earth is flat / If the Earth is flat, people would fall off edge into space* / Given that *people falling off edge into space* is false / Therefore, *Earth cannot be flat*.

Note that reductio is usually a test of not the argument but of the opposite argument. When a person is arguing with another, one usually picks the opponent's argument and proves its falsehood with reductio. However, as Dennet points out a few lines later, the difference between its use for "fair criticism and refutation by caricature" can be blurred. One can ridicularize the other's argument with this tool, implying that the opponent believes in something completely absurd: "Can your opponent really be so stupid as to believe the proposition you have just reduced to absurdity with a few deft moves?".

Reductio can also be manipulated with fallacies. The straw man is a logical fallacy which happens "when someone takes another person's argument or point, distorts it or exaggerates it in some kind of extreme way, and then attacks the extreme distortion, as if that is really the claim the first person is making" (Excelsior University. n.d.). For instance, two people are discussing the law on contraception methods and suddenly, one uses a reductio ad absurdum: if contraception methods are not allowed, then each couple will have hundreds of children. Believing or not in the position that is being advocated here, one can identify a straw man in this argument. The prohibition of contraception methods does not directly mean an absurd number of children, simply because it depends on the number of times a couple has sexual intercourse. The person is distorting the argument by creating a straw man, in this case, a situation where a couple is having relationships as if they were using contraception methods, a situation that does not factually exist. The person is also misrepresenting the opponent's scenario: they are arguing about contraception methods, not about sexual relationships, therefore, the opponent has not mentioned that part of the problem.

Fallacies are to be avoided in arguments but are very useful to humor. This very example is, in fact, a scene from Monty Python's film, *Meaning Of Life.* The scene shows a catholic couple with a preposterous number of children, which they have because of their religious views on contraception. The use of *reductio*, with or without fallacies, creates absurd scenarios, and possibly comic scenarios to be explored by comedians. The paths that lead someone to deconstruct an argument with *reductio* and that lead the comedian to construct a comic situation are so similar that they are so often confused. By writing and performing this movie scene, is the Monty Python group arguing that the Catholic's position against contraceptive methods is ridiculous?

2.2 Humor Theories

As I mentioned in the introduction, there are several theories that over the years proposed an explanation for the humorous phenomenon. In *Inside Jokes*, Hurley, Dennet and Adams Jr. give an overview of the eight theories, assuming that the boundaries between them can be diffuse and some aspects escape all of them. As for Araújo Pereira, he subscribes to this idea, but only develops in detail what he considers the three main ones: superiority, incongruity and relief. In light of this plurality of theories, I shall follow Hugo Simões' thought, who says:

> "It seems unwise to continuously discard these theories because they fail to provide one unique answer to all of humour's intricacies. These intricacies, I believe, would perhaps be better explained by employing each of these theories in tandem; by exploring their different contents as characteristics that highlight the many different aspects of humour, instead of attempting to provide us with one limited answer" (Simões 2017, 25-26).

For the analysis of the previous example, I shall work with two theories: superiority and incongruity. What the incongruity theory holds is that the motive for laughter comes from "a deviation from some presupposed norm—that is to say, an anomaly or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be." (Carroll 2014, 90). Laughter is a consequence of perceiving incongruity. This theory finds support in the writings of great philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer and Soren Kierkegaard (Morreall 2011), but also in contemporary thinkers, such as Terry Eagleton. In his 2019 book called *Humor*, he considers incongruity theory the "most plausible account of why we laugh" (Eagleton 2019, 67): "Children under the age of two, so the psychologists inform us, will laugh at incongruous sights. The peekaboo game, which children find funny even when only a few months old, is one of the earliest cases of incongruity, as one appearance is rapidly replaced by another" (*ibid*, 68)

But incongruity theory has also been criticized for not offering a complete explanation of the humorous phenomenon: it does not clarify how and why a perception of an incongruity is funny (Hurley, Dennett and Adams Jr. 2011), neither why some incongruities or distortions of reality are funny and others are not (Eagleton 2019, 92-93).

As for the superiority theory, it claims that laughter "results from the recognition or sense that we have some level of superiority or eminency over some other target, the butt of the joke, as

we say, or the protagonist in some humorous episode" (Hurley, Dennett and Adams Jr. 2011, 114). Looking at this joke through the lens of superiority theory is to argue that laughter comes from thinking that we are superior to the object of the joke, in this case, the couple who strictly follow the Church's position on contraception. Superiority over the couple can take two forms: 1) disagreeing with the Church's message regarding contraceptive methods, 2) finding the number of sexual relationships the couple had or has had ludicrous [7]. In both cases, there is a moral message that the joke's receiver agrees on or identifies with, whether it is agreeing with the catholic doctrine on contraceptive methods or finding the amount of sexual intercourse a couple had ridiculous. Either way, accepting the superiority theory of humor is to believe that the author of this joke was, by using *reductio*, convincing the audience of one of these two ideas.

There is the possibility that it is neither of them. The incongruity seems to be less moralistic, since it places as the object of the joke incoherence itself. Whether we agree or not with the moral principles that are brought up here, one perceives that something is wrong in the situation presented. The number of children that the couple has had is extremely incongruous with the idea of a common family. One does not feel superior to them, one just perceives the absurdity of the situation. Therefore, it explains why a person that has a strong position against contraceptives might laugh at this joke. If the key aspect of the joke is the deviation from the norm and not our position regarding the norm or the deviation, then humor becomes more consensual, less argumentative. As Eagleton puts it, "[people] may laugh at deformities not only, or not at all, out of a sense of superiority, but because they are incongruities" (Eagleton 2019, 81).

The purpose of this dissertation is not to make general statements or rules. I find it very hard to believe in a theory that fully explains the humourous experience, especially the why we laugh question. Jokes have contexts, influenced by timing, authors, medium and a never ending discussion on the role of humor in society. And as a physical spontaneous reaction, laughter can be hard to explain even by the person who laughs. Nevertheless, I believe these theories explain various ways of experiencing humor. These ways depend on the joke and on the person

[7] I remind you that in this discussion we are not interested in what is the most likely option according to the author's view on this topic, or what a joke has generated in the public. What we are interested in are the possibilities themselves and the theoretical explanations behind each one. To rule out options that seem less likely we would have to justify them with a study on the audience, with contextual information and author's public positions on the topic.

listening. But a single joke can have a superiority interpretation and an incongruity interpretation, as we have seen in Monty Python's example.

I argue that one of the features of absurdist humor is an 'incongruity' interpretation of humor rather than a 'superiority' one. This is because humor, if it is to be called absurd, aims to offer questions instead of answers and in a creative and somewhat inebriating way, to make human beings deal with the lack of answers.

Now, one can say that humor theories and conceptualizations, such as absurdist, might not be able to relate, because the first depends, as I have demonstrated, on the audience's response and the latter is an *a priori* classification of the joke itself. In this case, I am referring to the incongruity theory as a "why we joke" and not a "why we laugh". This difference is important to refocus the scope of this discussion: an analysis on humorous products themselves, the impact they can have, and not on data that reveals their actual impact. Of course, the "why we joke" and the "why we laugh" also influence one another. If the comedian believes in a theory of the incongruity realm, his/her work will emphasize the incongruities more. But the comedian will always, in certain jokes, be susceptible to being misinterpreted or associated with views that are not his/her own.

In his latest stand-up comedy show, Ricky Gervais[8] advocates that people laugh at the wrong thing because they know what the right thing is (Gervais 2020). This is an interesting statement because it not only explains in uncomplicated words what is meant by perceiving an incongruity - that is, we laugh at the incongruity because we know what the congruity is - but also explains why the comedian usually says the most immoral things that should not be said. It is not a matter of believing or not in those assumptions, it is a matter of playing around incongruity.

The first time I read *reductio ad absurdum* in the definition of absurdist humor, it seemed that something was missing in this connection. The sentence suggests that comedians use *reductio* in its primary function: to generate meaning and persuade the audience to believe in a certain viewpoint. *Reductio* is used by philosophers, scientists and other thinkers to verify the truth in

[8] Acclaimed English stand-up comedian, actor and director, he is known for his dark humor, cynical and controversial jokes on contemporary themes. His most famous works are the Tv series The Office (that later was adapted to the United States becoming a worldwide phenomenon), the Netflix series After Life and also his monologues in several Golden Globes ceremonies.

their propositions with a loyal commitment to create meaning or knowledge. What one concludes from analyzing some humorous texts is that *reductio* can be employed with no philosophical rigor, and may even have the help of logical fallacies to be more laughable. The only way this can be acceptable is to discredit these humorous texts of their philosophical role. These humorists do not intend to generate meaning, nor to convince someone of any idea. This, again, cannot be a general statement on humor, since there are several cases of authors and respective humorous texts that are at the same time a political and social message, clearly intended, and respecting for the most part the rules of argumentative logic. So, I argue that this idea of deconstructing reality without any respect for 'the truth' is the practice of absurdist humorists and they do not intend to generate meaning, nor to convince someone of any idea.

Writing an argumentative text, with or without a humorous tone, implies a belief in one truth, in one idea, and at the same time, the discrediting of another idea. This is where perhaps the humor that presumes superiority can be found.

Absurdist humor, because it believes in the Camusean absurd, is almost the opposite of an argumentative text. Instead of proposing ideas to construct meaning, it deconstructs established ideas and proposes absurd ones not to be taken literally. To do this, it represents one or a few incongruities and relates them in a more or less plausible way.

2.3 Appropriate Incongruities

Elliott Oring notes that "there is no structural difference between ordinary humor and what has been called 'absurd' or nonsensical humor. Every joke is in some sense absurd in that it rests upon a violation of logic, sense, reality, or practicable action" (Oring 2003, 14). This is an important idea, although it almost suggests an extrapolation between an understanding of the structure of a joke, and a study about 'why we laugh' or 'why we joke'. It is important to distinguish structure from interpretation. In both, humor theories might be useful. As I have discussed in the last section, the incongruity and superiority theories helped to create and examine possible interpretations of Monty Python's scene. What I intend to discuss in this next section has to do with structure. The structural analysis of humor carried out in Oring's book, *Engaging Humor*, develops a theory called 'appropriate incongruities'. He argues that humor "depends upon the perception of an incongruity that can nevertheless be seen as somehow

appropriate" (Oring 2011, 213). The expression 'appropriate incongruities' embraces and captures the best way to understand the balance between sense and nonsense, truth and inaccuracies, reality and imagination in an absurdist humorous text.

Consider Monty Python's gag on the catholic family once again. The scene begins with a woman, standing by a sink, washing dishes while giving birth to a newborn, who falls through her legs. Only after the baby falls to the floor and cries, does the woman become aware of the event. She turns to the girl next to her and asks her to hold the baby, so that she does not have to interrupt the task of washing the dishes. Only in these 15 seconds can one observe a sequence of incongruities mixed with elements perfectly appropriate to reality. A woman performing household chores with the help of her daughter, looking exhausted, blandly reacting to what happens around her, is an appropriate scenario. A child being born, coming out of a woman's body, is also an appropriate event, faithfull to reality. The combination of these scenarios in one mixed event is rather incongruous. Blending two structurally reasonable happenings into one creates an absurd scenario.

Oring says that "there should be no preconceptions about the kinds of incongruities that will necessarily arise, where they will arise, or how appropriateness will be established." (Oring 2011, 219). The complex and diverse ways in which humor can manifest itself do not allow for the construction of a more specific formula that is transversal to all kinds of jokes. What we have just analyzed was a scene from a movie, a joke that manifests itself through image and action. But the mixture between appropriateness and incongruity can also be identifiable, for instance, in textual jokes. Consider this example of a one-liner joke: "Cold baths are more enjoyable when made with hot water" (Oring 2003, 13). There are several appropriate elements: the sentence has perfect syntax, uses correct grammar and, with the exception of the word hot, everything generates a very plausible meaning; in terms of content, baths are made with water, hot water is associated with enjoyable baths, and the promise of a solution to make cold baths more enjoyable is also appropriate, as cold baths have several bodily health advantages, but have the problem that they are not so pleasurable. The incongruity, in this example, is a contradiction in substance.

I argue that, structurally speaking, absurdist humor is made of 'appropriate incongruities'. It is the theory that so far best explains the construction of an absurdist text or image with humorous content. By combining appropriateness and incongruity, absurdist humor manifests the absurd

realization and the absence of meaning of the universe. The theory, in structural terms, could further be applied to all kinds of humor, not just absurdist humor, as Elliott Oring does. It is something that I would not venture to say, nor rule out. What I am simply defending now are the aspects that characterize absurdist humor, and in terms of structure, in the aspect that specifically analyzes the "skeleton" of the joke, this is the theory that seems most suitable.

Saying that, structurally speaking, I advocate the existence of just one effective theory, it is not the same as stating that 'appropriate incongruities' explains alone the humor phenomenon as a whole. There is structure and there is substance. Regarding substance, there is intention and interpretation, that is, what the joke is intended to mean and what is to be interpreted. And these two were the features I discussed in 1.2.2. Regarding intention and interpretation, it is possible to read and apply more than one theory in tandem, just as suggested by Hugo Simões. In fact, later in the thesis, he claims that:

> "[Superiority theorists] seemed to be making an essential point about incongruity in humor: the ridiculous person, the humourist in the physiological sense of the word, is incongruous. He is discrepant. He deviates from the norm. Whether or not we laugh at what is incongruous because we find ourselves superior to it is another question, to be examined further below" (Simões 2017, 26)

In this discussion, the question was examined above.

Chapter 3: Humor and Genre

Up to this point, I have discussed the concept of absurdist humor in terms of its philosophical foundations (section 1.1) and humor theories (section 1.2), in an attempt to build a history for the term 'absurdist humor', but also select what are the ideas that regarding these fields - philosophy and humor - best characterize and contribute to the concept of 'absurdist humor'. The third field I am going to explore is genre. What genres does absurdist humor work with?

3.1 Humor vs. Comedy

Humor and comedy are commonly thought as synonyms, both meaning to classify something that makes one laugh. However, the terms have different epistemological backgrounds, which are relevant to understanding their distinction. The doubt about what is actually considered

humor begins from the moment one thinks about the different ways of expression that can be called humor: “1. Puns and wordplay 2. The rubber-faced antics of Jim Carrey or the deadpan gestures of Charlie Chaplin 3. Caricatures 4. Situation comedies 5. Musical jokes 6. Cartoons 7. "Real-world" humor, the perhaps uncategorizable objets trouves that occur in daily life, and cause us to laugh, whether or not they get turned into items of comedy” (Hurley, Dennett and Adams Jr. 2011, 4)

So far, I have always considered a general notion of humor that encompassed all these forms (and perhaps even more) for two reasons: 1) because the definition I start from does not directly suggest any exclusive form and makes a point of naming ‘absurdist humor’ and not ‘absurdist comedy’; 2) the considerations made so far seem to cut across at least the vast majority of these forms of expression. But as I approach the specific study of a television series, I think more and more exclusively of humor in the context of fictional narratives, be they visual, textual or a combination of both, as one may find in television, film and theater. Hence the need to now clarify the differences and convergences between the concepts of humor and comedy.

What is the difference then between humor and comedy? One must look at the epistemology to find great distinctions, starting from the first:

> “The word ‘humour’ comes from the Latin *humor*, which means liquid or fluid, including bodily fluids. Ancient physicians maintained that one’s well-being depended upon a balance between four such fluids: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. Where these bodily fluids are disproportioned, various personality traits become pronounced; an excess of blood, for example, makes one sanguine or hopeful. In this way, ‘humour’ became associated with the idea of a person whose temperament deviates from the norm. Such people were regarded as eccentric; by the 16th century they were seen as ridiculous and, thereby, a fit subject for mimicking by comic actors. As a result, ‘humour’ evolved into what humourists did.” (Carroll 2014, 40).

A person whose temperament and behavior deviates from the norm is an important ingredient of any humorous content or comedy text. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the expression was born to define deviant behavior without considering, at first, the provocation of laughter. That is, the word initially would not be linked to what we now call humor and comedy. It would only be the translation of a strange behavior. Only later, noticing that this strange behavior was imitated and explored in performances and texts whose purpose was to amuse an audience, did humor come to be classified as the phenomenon that causes laughter.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines ‘humor’ not only as “the quality in something that makes it funny; [and] the ability to laugh at things that are funny”, but also “the state of your feelings or mind at a particular time”. This latter meaning could be also applied to the word ‘mood’ and denounces the previous connection to the meaning related to the balance (or unbalance) of body fluids, since 'good' or 'bad' moods usually characterize sets of behaviors and feelings.

As for comedy, the word derives from the Greek ‘komodia’, which is related to celebrations, revelry[9] and fertility rituals (Parkin and Davis 2014, 140). It was soon established as the theatrical genre that opposed tragedy and presented a performance more joyful to the audience. The history of the term refers directly to the idea of provoking laughter and amusement, but it is limited to a performative context. Unlike the word ‘humor’, which stems from the classification of something that was observed, the term ‘comedy’ is born to label something that is practiced or executed.

However, scholars seem to prefer the word ‘humor’: all over the years, the essays on how and why we laugh are referred to as humor studies; theories such as the ones I discussed earlier are always called humor theories. In daily life, one says ‘sense of humor’ to refer to a person's ability to perceive, say, write or perform something that generates laughs. ‘Comedy’, on the other hand, applies to the context of literary studies, and is almost always used as the nomenclature of a genre.

Still, both terms can also be interpreted as synonyms: when searching for ‘comedy’ in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, one finds an entry that says, “a humorous aspect of something / Synonym: humor”.

The difference between these two words may also relate to whether or not it is an arguably attributed or self-proclaimed condition by the author or the intention:

[9] “The word *comedy* is derived ultimately from a Greek term denoting revelry” (Parkin and Davis 2014, 140)

> "humor, like beauty, is ‘in the eye of the beholder’. If others say that nothing was funny, one may still be willing to claim that ‘it was funny to me’. And if pressed further about why it was funny one may find that one cannot answer, but not be willing to rescind the claim, saying something such as ‘I'm not sure why it was funny, it just was’.” (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams Jr. 2011, 78)

Humor seems to be more subjective than comedy. That is, it does not depend so much on the author as on a response from the receiver. In fact, one can say that something is humorous, provokes laughs, without intending it to be. For instance, a real-life situation. Or even a tragic film that is poorly written: it is referred to not as a comedy, but an unsuccessful tragedy, because it caused the opposite reaction.

On the other hand, comedy relies on intention and technique. The writer who writes a sketch script is creating comedy. If no one laughs or finds it amusing, it may not be considered humorous, but it is still an intentionally comical text, something that is designed to be funny, to make people laugh. For example, if a Greek comedy play, such as *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, was staged today without any kind of cultural and language adaptation, it would be much less appreciated from a humorous point of view. The text may not generate as many laughs as we assume it did at the time it was first written and staged. It may not provoke any laughs at all. Some people today may not even realize that it is a comedy, as the jokes are unintelligible and dated. These Greek plays are, nevertheless, considered comedies. People refer to *Lysistrata* as a comedy, just like they do with contemporary texts that are much more laughable.

Comedy is a genre. Genre, as a technical notion, refers to the way the text is structured and constructed, it presupposes conscious decisions of the writer (McKee 2014). Genres are attempts “to achieve through definitions standard for creation and criticism; a struggle to reach an articulate conception, with which dramatic and literary productions could be compared” (McMahon 1929, 97). For instance, Aristotle's *Poetics* speaks of comedy, and it is essentially a set of technical rules (or guidelines) for constructing a narrative. By contrast, the theories of humor, such as incongruity and superiority discussed in the previous section, reach us in philosophical and sociological texts, which do not teach the reader how to write with humor as explicitly as the *Poetics* does, but rather attempt to explain humor in a posteriori approach: in other words, they explain ‘why we laugh’ and not ‘how to make someone laugh’.

I do not mean that there is an insurmountable barrier between these two areas of ideas. In fact, they are in constant communication: the evolution of humor theories is fundamental to deepening our understanding of what comedy is and the various types of comedy that can exist. But, for the purpose of this dissertation, allow me to separate the areas in this way: if in the previous section I spoke about humor, the nature and inner structure of the phenomenon, in this section I discuss comedy, genre, and the categories created to organize humorous texts.

3.2 Comedy and Tragedy in Ancient Greece

According to McMahon, it "has been common practice to refer metaphorically to disastrous events as tragedies and to ridiculous ones as comedies" (McMahon 1929, 97). However, he admits that "the meanings of tragedy and comedy are related and often interchangeable ideas" (*ibid*, 98). The first definitions of comedy and tragedy come from Aristotle's *Poetics*, and their analysis is useful to understand how the genres have developed throughout the years. As McMahon notes, the Middle Ages dramatic works did not rely directly in Aristotelian theory, given that the authors of that period did not study directly classical Greek drama; still they "relied on broad definitions which were authentically and legitimately Aristotelian" (*ibid*, 98). It is suggested that, although the definitions presented by Aristotle are not definitive and immune to the evolution of drama and storytelling, they are still central to the basic ideas of each genre and some of the aspects have survived the various states of art.

The structure of the *Poetics* has always been a controversial issue among scholars. As Richard Janko states, "*Poetics* is one of the worst preserved texts to reach us from antiquity" (1987, xxii), resulting in an eternal discussion about the authorship of the ideas that form narrative theory of Ancient Greece. It is commonly believed, and argued by Richard Janko, that the original *Poetics* was divided into two books: the first one focuses on tragedy and epic, and the second one discusses comedy. However, it is also argued that this lost second book never existed and the ideas that have survived to this day regarding Aristotelian comedy stem from the dialogue *On Poets* (see McMahon 1929, 99).

For our discussion, the relevance lies in the ideas themselves, not in questions of authorship and the structure of the work. I am aware that, as Philip McMahon also questions, the current version of the *Poetics* has been influenced by modern notions of these two great genres. It is

something that scholars will never be able to clarify due to the lack of a clear original document. In short, the *Poetics* today is a book that is the result of interpretation, interpretations that may have been involuntarily influenced by the time in which it was translated and reedited.

Having these issues in mind and to make the discussion more focused and thus productive for this purpose, I chose as my main source for defining the Greek notions of comedy the book edited and translated by Richard Janko, on the grounds that 1) the differences between the editions do not raise questions that matter to this discussion and 2) this edition reunites a version of *Poetics* and *The Tractatus Coislinianus*. The latter is a Greek manuscript outlining the theory of comedy, resembling a student's notebook of what might have been a lecture on comedy given by Aristotle. This edition also includes fragments of the *On Poets*, another book by Aristotle on narrative theory.

"Our topic is poetry in itself and its kinds" (qtd in Janko 1987, 1), that is how Aristotle starts to present the subject matter for his study. The word 'poetry' encompasses dramatic texts, aiming at a theatrical representation, and narrative texts intended to be read, like Homer's Odyssey. Aristotle talks about this confusion between the terms used, namely that of the Poet, which was also used for those who did science by writing "work of medicine or natural science in verse" (*ibid*, 2). Therefore, the *Poetics* proposes clear definitions for the vocabulary that surrounds the dramatic text and establishes the barriers between art (or poetry) and science.

The different kinds of 'poetry' are classified according to three aspects: the 'media' (rhythm, song and verse), the 'manner' (narrative and dramatic) and the 'objects represented' (portraying better people or worse people, the former associated with tragedy and epic, the latter with comedy) (*ibid*, 2-3). For the discussion of genre, I am mainly interested in the last criteria of distinction, namely the "objects represented", although the others should not be ignored because they also contribute to the characterization of genres, as it will be proved later in the definition of comedy. But looking exclusively at the distinction according to the "objects represented", the epic is very similar to tragedy. Both deal with "serious" subjects, hence the tradition in dramatic performance makes more sense to be rashly divided between comedy and tragedy, and general poetry between humorous and serious. Some technical features, like the length of the action and the form of verse construction, separate the epic text from the tragic. However, one

notices in Aristotle's reasoning a preference for the dualistic division[10], especially when one thinks of the dramatic text.

Speaking about comedy, Aristotle explains that this genre has been "disregarded from the beginning, because it was not taken seriously" (*ibid*, 6). As a result, there was not enough information to determine the origins of its features, like masks, prologues and the multiplicity of actors. Still, Aristotle gives us a tentative definition:

> "Comedy is, as we said, a representation of people who are rather inferior - not, however, with respect to every [kind of] vice, but the laughable is [only] a part of what is ugly. For the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive, just as, evidently, a laughable mask is something ugly and distorted without pain" (*ibid*, 6)

And in the *The Tractatus Coislinianus*, he allegedly gives this definition:

> "Comedy is a representation of an action that is laughable and lacking in magnitude, complete, [in embellished speech,] with each of its parts [used] separately in the [various] elements [of the play; represented] by people acting and [not] by narration; accomplishing by means of pleasure and laughter the catharsis of such emotions. It has laughter as its mother." (*ibid*, 43-4)

Back to the *Poetics*, here is how he defines tragedy: "Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions." (*ibid*, 7)

Among the several aspects that evidently separate tragedy from comedy, there is one that establishes an apparent black and white distinction between the two concepts: emotions. "Pity and terror" seem to be in the opposite pole of "pleasure and laughter", Besides, they are strongly connected to the "objects of representation" that according to Aristotle each genre depicts: in a tragedy, the audience feels pity for the disastrous events caused to people that are 'better', and laugh at - or feel pleasure from - the errors of 'worse' people in a comedy. These emotions that the writers intend to provoke in the audience are the last criteria for the success of a text in its genre, and generally manifest themselves in the plot through an unhappy or happy ending,

[10] This is firstly suggested in the chapter "The early development of serious and humorous poetry" (1987, 5), and secondly by a critical look to the structure of the book, which disposes tragedy and epic in the same text and comedy in an alleged second book.

respectively in tragedy and comedy. However, one needs to look no further than Aristotle's own theory to find ambiguities in this simplistic way of separating the genres. As Halliwell argues in his reading of the Poetics: "The paradox hinges in part around the *Odyssey*, which is here said to belong to the second-best type of tragedy, in which both good and bad receive their deserts. But a liking for this kind of tragedy, according to Aristotle, displays 'weakness', and the pleasure which it affords is 'more suitable to comedy'" (Halliwell 2009, 276)

Therefore, it is in the *Poetics* that the basic theory of comedy finds a way to contradict itself. According to Halliwell, Aristotle was aware of that, when he recognized "the mixed nature of the relationship between comedy and tragedy" (*ibid*, 275) and he knew how difficult it was to clearly define two categories that, even in its origins, were so intertwined.

In an article called "Comedy versus tragedy in Wasps", Matthew Wright discusses an Aristophanes play presented in 422 BC (almost one hundred years before *Poetics* was written), describing it as "embodying a *contest* between comedy and tragedy" (Wright 2013, 206). Wright adds that: "What we see in *Wasps* is a carefully constructed series of encounters between the world of comedy and the world of tragedy, culminating in the final dancing scene, which, together with the paratragic[11] opening, constitutes an emphatic framing device for the whole play" (Wright 2013, 206).

Aristophanes is one of the richest sources of dramas that challenges the oppositional separation of comedy and tragedy. In a book called *Aristophanes and the Definition of Comedy*, M. S. Silk presents a new critical reading of Aristophanes' plays, underlining the "complex preoccupation with tragedy": "Aristophanes is concerned with tragedy because he is concerned with the possibilities of comedy. It notes that tragedy is not per se comedy's opposite; comedy is free to use tragic norms to help create a new comic self-sufficiency and it is autonomous".[12]

Research around these classical texts, both dramatic ones such as *Wasps* and the *Odyssey*, and theoretical ones like the *Poetics*, allows one to see that the separation of the two major genres,

[11] Paratragedy "is an imitation which adapts a specific literary work of tragedy or the diction, poetry, or tone of tragedy in order to construct and enrich the dramatic situation. (...) the meaning or significance of paratragedy differs markedly from that of parody. Instead of speaking *against* another text, paratragedy speaks *along* with it" (Trivigno 2009, 76-7).

[12] These quotes are taken from the abstracts of the book and the chapter 2 "Comedy and Tragedy", provided on the website of the publisher Oxford University Press. I did not consult the book itself.

comedy and tragedy, is ambiguous and questionable in several ways. Nevertheless, the need to establish boundaries between the two genres, and the need to theorize what would comedy be and what would tragedy be, has led to some interesting points that influenced the general view of comedy.

One of them, the mention of the representation of people "rather inferior", makes one think about the humor theories again, because it suggests a superiority of both the author and the audience regarding the comic character. A proof that comedy, according to Aristotle, was apparently in line with the views of superiority theory[13]. But at the same time, suggesting that since "the laughable is a sort of error" the theory of incongruity may also be perfectly applicable. Either way, the “rather inferior” people represented causes a distance between the spectator and the protagonist. Aristotle seems to imply that, when watching a comedy in a theater, the spectator does not come to identify with the protagonist and his/her issues, but to laugh at him/her. Meanwhile, the way the genres are characterized also says something about why comedy has been given less intellectual or academic consideration: it is intended to cause “pleasure and laughter”, a reaction that inebriates the audience, provokes a immediate response that does not invite people’s reflection and thought. The catharsis of these emotions is not as powerful and serious as the catharsis of “pity and terror”. Along with the distance created by non-identification, the idea of comedy is, therefore, beyond the status of tragedy.

The theoretical framework presented in the *Poetics*, which arises from Aristotle's thought as a consequence of what he saw, but also as a guideline for future playwrights and writers, has influenced the writing of comedies and tragedies up to the present day. But it is also important to retain, as Aristophanes and so many other examples throughout history prove, that works often complicate the simplifications that genres try to establish. Robert McKee says that genres “are not static or rigid, but evolving and flexible, yet firm and stable enough to be identified and worked with, much as a composer plays with the malleable movements of musical genres” (McKee 2014, 86). It will always be under discussion how firm and stable the separation between comedy and tragedy is. From the plays of Aristophanes to the TV series *BoJack Horseman*.

[13] As explained in previous section, the theory says that laughter “results from the recognition or sense that we have some level of superiority or eminency over some other target, the butt of the joke, as we say, or the protagonist in some humorous episode” (Hurley, Dennett and Adams Jr. 2011, 114)

3.3 Comedy and its Tragic Subgenres

Academic research on genre has revealed the emergence of several other concepts that whether in literature, drama, or cinema, became representations of works that combined the comic and the tragic. A brief overview of these concepts, that I here call 'tragic subgenres', will help one to characterize absurdist humor, regarding its features and history. A subgenre, according to Reis (1995, 264), is a specification of a greater genre. The latter is wider in content, embraces more features and has a looser definition. The following concepts belong in the realm of comedy, but, in some way, use particular aspects and are born in particular contexts that are associated with tragedy, therefore, tragic subgenres of comedy. The concepts are tragicomedy, dark humor, sadcom and nonsense.

According to Forman, 'tragicomedy' "is either a dramatic work that combines elements associated with both tragic and comic forms, or one that sustains a consistently tragic or heroic tone but avoids a catastrophic ending" (Forman 2014, 768). The term to characterize a text that fused the two genres was born still during Ancient Greece, when Plautus presented the play *Amphitruo*. A story that combined gods and mortals, heavy topics and silly moments, was then classified as *tragicomoedia*: "the genre of tragicomedy came to be typified by the combination of the heroic with the trivial, the intense with the domestic, and the philosophical with the burlesque" (Forman 2014, 768). In this entry of the Encyclopedia of Humor Studies, Forman makes an overview of the history of this hybrid genre, essentially covering the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. Arriving in the twentieth century, the author argues that the distinction between comic and tragic had become indiscernible, since most of the plays present a mixture of tragic and comic moments. Then, a reference is made to "Absurd Theater", as it "explored fundamentally serious themes through extremes of hilarity and comic inventiveness" (Forman 2014, 771). The author uses the example of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*, describing it as if "despair is tangible alongside the virtuoso wit that permeates the text".

The term is the oldest to describe a mixture between the two genres. Its usage loses some impact in contemporary times as the vast majority of current dramatic texts challenge and subvert the dualistic separation between comedy and tragedy. Still, it is possible to find it in recent articles,

such as the Bramesco 2016, from Rolling Stone, to describe this thesis' case study, *BoJack Horseman*.

The second concept is 'dark humor', which expresses a kind of paradox; after all, if one follows Aristotle's thoughts, comedy should be dedicated to light - as the opposite of "dark" - subjects: "For the laughable is a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive" (qtd in Janko 1987, 6). The topics that dominate 'dark humor' and the perspective taken about those subjects are usually more inclined to cause discomfort instead of 'pleasure and laughter' - although both reactions can be compatible.

In Harold Bloom's collection of articles about dark humor, the first two essays are quite close to this discussion's field: Louise Cowan writes about the "double vision" comedy[14] of Aristophanes, and Martin Esslin about the Theater of the Absurd[15]. When introducing the volume, Bloom states that "defining dark humor is virtually impossible because its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the opposite of what is said" (Bloom 2010, xv). This might be the reason why dark humor also has a strong connection to tabu and sensitive topics. Through the use of irony, comedians often express controversial opinions about social and political topics, often leaving the audience debating the limits of humor and the line between humor and pure verbal aggression.

The task of distinguishing 'dark humor' from 'absurdist humor' becomes even harder after reading Patrick O'Neill's article named *The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humor*. According to O'Neill, dark humor, or its equivalent "black humor", "is a phrase which nowadays crops up fairly frequently in casual conversation as well as in literary criticism" (O'Neill 2010, 80). However, he adds, there is not a unanimous definition for this expression. It can mean "humour which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these" (*ibid*, 80). All these adjectives have one common feature: they attribute an entropic vision of the world. And that is, according to O'Neill, what dark humor is about:

[14] "For Cowan, Aristophanes employs dark humor as an apocalyptic writer with "double vision." This duality, according to Cowan, "allows the writer to be possessed by a spirit of nonsense, absurdity, and contradiction, so that he may undertake his supremely difficult task of raising earthly existence to a new plane of being."" (Cowan 2010, 1)

[15] An essay that preceded his 1961 book, *The Theater of the Absurd*.

> "The scholarly analysis of humour smacks all too much of academic humourlessness, and we must not lose sight of what in the final analysis is the most important aspect of black humour as it is of all humour: it allows us to envisage the facelessness of the void and yet be able to laugh rather than despair. Entropic humour, which in the end is seen to be simply an intensification of the disturbing dynamics common to all humour, comes in many shapes and forms, and our laughter may contain many degrees of bitterness and hollowness, mirthlessness and parody and pain, but in the end—we do laugh,and while we laugh there's hope". (*ibid*, 100)

The expression does not have an entry in the Encyclopedia of Humor Studies, but it is referenced in many other entries. According to Klein, in the text about 'Art and Visual Humor', "dark humor relies on the effect of morbidity and confronts topics such as death, chaos, violence, disasters, and personal crises with humor. Dark humor utilizes techniques of exaggeration and transposition" (Klein 2014, 64). It is in this sense that the term is used on the other entries, particularly in 'Absurdist Humor', when Noonan says, "the rational absurd tending toward formal playfulness and nonsense, and the existential absurd toward darker humor" (Noonan 2014, 1). John Cleese, one of the founders, writers and performers of Monty Phyton, often works between these darker themes and surrealistic and absurdist approaches:

> "when you talk about black humor, what it's often about is the things that are very real, but we don't talk about them, (...) Things like death. The fact that we get very uptight about discussing it and pretend it doesn't happen, that's not good. So comedians often bring this stuff out into the open air that people are trying to keep repressed. And I think it's better not to repress them" (Adams 2021)

But where does 'absurd' end and 'dark' begin? And where do they overlap? What is the difference between dark humor and absurdist humor? Both concepts seem to have a similar theoretical framework, and the more one researches their literary references, the more obvious the intersection becomes. Before investigating these two concepts, I had the perception that dark or black humor was used in contexts where more morbid or otherwise socially taboo topics were dealt with. Absurdity was, in my view, more associated with nonsense and randomness, less emotionally disturbing than dark humor.

It is possible that the terms have a distinction only at the level of common-sense language or the level of the emotional experience they provoke in audiences. It would be interesting to understand how a certain group of people, involved in a certain context, would classify a joke about death; whether it would be absurd, dark, or both. As this discussion only focuses on reading existing theoretical research, and consequent reading of humorous content, I shall only

conclude that the theoretical fields of both intersect and feed into considerations relevant to the definition of humor, such as the ones by Patrick O'Neill and John Cleese.

Thirdly, a term that has recently come into use to classify the series I will be analyzing[16]. 'Sadcom' combines the word 'sad' with the beginning of the word comedy, invoking once again the same interplay I have discussed in tragicomedy. What this new term adds is, according to Sawallisch, a dimension relating to the specific format of the text. 'Sadcom' evokes a subversion of the concept of sitcom, which is, according to Larry Mintz:

> "A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in each episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour . . . The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premises undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored" (qtd. in Simpson 2020, 4)

The word 'sitcom' stands for 'situation comedy'. According to David Marc, "[the] integration of the term 'sitcom' into the American language, like much of popular culture, was driven by the promotional needs of the entertainment industry" (Marc 2005, 16). 'Situation comedy' was used for the first time in 1953, in an article from the *TV Guide*. The piece notes that, since the success of *I Love Lucy,* a sitcom from CBS aired between 1951-57, television networks are inclined to fill all the empty half-hour slots in the schedule with this kind of program. The abbreviation, 'sitcom', appears only in 1964, in a similar type of article, however this time about *The Bing Crosby Show*.

There is a lot to say about the evolution of the format since its origins, and even before the TV (according to David Marc, some radio series served as "sources" to these first TV shows). The book, called *The Sitcom Reader*, where the article from Marc is integrated, covers in a series of essays the whole history of the format that was born and developed in American television[17].

The series considered 'sadcoms' follow the basic format described earlier by Larry Mintz but break one rule or another in order to introduce tragic and dramatic elements. According to

[16] First text where it appears is a website article from Jenny Jaffe 2015. The first academic work to use it is Sawallisch 2021.

[17] The book was edited by Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, in 2005, and re edited in 2016 with a new collection of essays, indicating the format is still useful in TV studies while it continues to be changing.

Handlen 2015 and Jaffe 2015, the sitcom format helps to hide "the dark reality under the smiling-happy-people surface of familiar concepts", creating a hybrid content that is an apparently flat and light comedy, but suddenly turns into a heavy drama[18].

Lastly, the fourth concept is nonsense. In *The Absurd in Literature* Neil Cornwell quotes Wim Tigges to define nonsense as "a narrative genre in which the seeming presence of one or more 'sensible' meanings is kept in balance by a simultaneous absence of such a meaning". After that, Cornwell cited Susan Stewart who says that nonsense is "humor without a context (...) a mistake on purpose", although "without sense there is no nonsense" (Cornwell 2006, 18). The idea that nonsense does not exist without the presence of some 'sense' is interesting as it reveals that the genre is not made of total randomness.

In fact, Jean-Jacques Lecercle argues that nonsense is a way of, not only denying the sense, but essentially of "reflexivity" about the aspects that constitute the sense. This French author analyzed the work of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear in order to describe the importance of nonsense to philosophy and linguistics. He argues that "non-sense is also metasense" (Lecercle 2002, 2). These texts, by breaking the rules of logic, structure or language, they are distancing themselves "from contemporary values, [and they are] not threatened when these vanish or are deeply altered (...) the diachrony of nonsense works both ways: it looks back in nostalgia, but it also looks forward in anticipation" (Lecercle 2002, 224). Through the absence of certain logical meanings, it is possible to emphasize reflection on others. On the other hand, the logical senses that are denied are sometimes what would tie a text to a particular time or place. Their negation makes it more transversal and universal, as they can be easily read in a different time period or location.

Taking into account the definition proposed by Viana, nonsense is intrinsically linked to comic reasoning because "humans often obtain pleasure from linguistic play and are ready to look for alternative paths to produce meaning" (Viana 2014, 543). Also, it is "a form of freedom, especially as a means to free thinking from the conventional bindings of logic and language" (*ibid*, 543).

[18] Zack Handlen's article talks about this phenomenon regarding animated series, and Jenny Jaffe takes the argument a step further and applies the same logic to live-action modern sitcoms.

Nonsense is often used to classify absurdist jokes and texts. The word has a lexical formation that simplistically and intuitively translates the detection of an incongruity: the absence of a moral, linguistic, rational or structural sense. It is a genre that is once again confused with absurdist humor. Nevertheless, its academic literature seems more far from the tragic and the dark subjects than tragicomedy and dark humor, respectively.

The point of looking at the theory behind these concepts is not at all to distinguish them or to propose distinctions. Genres, as mentioned earlier, are fluid, evolve over time, and differently in each cultural space. This summary of genres has allowed for a more succinct gathering of the characteristics that shape absurdist humor. And with all these ideas in mind, we will analyze the case study in part II of this dissertation.

Part II: BoJack Horseman

Chapter 1: Introduction to the series

BoJack Horseman is an animated TV series broadcasted between 2014 and 2020. It is composed of six seasons with twelve episodes each, except the sixth and final season which had 16 episodes and was aired in two parts. Similar to the sitcom format, an episode of *BoJack Horseman* has the duration of 25 minutes and a stand-alone plot for each episode. Nevertheless, the show also works with a main storyline which forces an orderly viewing of the episodes. The dynamics between the characters change as the show develops and the main storyline adds important context to the episodic plots.

1.1 Basic Info

The show was created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, designed by Lisa Hanawalt and produced by Michael Eisner's Tornante Company. Bob-Waksberg and Hanalwalt were unknown artists in the Hollywood industry before the series' success - when reviewing the show, TIME magazine called Raphael the "untested creator" (Berman 2019). He was a comedian who graduated in Theater and Performance and was part of a comedy sketch group. Around 2009, Raphael moved to Los Angeles and started to pitch ideas for shows to television producers. After successfully selling *BoJack* to Michael Eisner, he decided to invite an old friend, Lisa Hanawalt, to join the project as a designer. Until then, she had worked in several projects as an illustrator and a cartoonist, being published in *The New York Times*, *McSweeney's*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Lucky Peach* magazine. Bob-Waksberg and Hanawalt had already worked together on an online comics project called *Tip Me Over, Pour Me Out*.

BoJack Horseman was produced in the United States, by Tornante Company and in the ShadowMachine animation studios. It was released in 26 other countries and distributed in most of them by Netflix.

Along the way, *BoJack* collected some wins and nominations for several awards: two Saturn Award nominations for Best Animated Series on Television, four Critics' Choice Television

Awards for Best Animated Series, and two Creative Arts Emmy Award nominations for Outstanding Animated Program; Kristen Schaal was nominated for the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Character Voice-Over Performance, for her portrayal of Sarah Lynn.; writers on the show received seven nominations from the Writers Guild of America, three of which were won by Joe Lawson, Kate Purdy and Nick Adams.

Over the six seasons, the media critics recognized *BoJack* as a noteworthy show. According to the review platform *Rotten Tomatoes*, the series received an average of 93% score from the critics and 95% from the audience. Numerous magazines, such as TIME, RollingStone and GQ, have been putting *BoJack* on lists of the best series from modern television (see annex 1). On October 24, 2019, a few days before the final season premiered, BBC published an article arguing how the show became the "21st Century best Animation" (Mandle 2019).

Regarding the tone, *BoJack* is, at first sight, a colorful and energetic animated series. Dialogues and scenes are written with a fast-paced rhythm, matching the feel of being inside the show-business. The sound design is usually jazzy and upbeating, making the show appear light and superficial. However, as the story progresses, the audience starts to discover its deeper subjects and dark themes. Some moments of silence or with a heavier mood uncover the show's angle about depression, addiction, self-destructive behavior and toxic relationships. *BoJack* is often characterized as a comedy with an unavoidable tragic side; a show filled with nonsense puns, dark jokes and depressing moments, a constant struggle between humor and existential melancholy (Simpson 2020, Sawallisch 2021, Parashar 2020, Sánchez Saura 2019, Chater 2015). As McDonnell puts it:

> "The show's comedic highs are high, and the depressing lows are low. When Bojack Horseman hits us where it hurts, there's no wink wink moment or sarcastic sidekick deployed to instantly deflate the tension; instead, the writing explores the human condition with believable realism, and it's this sincere interest in what it's like to struggle that connects viewers so deeply to the characters of an otherwise zanily rendered comedy" (McDonnell 2018, 21).

1.2 Characters

The characters in this series are a mixture of animals and human beings. Living in an anthropomorphic universe, all the animals behave and are treated like human beings, although they retain the appearance and sometimes motor skills of the animals they resemble, which is

often used to create comical moments. For example, two secondary characters who personify the paparazzi are represented as two birds. They appear in season one to take incriminating photos of Bojack and blackmail him. Since they are birds, they work perched in a tree overlooking one of the windows of BoJack's house, thus using a common bird feature as a fundamental tool for the efficiency of their human work. In Season 1 Episode 7, these paparazzi birds are being threatened by another character, and one of the birds tries to storm out of the room by flying out the window. The window, however, was closed and the character ran into the glass, representing a comic moment often played in the real world by birds. These recurring comic puns are both visual and textual and are a part of the comedy style implemented in BoJack.

Cynical, destructive and pessimist classify not only the plot of the series but also BoJack's attitude towards life, towards those around him and, above all, BoJack himself (Chater 2015). Having been a young actor well-known to the general public, BoJack is now a wealthy 50-year-old adult, living off his past financial gains, but also off his memories of the peak of his career. He looks sloppy, ashamed of his excess weight (something he mentions himself in the very first episode), and which reflects the lack of ambition and personal and professional direction that has affected him in recent years.

From the start, BoJack behaves like an antihero, “a central character in a narrative or drama who lacks the admirable qualities of fortitude, courage, honesty, and decency” (Chandler and Munday 2011). His use of drugs and alcohol, the toxicity of his social relationships, the way he deals with his problems, the negative impact he has on those around him, all this lead the character to a state where it is difficult for others to find heroic virtues in his behavior. He is, however, a character aware of his flaws, determined to change. Being aware of his faults and constantly failing to change them, he enters a spiral of frustration, between accepting that he is destined to be unhappy and harmful to others and wanting to be a different person.

The choice of a main character with so many flaws and faults does not come by chance. In a book about the creation of the show, Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Lisa Hanawalt discuss the construction of this character and the need for a protagonist whose vulnerability is something the audience can identify with:

> "Raphael: 'Likeability' is a very loaded term in television development, and a lot of writers kind of push back against that. I don't think it's a bad instinct. You want your characters to be likeable, but the way you make them likeable is wider and more open than what some people may think. There's this narrower kind of philosophy that you have to make a character likeable by making him or her good, or generous, or kind, or admirable in some way. The wider approach is, for example, that if they're good at their job, the audience will like them.
> Lisa: It's more important for them to be relatable.
> Raphael: That's what it is. And I think you like your characters if you understand what they want, if you understand where they're from, if they feel vulnerable in some way. Vulnerability makes a character 'likeable'." (McDonnell 2018, 94)

Perhaps BoJack's problems during the series are not the problems that the average viewer faces in everyday life (since the audience is not necessarily composed of rich, adult actors with no Hollywood career prospects); but BoJack's emotions, his tendencies to make mistakes and have to deal with difficult psychological situations, the sadness he often feels for no obvious reason are aspects that anyone can identify with, sympathize with, or at least understand.

In addition to BoJack, the series introduces us to four more main characters written with their own complexities and arcs developed from existential questions, more characters with flaws that the audience can relate with. Diane Nguyen is, according to the creator Bob-Waksberg, the "fifth funniest" (*ibid*, 107), but curiously she seems to be the second most important character. This is because the six-season series has as its storyline in the pilot episode the meeting between BoJack and Diane. All the other main characters were already part of BoJack's life, and looking from this perspective, we could assume that it is Diane who effectively sets the main narrative in motion. As BoJack struggles to write his autobiography, his editor convinces him to hire a ghostwriter who will follow his daily life and regularly interview him in order to write the book. BoJack resists this idea out of pride but, by the end of the first episode, the two finally meet in person and Diane is officially hired.

The creators admit that it was difficult to find a voice for Diane, especially in a comedy show. She was initially thought as: "Cynical and clever, she's a development exec who likes BoJack and wants to help him make his comeback" (*ibid*, 51)[19]. In the Pitch Treatment, Diane is described with "charm and wit", and as "upbeat, but not cloyingly so, with a dry sense of humor" (*ibid*, 56). Her character in the show ends up being like this with some additional complex issues. She comes from a difficult and unsupportive family; she feels professionally

[19] From one of the emails of Raphael Bob-Waksberg to Lisa Hanawalt, with ideas for the show, in 2010.

frustrated and undervalued; she has strong views on social issues but is often ridicularized and disregarded by society; finally, she is dating a nice and caring partner, although they are deeply incompatible and end up divorcing. McDonnell sums her up as "the flawed idealist" (*ibid*, 107). He mentions "her terrible high school experience" and her feeling "stifled and directionless". An important contribution for Diane's profile was Alison Brie, the actress who did the voice for the character, according to the creators (*ibid*, 107). About Diane's love life, Brie says:

> "Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter are definitely wrong for each other, and that is what makes them one of the more realistic relationships on TV. There are aspects of both of their personalities that draw them towards each other, at times even bringing out the best in each other, but they will never fully understand each other. Perhaps they both represent the type of person they think they should be with rather than their actual perfect match. That is something I think a lot of people struggle with when looking for love". (*ibid*, 108)

Diane is one of the few human main characters of the show. However, being a human or animal in *BoJack's* universe does not have specific meaning. In an interview, the creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg reveals that, when a new character is created, the decision over whether it is a human or animal can rely on different factors: sometimes, the character's personality suggest a specific species, other times the writers think about who the character is going to relate with and try to keep a balance between human and animals in the scenes (Sepinwall 2016). Throughout the analysis of the show, I did not find any correlation with being human and a specific trait. However, I believe that the presence of humans among animal characters adds a layer of realism, making the viewer feel closer to the animal characters than if they were all animals.

Unlike Diane, Mr. Peanutbutter, who is an anthropomorphic yellow Labrador, described by McDonnell as the "Sunny Optimist". All in this character indicates happiness: his yellow color, his constant smiling expression, and his cheerful behavior. The audience might perceive him as a superficial character, naive, unaware of the problems of the world and particularly of the environment that surrounds him (he is also a Hollywood actor). If one starts to engage emotionally with BoJack, one will probably hate Mr. Peanutbutter, as BoJack does, and will feel annoyed by his constant good mood. However, as any other character in this show, Mr. Peanutbutter soon reveals some layers of personality that introduce complexity to its characterization and realistic explanations for his seemingly fake and superficial attitude.

In this fictional universe, *Horsin' Around* was followed by a very similar sitcom called *Mr. Peanutbutter's House*. This second show-within-the-show evidently suggests a tendency in the

American television industry to create almost identical products in order to extend the success of the formula as much as possible. One could presume that BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter would be very similar characters that could relate to and sympathize with each other, since they had a parallel background. Mike Hollingsworth, supervisor director of the show, mentions this in McDonnell's book and Lisa Hanawalt clarifies that their opposite behaviors are opposite responses to the same backstory.

What one understands from the development of Mr. Peanutbutter's arc is that he is not the naive and dumb happy character type, but instead a conscious individual that rationally chooses to live with lightness, appreciate every opportunity that is given to him and embrace the superficiality and other flaws of the world that surrounds him. Bob-Waksberg sums it up as "he's like, 'Oh you want me to do a commercial? You want me to do a cheesy reality show? Sounds great! What a joy to be alive!'" (McDonnell 2018, 112). At some point in the show, Mr. Peanutbutter himself reveals his life philosophy, demonstrating awareness of his superficiality: "The universe is a cruel, uncaring void. The key to being happy isn't a search for meaning. It's to just keep yourself busy with unimportant nonsense, and eventually, you'll be dead" (Season 1 Episode 12).

Besides the two actors - BoJack and Mr. Peanutbutter -, the show has in its main cast another character from the Hollywood industry: Princess Carolyn, an agent and manager. She is a forty-year-old Persian cat who manages BoJack's career (and later also Mr. Peanutbutter's) but also gets romantically involved with BoJack. However, their relationship ends in the first episode of the show. Despite some sporadic returns to BoJack, the storyline of Princess Carolyn's love life essentially follows with the involvement of secondary characters and her relationship with BoJack is consolidated as a friendship. The main conflict in Princess Carolyn's character is work-life balance. She represents the workaholic agents and managers of the industry, who combine dedication and unconditional effort with occasional less-ethical practices and money-driven actions. Extremely ambitious on a professional level, Princess Carolyn has, however, a lot of breakdown moments when she notices that her personal life is being forgotten. As she becomes older, she realizes the difficulties to find a compatible life partner and to accomplish her life goal of having a child. The writers mention this conflict as the basis for Princess Carolyn, although they attempt not to fall into "the cliché of the woman who has a great work life, but her personal life is in shambles" (McDonnell 2018, 108). They mix the equation as the series goes along, resulting in 1) moments when her work is successful, the love life is not and

she feels good about it, 2) moments when the same happens but she feels frustrated, 3) moments when the opposite happens and she feels accomplished, and so on. As the other characters presented so far, she also impersonates the complexity of finding a purpose in life and following it through victories and drawbacks.

Finally, to complete the main cast, there is Todd Chavez, a human character. Todd is a twenty-year-old who lives on BoJack's couch and has no professional or familiar relation with any character at the beginning of the show. According to Mike Hollingsworth (supervisor director) and Aaron Paul (voice of Todd Chavez) there are a lot of people in Los Angeles that live a similar lifestyle to Todd's: sleep in someone's house, have no personal or professional ambitions, "seem to be floating and have nothing going on but… are so happy" (McDonnell 2018, 116). Todd is friendly, creative and enthusiastic especially when he finds a new passion or when he helps his friends in an adventure. However, he finds it hard to know what he wants to do as a job and to establish his independent life. Eventually, he settles down professionally starting a nannying service for a company, a job that combines his care for others and childish personality. Regarding his social relationships, the series follows Todd's evolution from living in BoJack's couch to moving in with a love partner named Maude. During this process, he realizes that he is asexual, something that has been keeping him insecure and unhappy. After coming out and accepting his identity, he became more self-confident and assured of what he wanted.

1.3 Plot

Set in Hollywoo (a fictional Hollywood that has lost the 'D' in a incident from the sixth episode), *BoJack Horseman* is a story focused on a character with the same name, an anthropomorphic horse, who had the peak of his acting career in the 1990s with a very famous sitcom called *Horsin Around*, and is now trying to revive his career by publishing a memoir.

The audience meets BoJack in his 50s, living in a big Hollywood mansion with a lot of money, but going through a phase of professional decay and emptiness on a personal level. He is an actor who had an early big TV success and is now living the rest of his life in depression and

frustration for not having any more relevant roles and living hostage to his former hit[20]. Also, the fact that his show *Horsin' Around* was not highly considered, but seen as a non-smart family sitcom, makes him even less at peace with his past. The character demonstrates this in one the first scenes of the show, when he is being interviewed about his career: "I know that it's very hip these days to s**** all over Horsin' Around. . . But, after a long day of getting kicked in the urethra, you just want to get home and watch a show about good, likable people who love each other. No matter what happens, at the end of thirty minutes, everything's going to turn out okay" (Season 1 Episode 1).

The first season covers the process of writing the memoir with the help of Diane. They meet at the first episode and, after a period of reluctance, BoJack agrees to have her following his life for the next months in order to write the book about him. However, his psychological instability stimulates BoJack to behave in a self-destructive way: he is addicted to alcohol, has several episodes of abusive use of drugs and carries an overall toxic life regarding his habits but also his social relationships. In the pilot episode, the audience is introduced to Todd, and to the way BoJack is constantly annoyed by Todd's presence in the house; to Princess Carolyn, who decides to end the love relationship she had with BoJack but keep the professional relationship of agency.

The second episode brings the self-destructive behavior into more evidence. After a regular trip to a supermarket, BoJack ends up arguing with a navy seal. The situation escalates so far that the navy seal goes on national TV and exposes BoJack's impoliteness. BoJack responds emotionally and accuses the troops to be "jerks", declarations that suddenly cause a chaotic controversy around his public figure.

And the array of harmful practices goes on: in episode 3, he acts as a bad influence on Sarah Lynn, his former co-star of *Horsin Around*, who is already having a rampage of drug use; in episode 4, he helps Todd to put together a rock opera, but sabotages the project when he realizes that, by making Todd successful, he will probably be more alone at home; and the list goes on.

[20] Some fans suspect that the character is based on real cases of the American Tv industry. The most probable inspiration is Bob Saget, according to online forums on Quora and Reddit.

Until one gets to the end of the season, and BoJack's biography written by Diane is finally finished. The book paints a cruel but vulnerable person that matches the character that the audience have known throughout the show. However, BoJack does not accept this portrayal of himself and fires her. He tries to write an alternative version. Eventually giving up, he agrees on publishing her version and asks her to give him some redemption: “Diane, I need you to tell me that it's not too late. I, I, I need you to tell me that I'm a good person. I know that I can be selfish and narcissistic and self-destructive, but underneath all that, deep down, I'm a good person and I need you to tell me that I'm good. Diane, tell me, please, Diane, tell me that I'm good”.

In season 2, BoJack gets one of his dream jobs as an actor: he plays Secretariat, an old racehorse who BoJack admired as a child, in a movie about his life. At the same time, BoJack falls in love with Wanda Pierce, a TV producer who had recently woken up from a 30-year-long coma (therefore, does not know who BoJack is and is unaware of his reputation).

This season also explores the troubled relationship between BoJack and his mother Beatrice. After a childhood of witnessing harsh arguments from his parents, his father died, and his mother continued to be as cold and cruel to him as she always had been. BoJack avoids talking to her until a certain point in this season when he finally answers her phone call. It is through this subplot that one understands where BoJack's fragile, self-destructive, and hopeless attitude comes from. All the way through the series, Beatrice continues to exert a negative influence on BoJack; in season 4, dementia begins to affect Beatrice's mental health and create an extra layer of toxicity in the relationship between mother and son. Episode 6 of season 5 is an entire monologue: it is BoJack's speech at his mother's funeral. Even after she passes away, Beatrice still makes a few appearances in the series, most notably in the series' penultimate episode, which takes place entirely in BoJack’s dream.

Meanwhile, the relationship with Wanda eventually flops. BoJack's love life over the six seasons remains poorly resolved, with fleeting partners and connections with little depth. The exception to the rule would be Diane. At first, the story seems to lead towards building a love relationship between the two, but it turns out to be an intense friendship that nevertheless makes Diane one of the most important people to BoJack: she is the one BoJack turns to when his life hits rock bottom.

As a whole, the series is about BoJack's inability to deal with his negative impulses and emotional instability. The characters around him also play out their own subplots, with existential problems (which I mentioned in the characterization) that sometimes intersect with BoJack's story. As the series progresses, the episodes become more and more interconnected, and it is increasingly indispensable to follow the plot carefully to understand what is happening in each episode.

The plot of the last season brings together a number of loose ends in the story that were left unfinished in previous seasons. BoJack's life becomes more complicated, with the consequences of past wrongdoings looming.

The series covers a range of contemporary and some timeless themes. In this brief introduction to the series, I believe it is more useful to focus on contemporary themes, given our major goal of analyzing how the concept of absurdist humor, which is cross-temporal, applies to a contemporary product.

Chapter 2: Precursors

In this subchapter, I am going to briefly introduce the most relevant precursors and influences of *BoJack Horseman*.

2.1 Anthropomorphic Animals

One of the first elements that stands out when one faces any image or excerpt from *BoJack* is the use of anthropomorphic animals, particularly the main character who appears as a horse. The use of animals to personify people's dramas is not something new in the Western animated film and television industry. Throughout the 20th century, several stories were told with animal characters: sometimes cohabiting with animated humans, as in the film *The Jungle Book* 1967; other times with real live-action humans, as in the film *Space Jam* 1996; and even with both, such as the case of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* 1988.

BoJack Horseman is made entirely from animation and the figures can either represent a human or an anthropomorphic animal. Regarding the latter, it is important to clarify the 'rules' in which

the animal-characters are humanized: do they behave like humans or like their corresponding animal? How self-conscious are they about their animal features? Are they humanized animals both on a physical and psychological level?

When commenting on the talking animals, creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg (McDonnell 2018, 109) mentions the American TV series *Family Guy*, an animated show where the character Brian plays the role of a pet, the dog of the family. Yet he acts as any other human character in the show. His body resembles a dog but he walks in erect posture and his superior paws are human hands. This anthropomorphism is very similar to the one used in the characters of *BoJack Horseman*. However, differently from *Family Guy*, almost all animals in *BoJack'*s "universe" are actually part of society, as if they were also humans. Unlike *Family Guy*, which presents a normal world where this dog happens to have human traits, in *BoJack* the social world is inhabited by humans and animals.

Regarding their psychological and social capabilities, the characters of *BoJack Horseman* are fully humanized. They have jobs, go to restaurants, have friends and families exactly how a human society works.

The use of animals with this degree of humanization is more easily found in kids shows, like the short films from *Looney Tunes* and the series from *Mickey Mouse's* universe. The show inherits a childish visuality, becoming more unique when in combination with the plot's realism and cynicism.

Looney Tunes and the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* also have the Los Angeles motif in common with *BoJack Horseman*. According to Laurel Schmuck, all these shows intend to "explore the imagined city of Los Angeles as a cartography of animal ghosts, invented and reinvented as semiotic machines, which force us to look at animals as ourselves and at ourselves as animals" (Schmuck 2018, 2).

2.2 Discourses on Postmodernism

Still in the animated series context and regarding the critical approach on postmodernism, *BoJack Horseman* appears to be in line with other programmes that preceded it. As Raúl

Sánchez Saura points out, "[s]hows like *The Simpsons* and *South Park* have exposed a cynical sense of humor and pointed out the faults of Western society while ridiculing any attempts to change them" (Sánchez Saura 2019: 292).

The Simpsons, on the air since 1989, with more than seven hundred episodes, have parodied almost every topic related with American culture, society, politics, and history. Through a fixed group of characters with strong features, their conflicts with contemporary issues triggers some interesting thoughts about our society. For example, Lisa Simpson, the daughter of the family, who has always shown a progressive mind, becomes at some point a vegetarian; she faces several adversities, most of them related with social interactions, with her friends and family ridcularizing her beliefs. The episode portrays a society that is not ready for such a change, and refrains the ability of Lisa to change her habits.

The series *South Park* takes a step further on this topic. In an episode called 'Let Them Eat Goo', the writers play with the recent general care for animal rights and environmental protection in the real world: Randy opens a plant-based hamburger fast food restaurant, only because his weed company was decreasing the sales. He uses the animal and environmental causes for marketing his business and succeeds. The episode also discusses the confusion between healthy and vegetarian food, with characters eventually realizing that the new fast food hamburgers are equally high in saturated fats and salt.

However, the article distinguishes BoJack from these shows by mentioning the plot continuity, that is, actions of one episode having an impact and being remembered in subsequent episodes. This memory leads the characters to deal with their weaknesses and seek redemption (Sánchez Saura 2019). The author argues that despite "the criticism of the roots of the postmodern hegemony", *BoJack* also "offer[s] creative alternatives that aim at overcoming it" (*ibid*, 299), being one of them the sincerity and redemption characters must search for at the end of each episode, as the plot continuity does not allow their emotions and state of minds to be magically reset in the next episode.

In sum, it is possible to position *BoJack* in the family of animated series for adults that present a cynical and also critical humor of contemporary society and critical of the cultural reflection itself. From *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, to *South Park*, *Big Mouth* and *Rick and Morty*, all try a humorous approach that is increasingly subversive. Though, in *BoJack*, the critique comes in

a particular way since the series has a habit of exploring the flaws and weaknesses of society to an extreme not very common in these kinds of series. The way BoJack leads the reflection on these themes, unlike the others, seems not to be so committed to the comical side and clearly alerts us that that society of animals and cartoon figures is also our society. Nevertheless, I do not pretend to argue that BoJack is more critical of postmodernism than the others; for that a meticulous analysis of each of these shows and comparison between them is needed. At this point, I want to describe in what context *BoJack* appears to the audiences and what aspects it inherited from the other shows.

2.3 Sitcom Format

Bradley Simpson's dissertation called *More Man Than a Horse? BoJack Horseman and its Subversion of Sitcom Conventions in Search of Realism* offers another level of contextualization of our practical case, which concerns the sitcom format. According to the author, BoJack follows the trend of corrupting the traditional sitcom format (as described in section 1.3.3) already started by the "ironic, nihilistic comedies of the postmodern era (*The Office, Seinfeld, Friends*)" (Simpson 2020, 4). These shows have introduced to the western TV tradition the meta humor, in other words, the humor about its own way of making humor. *Seinfeld*[21], for example, uses this explicitly in an episode called "The Pitch": TV executives express interest in Jerry Seinfeld doing a TV series, so Jerry and his friend George work on a pitch for the proposed show. The plot is a reference to the real process that the show's creators Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David went through. As for *The Office*, both UK and US versions, is a mockumentary - a fake documentary - about a branch of a paper company. The characters are aware of the presence of the cameras, which makes them look at them several times in the show, breaking the fourth wall.

These two examples, among other cases of meta-humorous shows, have created a trend of cynical and self-conscious comedies. The show's characters and plot manifest awareness of the format and often comment on their 'fictional condition'. In *BoJack*, the cynicism is increased, since part of its comedy and criticism relies on the Hollywood superficial industry and the *Horsin Around*'s flaws.

[21] *Seinfeld* is an American sitcom, aired between 1989 and 1998, where the stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld plays a fictional version of himself. It is about the mundane life of Jerry and his friends George, Elaine and Kramer. The show is considered one of the best TV comedies of all time.

Regarding the plot continuity, *BoJack* works with strict rules. Characters are truly affected by the events of the previous episodes, and the main storyline is developed throughout the series, despite the episodic subplots. Traditionally, a sitcom has episodic plots whose conflict is open and closed in the same episode. Recalling Larry Mintz's definition:

> "A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in each episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour . . . The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premises undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored" (qtd. in Simpson 2020, 4)

But already in *Seinfeld,* aired during the 1990s, the continuity of the plot began to be subtly worked out: for instance, the final episode of the show brings back almost all of the episodic characters as witnesses of a main trial, making the events of each episode that seemed resolved and inconsequential have an aftereffect on the show. In *The Simpsons*, the character's changes in an episode also do not fully reset to their previous features after the end of each episode: Lisa Simpson's turn to vegetarianism happens in an episode and it is maintained in the following seasons with occasional references. Hence, the circular plots, which was a remarkable feature of sitcoms, has already been challenged before *BoJack*. Still, the latter takes it further with a strong continuity that almost demands an orderly watching of the episodes. Besides, the show frequently comments on this subject: BoJack often discusses how things were always reset at the end of an episode of *Horsin' Around*, and that is not the case for real life.

In September 2015, *Vulture*[22] published an article by Jenny Jaffe called "The Rise of Sadcom" where this new term is born. The author references the argument of another article, Handlen 2015, that shows like *BoJack Horseman* and *Rick and Morty* are an example of subversive animations using their light and colored appearance to paradoxically portray a dark reality; then she makes her own argument: "While I agree with his point, it can be taken a step further. This isn't just a new trend in animation (in fact, I'd argue, subversiveness and animation have gone hand in hand since the early days of *Looney Tunes*) — it's defining an entire new crop of TV shows". (Jaffe 2015)

[22] A website from the New York magazine.

Next, the author explains how the new era of sitcoms are divided in two factions: the sincere and the cynical: “The key difference between these two types of shows lies in the different ways their main characters interact with the world around them. (...) One operates with a 21st-century ‘nothing ever changes’ cynicism, the other with a wide-eyed sincerity that says, ‘things are always getting better’” (Jaffe 2015)

She places *BoJack* and some other new American comedies in the middle of this framework, although BoJack adds a portion of optimism. That is, in a society that is corrupt and prone to bad behavior, even those who are distinguished by bad examples, such as the protagonists of *BoJack* and many other modern series, have a fund of will to improve: “unlike shows like (...) Seinfeld, our bad decisions don’t stem from an inherent moral bankruptcy at our cores but from an inherent limit to our knowledge and capability. (...) And there is something deeply optimistic in that” (Jaffe 2015).

Although my reservations about the conclusions the author draws, it is important to retain from this article the complexity of the issues that the sadcom TV series usually raise, especially in the judgment and interpretation of the flawed protagonists.

And the flawed protagonist is also an important element in the narrative that BoJack inherited from previous shows. Comedies, as I have mentioned in Aristotle's definition in section 2.3.2, are about “people who are rather inferior” (Janko 1987, 6), therefore, it is as if they required the existence of flaws in the protagonist. However, the way in which the protagonist is flawed and how the show relates him with the audiences establish key differences between *BoJack Horseman* and, for instance, *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*. As suggested by the writers of The Take (2020), BoJack is part of the antihero’s group of modern television, a group where we can find the flawed protagonists of *The Sopranos* (Tony Soprano, a mob leader), *Breaking Bad* (Walter White, a drug cooker and dealer), *Peaky Blinders* (Thomas Shelby, a gang leader) - all live action dramas - and finally, *Rick and Morty* (Rick Sanchez, an alcoholic mad scientist, who frequently mistreats his grandson). In contrast to the common flawed protagonist presented in comedies, like Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons* or Peter Griffin in *Family Guy,* this antihero is seriously and disturbingly immoral. His lewd behavior has a tragic side, something that brings serious implications to the plot and the other characters and not just funny gags. As noted by Chris McDonnell, “what makes BoJack unique among comedic protagonists is his capacity to be both a cartoonish heel and flawed, dramatic, antihero who has to cope with the havoc he

wreaks upon his own life" (McDonnell 2018, 99). It is yet another feature where the creators of *BoJack Horseman* get the comedy and tragedy genres mixed up. But for the purpose of contextualizing BoJack, it proves the existence of an influential strand based on dramatic antihero protagonists from the Western television.

2.4 Theater of the Absurd

The Theater of the Absurd has been present in this dissertation from the very beginning, with multiple direct references, but also a possible general deduction: is *BoJack Horseman* a contemporary example of this movement, regarding subject and form?

First, one needs to question the attribution of the 'movement' categorization to the Theater of the Absurd, since, contrary to what the term may suggest, the authors who formed this group did not come together as a faction and purposely created a new theatrical current. They were united, *a posteriori* of their work, by Martin Esslin, a Hungarian scholar who coined the expression 'Theater of the Absurd'. Esslin wrote an essay in 1956 (Esslin 2010) and a book in 1961 (Esslin 2004), where he identified the similarities of these playwrights and a philosophical tendency that mirrored the absurd of Albert Camus:

> "This common denominator that characterizes their works might well be described as the element of *the absurd*. "Est absurde ce qui n'a pas de but . . ." ("Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective"), the definition given by Ionesco in a note on Kafka, certainly applies to the plays of Beckett and Ionesco as well as those of Arthur Adamov up to his latest play, *Paolo Paoli*, when he returned to a more traditional form of social drama" (Esslin 2010, 31)

And a few lines before, he clarifies that: "The three dramatists that have been grouped together here [Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco][23] would probably most energetically deny that they form anything like a school or movement. Each of them, in fact, has his own roots and sources, his own very personal approach to both form and subject matter." (*ibid*, 31).

[23] In this first essay, Esslin only mentions these three playwrights as part of the group. However, later in the text, he brings up Antoin Artaud, as "another major influence in the development of the Theatre of the Absurd". In the book Theater of the Absurd (Esslin 2004), Jean Genet and Harold Pinter enter the list. And in a chapter called "Parallels and Proselytes" many others are referenced.

The absurdity of each of these writers assumes different types of darkness, in the sense that the subject usually tends to melancholy, loneliness and disillusionment; a tragic, irrational, sometimes visceral and aggressive portrait of life's meaninglessness. Regarding the tone of each author, Esslin says:

> "(...) in Beckett it is melancholic, colored by a feeling of futility born from the disillusionment of old age and chronic hopelessness; Adamov's is more active, aggressive, earthy, and tinged with social and political overtones; while Ionesco's absurdity has its own fantastic knock-about flavor of tragical clowning. But they all share the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irremediable character of the human condition" (*ibid*, 31).

Nevertheless, the Theater of the Absurd "does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation" (Esslin, 1965)[24]. Liberation from the sense of despair that the human condition provokes. The plays make the audience confront the lack of logic and meaning in the world but also make the audience accept that there is nothing to do but laugh:

> "It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity (...); precisely *because* there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief" (Esslin 1965).

The subject-matter from the plays of the Theater of the Absurd has some semblance with the broad melancholy of *BoJack Horseman*. Generally speaking, both speak about the darker topics of the human condition, confronting the audience with a heavy reality and with the human's inability towards the absurd. Despite the obvious differences caused by time and social context in which both were written, what separates this group of plays from the series is the form.

By form I do not mean the use of humor, because both reveal a strong comic side. What is distinguishable is the absurdity of the form. According to Esslin, the Theater of the Absurd dismantles every rule of logic humans created, even in the storytelling techniques. An absurdist play is "a bewildering experience, a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on that seem to go counter to all accepted standards of stage convention" (Esslin 2010, 30). It is usually hard to find a beginning, middle and end to most of these stories and characters are generally incoherent and unrealistic: "(...) the audience is confronted with characters whose

[24] Writes Esslin in the introduction of a collection of plays called Absurd Drama.

motives and action remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify" (Esslin 2004, 411).

Esslin argues that "[characters] with whom the audience fails to identify are inevitably comic" and explains that "[if] we identified with the figure of a farce who loses his trousers, we should feel embarrassment and shame". The issue of identification is quite important in this discussion, if one recalls that the authors of *BoJack* were advocating the need for the characters to be relatable, so that the audience could identify with their vulnerability. Is the series written so that, when BoJack "loses his trousers", the audience laughs? Or feels embarrassed?

It seems that *BoJack Horseman* combines an influence of this kind of theater with a strive for a conventional show. The series, at the same time that mixes the principles of comedy and tragedy and subverts a lot of traditions in storytelling, it also respects some of the structures expected from a Western TV show.

2.5 Monty Python's Absurdist Humor

Absurdist humor has evolved from the Theater of the Absurd to the present day with a major reference in the 1970s and 1980s: the Monty Python group. Born on British television, the group was formed by Eric Idle, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Michael Palin, Terry Jones, and Terry Gilliam, becoming an international phenomenon and influencing the following generations of comedians.

Their work could be seen in television, firstly in the series called *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974). Each episode of the show consisted in a sequence of comedy sketches, with no narrative connection between. According to Peter Marks, in the entry 'Monty Python' from the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, the sketches from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* "parodied television conventions and formats such as game shows, interviews, news broadcasts, documentaries, and pretentious cultural programs", adding that the show "ventured regularly into the absurd (...), the pseudo-intellectual (...), the silly (...), and the grotesque" (Marks 2014, 519).

Meanwhile, the group spread its work into other formats such as books, records, live performances and films. In this last field, some pieces like the *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1974), *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) and *Monty Python's Meaning of Life* (1983) are considered prominent references of comedy in cinema history (Marks 2014).

What distinguished Monty Python was their uncommon use of the absurd as a comic tool. Marks describes their humor as a "unique blend of surrealism, absurdity, and satire" and their style became so important that the *Oxford English Dictionary* has an entry for the word 'pythonesque', "signifying absurd, surreal humor" (*ibid*, 519).

The Monty Python phenomenon can be seen as a move of the absurd from the stages to the screens (television and film), while maintaining the subversive aspect of storytelling. That is, as the plays of the Theater of the Absurd subverted the expectations of theater, Monty Python played around a television fictional show, often breaking with its basic principles. For example, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* "lampooned film conventions, opening with faux–Ingmar Bergman credits, acknowledging that its sets sometimes were models, and including a parody of a Hollywood song-and-dance number". These last two moments happen in a scene where King Arthur and his knights arrive at a castle called Camelot. Fascinated by the place, all the knights admire the castle's beauty, while the servant says, "It's only a model", alerting to the fact that, in reality, they are not standing in front of a castle, and the footage is only from a model. Then, a classic Hollywood musical stars about Camelot, sung by the knights. In the same movie, there is a scene where time coherence is openly broken. The film is about the legend of King Arthur's search for the Holy Grail, therefore, it happens in medieval times. Nevertheless, in the middle of a battle scene, the medieval soldiers are stopped by modern police cars and King Arthur is arrested.

The following analysis on the humor from *BoJack* will remind us of this "unique blend of surrealism, absurdity, and satire", with plots and characters that deconstruct the television conventions, play around absurd premises and perform meta-jokes on the format.

Chapter 3: Themes

3.1 Satire of Hollywood Industry

One of the themes that is evident from the first minute of the series is the Hollywood industry and its flaws. This critique begins with the construction of the character BoJack (a washed-up and self-centered famous actor), goes through the other characters who represent other people from the industry (such as Princess Carolyn, the workaholic agent and manager of actors, and Mr. Peanutbutter, the actor who plays along with the superficiality of the world), and it is also present in the characterization of the space where the series occurs: a Hollywood that loses the 'D' and becomes Hollywoo (I am going to develop this aspect in the analysis chapter).

In an article published in *The Week*, Arielle Bernstein writes that "[in] the world of BoJack, each colorful character, whether human or animal, is constantly wrestling with (...) the self-absorbed and vapid culture of Hollywood" (Bernstein 2020). This quote refers to what the series points out as a flaw in Hollywood culture: self-absorbed people and vapid content. BoJack represents a self-absorbed person, right from the first episode when, for instance, he is not worried about parking in handicap spot, when he does not care about Princess Carolyn feelings (when they had a relationship) as much as he cared about his overweight, or when he spends hours watching himself on the television. BoJack is egocentric and 'wrestles' with other egocentrics of the industry[25].

As for the vapid culture, the show comments frequently on how the industry avoids entering into a serious and informative discussion about challenging topics of our era. An example of this comes in the second episode of the show, called "BoJack Hates the Troops". BoJack buys a box of muffins in a grocery store, but the muffins had already been saved by "Neal McBeal, the Navy Seal"[26]. He wanted them as his first present after coming back home from Afghanistan. Neal is accusing BoJack of disrespecting him, therefore, disrespecting the American forces. The situation escalates into a debate about the glorification of the troops, with BoJack arguing that people who become soldiers are not "automatically" heroes: "it's not like giving a jerk a gun and telling him it's okay to kill people suddenly turns that jerk into a hero!".

[25] Mr.Peanutbutter usually does not listen to others, as he constantly interrupts conversations to greet another person that suddenly captures his interest. The writers even make this a recurrent situation in several episodes, transforming this into a funny gag: every time that he is in a middle of an important conversation, Mr. Peanutbutter greets the same Erica, someone he sees, that is always outside the shot and the audience never gets the chance to meet.

[26] An actual seal, one of the show's recurrent animal puns.

BoJack is trying - with an edgy attitude, for sure - to engage in a critical debate that questions the instinctive exaltation of someone just because he belongs in the army. However, BoJack is surrounded by an uncritical society that follows the easiest and thrilling trend, and a media coverage that is more interested in the scandal between a movie star and a member of the military than contributing to an informative mediation. In the end, Mr. PenautButter suggests that BoJack should apologize to the navy seal on his live reality TV show. Again, the industry - in this case represented by Mr. PenautButter's reality show - takes advantage of the whole affair to produce another content for itself, creating a lurid moment instead of developing a serious debate.

As Alissa Chater writes, "*BoJack Horseman* departs from this humor [the situation between BoJack and the navy seal] by politicizing the issue, turning it into a deeper consideration of the ill-treatment of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, making it more modern than the dated sitcom format" (Chater 2015, 2).

Following this thought about the subversion of the sitcom format in *BoJack*, it is important to say that the commentary on the sitcom format is done through the "show-within-the-show"[27] *Horsin Around.* In this fictional sitcom series, where BoJack played the main protagonist, a lot of things were different from real life. Or, in other perspective, from the world of *BoJack Horseman*, the series. For instance, no controversial topics were discussed in *Horsin Around* and in every situation, every character seemed to be, at the end of the episode, better than before. The creation of this show-within-the-show makes the contrast evident and proposes a rethinking of the way reality is represented in *Horsin Around*'s type of TV shows: a reality where everything is perfect or heading towards perfection; serious debates are avoided; and all endings give a sense of closure to the characters, therefore, to the viewers. "BoJack: Closure is a made-up thing by Steven Spielberg to sell movie tickets. It, like true love and the Munich Olympics, doesn't exist in the real world. The only thing to do now is just to keep living forward" (Season 1 Episode 5)

[27] Expression used by Chater 2015. It is generally applied to shows that are fictional and are part of the narrative from a TV series or movie.

By showing the backstage drama and dark reality of *Horsin Around*, *BoJack Horseman* alerts to the fact that the Hollywood industry can conceive an engaging but misrepresentative reality. The question is: what impact does that have on audiences?

3.2 Postmodernism

The satire of the Hollywood industry theme is profoundly connected to another current theme of the show: postmodernism. According to Britannica, postmodernism is "a late 20th-century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of Western philosophy in the modern period" (Duignan 2020). It is a position of skepticism and relativism regarding the 'truth' that was constructed or acknowledged in the last centuries. In an article on StudioBinder, Mike Bedard writes that "[works] in Postmodernism tend to have an attitude of rejection or irony toward typically accepted narratives":

> "Postmodernism typically criticizes long-held beliefs regarding objective reality, value systems, human nature, and social progress, among other things. In cinema, Postmodernism brought with it darker kinds of films that viewed the world with a hint of detached irony. Postmodern movies aim to subvert highly-regarded expectations, which can be in the form of blending genres or messing with the narrative nature of a film" (Bedard 2020).

This attitude is in many ways present in *BoJack Horseman*. Its premise of portraying the depressed life and injurious behavior of a Hollywood star - one who played the role of a smiley character on a famous and family friendly sitcom - is questioning the general belief that Hollywood stars like BoJack are happy, fortunate and perfect role models, like the characters they often portray. Besides, they are rich, live in mansions, are successful and worldwide famous and idols for millions of people. *BoJack* is, in this sense, a postmodern show: a series that reveals skepticism about Hollywood's expectations and deconstructs a reality that its precursors in the industry created (although, it is not the first show to destroy this idea).

Bringing back the example of the last section, the Neal McBeal conflict with BoJack will also reflect a postmodern attitude. BoJack, in a speech where he questions the blind glorification of the troops, destroys the existing narrative about heroes and war. It is, in fact, an interesting plot that mixes a silly and uncritical audience with a looking for scandal attitude from the media. It is hard to draw where the critique on Hollywood ends and on society starts.

Relativism, an important feature of the postmodern era, can be seen in *BoJack*, through some particular situations, like the Vincent Adultman storyline. In episode 9 of season 1, Princess Carolyn, in order to make BoJack jealous, introduces herself to a random person in a bar. That person has a bizarre physiognomy: it is clearly three children stacked up on each other inside a long trench coat, pretending to be an adult. Every time someone asks Vincent a question, he always answers shortly and generic:

> "Princess Carolyn: What's your name, stud?
> Vincent: Vincent. Adult… man. Vincent Adultman.
> Princess Carolyn: Did you hear that BoJack? Vincent is an adult, and I'll bet he knows how to treat a lady.
> BoJack: He very clearly isn't and doesn't.
> Vincent: Would you like alcohol?
> Princess Carolyn: I certainly would, you sophisticated smooth talker. Mmm! Tell me all about you!
> Vincent: I like business… Transactions." (Season 1 Episode 9)

Vincent portrays an interesting comment on relativizing identity, since himself and all the other people (except for BoJack) believe that he is an adult. Everything in his physicality and discourse suggests that he is a fake adult, but almost every character accepts the farce and accepts Vincent as a normal person. Princess Carolyn even gets to the point of starting a relationship with him. The story suggests that if everyone, including Vincent, assumes he is actually an adult and not three kids, neither BoJack nor the viewers can prove otherwise. The identity of character is relative, and not exclusively dependent on our perspective.

Additionally, there is also commentary on the postmodernism attitude itself. The TV series is, at the same time, a result of the era and a detractor of its flaws. Because postmodernism, if exaggerated on its relativism, can lead to a position of eternal doubt and, worst, indifference towards knowledge. The uncritical masses in *BoJack's* universe are representing this critique on exaggerated relativism: they follow every new trend without thinking and morally judge celebrities based on rumors and gossip. The episode of Navy McBeal ends with Mr. Peanutbutter interrupting the argument because his head got stuck inside a bucket; a silly moment that suddenly distracts everyone from the previous topic and finishes the discussion on the troop's glorification. Sánchez Saura reads this moment, indicating that "postmodernism does not seek to engage in earnest conversation which could weaken its shallow paradigm" (Sánchez Saura 2019, 295).

3.3 Mental Health

A few years before the start of *BoJack Horseman*'s production, Raphael Bob-Waksberg was living in a closet of a big house in Hollywood. That experience gave him inspiration for the conceptualization of the show: "I didn't know anybody else who lived there, but this house was amazing (...) I remember standing out on the balcony, looking out over the city, and feeling on top of the world - but also never more lonely and isolated. And I thought that kind of idea was an interesting feeling to explore" (McDonnell 2018, 23)

Loneliness in a world full of people, opportunities, projects, fame and celebrations: the series explores mental health issues in a context where one might think they would not exist. The primal example of this paradoxical phenomenon is BoJack, the character. Living in a dream house, with money earned from his career as a Hollywood star, one would not expect BoJack to feel frustrated and depressed.

Poorva Parashar proposes childhood trauma as one of the causes of BoJack's mental instability: "There was a complete lack of unconditional positive regard in his childhood. In fact, if anything, there was unconditional negative regard" (Parashar 2020, 11). His mother, Beatrice, is cold, distant and admits several times that she regrets giving birth to BoJack. Butterscotch Horseman, BoJack's father, and Beatrice have been seen fighting on multiple occasions, with the young BoJack witnessing everything: "the environment in which BoJack grew up was extremely troubling and not conducive to the development of a secure and mentally healthy individual" (*ibid*, 12).

Other aspects of mental health that, according to this author, are very vivid in the show have to do with substance abuse and defense mechanisms. She mentions BoJack's tendency to rationalize every damaging behavior or attitude, justifying "his actions, often pinning them on his 'narcissistic self', which at times he distinguishes from his 'good self'. By pinning the blame on a part of him that is necessarily bad, BoJack tries to absolve his larger personality" (*ibid*, 15). Also, he frequently denies the responsibility in his life choices, hiding behind his rationalizations and arguing that his destiny is a product of his environment and external factors. When Diane, his biographer, starts to ask him about his childhood, he creates a fake narrative of a happy home and supportive parents, in an attempt to deny the trauma he suffers. It is

interesting how the troubled childhood can be an example of denial - BoJack often hides this information so that people do not assume he is unstable and maybe to convince himself that none of that affected him - but at the same time an example of victimization - as he argues that his traumas are responsible for his bad behavior, not him.

Then, there is the alcohol and drug addiction, a recurrent theme of the show that causes major conflicts and consequences in the plot. In BoJack's life, the substance abuse is inevitably related to his instabilities. Consuming drugs and alcohol serve the purpose of distracting BoJack from his misery and bad thoughts.

The mental health theme was crucial to the series reputation and positive reviews. Mandle writes that "*BoJack Horseman* has always been particularly acclaimed for the way in which it has explored human trauma" (Mandle 2019) and several other critics[28] mention the accurate portrayal of depression, mental illness and trauma.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1 "Hollywoo" Universe: Nonsense and Realism

> "[Theatre of the Absurd] presents the audience with a picture of a disintegrating world that has lost its unifying principle, its meaning, and its purpose - an absurd universe".
> (Esslin 2004, 411)

In season 1, episode 6, BoJack is starting to have feelings for his biographer, Diane. After a night of excessive drinking, he wakes up at home to the sound of the following breaking news: someone stole the 'D' from the Hollywood sign. BoJack looks through the window of his house and finds out it was him. The gigantic 'D' sign is now at BoJack's pool. He wants to get rid of it, especially because he does not want people to know the reason why he stole it: he is in love with Diane and, while drunk, he stole the 'D' as an act of passion. The episode then develops around this incident, and, after a series of events, the sign ends up being accidentally destroyed.

[28] See annexes

However, people have already got used to calling Hollywoo to Hollywood and from that moment on until the last episode, the Hollywood sign stays without the D and everyone assumes they are living in a place called Hollywoo.

This apparently small detail from the show introduces interesting features both in terms of content and format. It opens the discussion on how the nonsense and ridiculousness of the show communicate with its realism and approach to real-life topics. What does it mean to be living in Hollywoo instead of Hollywood?

This can be read as a comment on society's lack of awareness. The rapidness and spontaneity with which people simply accept the new name, even though there was no logical and convincing reason for the change, reveals how little society reflects on itself and its identity. Social values are so fragile that people are not concerned if the name has a 'D' or not. They simply accept what they see, without critical thought or discussion on the reasons that have led to a change. Through this exceedingly ridiculous situation, the writers create a universe where the critique on the lack of awareness is always evident in the name Hollywoo. Only in a society that has lost its "unifying principle" it is possible to randomly change the name from Hollywood to Hollywoo through an individual's undiscerning action. The new designation of the place where these characters live is the result of an event representative of the problem of these characters: their irreflective and absent-minded spontaneity. And it is constantly being reminded, since the characters will always refer to the town as Hollywoo, and the image will always show the sign without the 'D'. There is no 'this was just a joke' moment that magically resets the sign and the name of the place.

It is a consequence that will last throughout the entire series. Only in the final episode, the mistake is fixed (for another mistake, since Mr. PeanutButter orders a 'B' instead of a 'D'). Maintaining the error keeps the viewers aware of the fictionality of that universe, but also remembers the satire: a collapsing society that can not even protect its name and identity.

Quick adaptation to change can be a good feature in societies, but in this case, it seems that the show is presenting it with a more negative tone. The article by Sánchez Saura (Sánchez Saura 2019) exposes a reflection on this topic and presents relevant conclusions out of the show's play of superficial and nonsensical events:

> "This unsurmountable lightness of being, which makes every single event subject to viralization in the face of the most thoughtless uncritical crowd possible can make one character either become the new Governor of California, United States without understanding how that came to happen or feel utterly alone when everyone is copying his usual clothing. No one will show any surprise or disbelief at this since no one possesses any clear rules sanctioning how society should operate, anything seems to be permitted" (Sánchez Saura 2019, 294)

This quote is referencing two interesting moments of the show. First moment, episode 1 of season 4, is when the decision about who will be the next Governor of California is being made through a ski race between Mr. Peanutbutter and the current Governor. Todd, who was not even participating, wins the competition and is elected governor. The second moment happens along that season: in episode 3, Todd accidentally starts a new fashion trend based on his clothes, and in episode 12 - season's finale - he is sitting in a cafe between a lot of people who are dressed like him. I am going to discuss the meaning of these events to Todd's character in the next section. For now, it matters the easiness of how changes happen in the show's universe, and how undiscerning the masses are towards those social and political changes.

The writers seem to be exposing an "exhaustion of postmodernism"[29], demonstrating an exaggerated scenario of fleetness and inattention. An exhaustion because some characters demonstrate awareness and exasperate with society's attitude, therefore, represent that exhaustion. In the case of the Governor's election, the only apprehensive character is Diane.

While Mr. PeanutButter runs for governor, Diane, as his wife, tries to convince him to give up without hurting his feelings. Mr. PeanutButter misinterprets her kind words and takes his efforts even further to become governor. Then, challenges the actual Governor to a Ski race. The Governor rejects, arguing that it would be undemocratic and unconstitutional. Katrina - Mr. PeanutButter political counselor - manages to create an amendment to the U.S. constitution, gathering other ridiculous causes to get enough support (one of them is building a bridge to Hawaii). The Ski race gets official and Mr. PeanutButter starts to have Ski lessons. Diane seems to be the only character that can see beyond the nonsense. In a voice message to BoJack - who is out of town at that point -, she says she misses him, since he would also understand how ludicrous the situation has become.

[29] The title of Sánchez Saura 2019.

Other proof of society's irreflective attitude and lack of self-awareness is, for example, the character Vincent Adultman. Vincent is allegedly an adult man (his last name is an intended pun), but he obviously appears to be three kids inside a trench coat. His right hand is a broom while his left hand is a mannequin hand. His face resembles Kevin, a young boy who appears in season 2 saying that he is the son of Vincent.[30] The question of whether Vincent is a normal adult or rather three kids pretending to be an adult stays unanswered for the rest of the show. This time only BoJack seems to be aware. He is the only character of the show that notices Vincent's charade and insists several times on alerting other characters to this obvious farce.

The nonsensical events and characters are uncountable throughout the six seasons of *BoJack Horseman.* But the realism is also present, making the show less close to an absurdist play. The disintegrating world of BoJack is not so disintegrated after all: characters like BoJack and Diane, in the situations where everyone and everything seems to be acting in an absurd way, offer a rational - or even lucid - perspective. A contrast between the nonsensical and the standardized reality we, the viewers, are used to watching and living with. In the absolute randomness of rules and morals, the writers of BoJack present some characters that share our conceptual framework.

The reason to create this contrast can have many dimensions. Firstly, it generates a conflict between the characters which always makes the narrative progress. Then, and more important to my argument, it produces a more complex series, something that is neither fully absurdist nor fully conventional. By placing Diane, Mr. PeanutButter, BoJack, and Vincent Adultman side by side, it leads to a relativistic discussion: what is reality really if everyone seems to believe in a different reality than I do? Who is BoJack to say that Vincent is three children inside an overcoat, if society, and Vincent himself, believe they are an adult person? What are the real standards of behavior? Follow the democratic tradition of direct elections or leave the decision to a ski race?

In this kind of reading, there is always the temptation to draw a moral, to conclude what the creators of BoJack want to say with these jokes and provocations. Is it postmodernism and does the series advocate relativism and the existence of alternative realities and standards? Or is it a

[30] At some point, Vincent and Kevin share a scene but they are never seen in the same room at the same time, making it quite noticeable they actually are the same person.

critique of postmodernism and the series ridicules the exaggeration of relativism by constructing a universe in which it is possible for three children to fool a society by claiming to be an adult?

I read this in accordance with what I argued in chapter 1 of part I about absurd art: these shows should not be objective and concrete conclusions, but rather triggers for discussions. The writers cleverly touch on these topics about postmodernism and social issues only to make us aware of their existence. Besides, there is the aesthetic purpose, or, in the particular case of comedy, the comic purpose.

The Vincent Adultman storyline - as well as the other examples brought here - is a comment on postmodernism without being a statement on postmodernism. It is a joke, without being a judgment.

What I enjoy about BoJack is that little gags or funny situations that lead to consequences that are used in the narrative and are not ignored or magically restored.

And similarly to the 'Hollywoo without the D' case, this Vincent Adult gag seems like a joke that went too far. The writers transform small details and brief storylines into something important and influential throughout the series. The removal of the 'D' from the Hollywood sign could have been something that happened and was solved in that same episode. It could also have been magically restored in the next episode, with no explanation other than an "agreement" between the writers and the audience. This "agreement" happens in a lot of traditional sitcoms, where drastic and consequential events happen in one episode, but its consequences are carried into the following episodes.[31] However, the resolution of the 'D' incident in *BoJack* did not leave things the same. And most of the events during the show do not always return to a *status quo*. And that brings the second point of what it means to live in Hollywoo instead of Hollywood.

It means that actions have consequences, even in a surreal and nonsensical world, even if this is an animated tv show. BoJack, alone, taking the 'D' out of the Hollywood sign, and the society

[31] In *The Simpsons*, for instance, the house where the family lives often burns down, furniture is broken or destroyed, but in the next episode or even in the next scene, everything is restored.

spontaneously accepting the new name of the place are all very surreal events. But the fact that in the next episode, the characters have to face the world they left in the episode before, the fact that the fictional universe is not simply and magically restored after the credits roll, it is rather realistic.

The 'D' out of Hollywood is just an example of this continuity issue. But I put it as a prime example due to its function of naming the space where the show happens. It serves, as explained in the last section, as a constant reminder of the features that it implies: firstly, the social comment on the loss of values and identity and the lack of self-awareness; secondly, the continuity rule, extremely important for the show's understanding because the characters eventually have to deal with some of their nonsensical behavior.

This continuity feature, that allows not only for the development of a main storyline along the seasons, but also for playing with these tiny details, is also important when discussing *BoJack* as a critique on the sitcom format. I have already reflected on this topic before when speaking about the term Sadcom and when exposing the precursors to the series. Now, I would underline BoJack's appeal to the questioning or even negation of the idea of closure. This is crucial to the show's characters and existentialist problems as they often appear as a result of their past decisions that, unlike a traditional sitcom, come back to the characters to be resolved or to bring consequences.

Therefore, Hollywoo is a place where there is no circular, happy ending narratives, unlike the narratives that real life Hollywood enjoys producing; circular as in stories that evolve but end exactly where they started, with little character development or damage. This rejection is not something that *BoJack* brings new to the American TV series industry, but it surely goes a step further in this capacity.

As a series about a washed-up Hollywood actor, it evidently assumes a meta-critique by creating and denouncing the backstage flaws of the show-within-the-show *Horsin Around*. This is a traditional sitcom where BoJack played the protagonist. It is about a young bachelor horse (BoJack's character) who agrees to raise three young, orphaned children: Olivia, Ethan and Sabrina - the latter was played by Sarah Lynn, who afterwards gets involved in BoJack's life.

The sitcom was created and directed by one of BoJack's best friends at the time, Herb Kazzaz, and this is where the exposition of the tragic side begins. In the show's timeline, twenty years after *Horsin Around's* cancellation, BoJack tries to make amends with Herb because of all that happened in the last years of the happy sitcom *Horsin Around:* Herb was found to be homosexual and a group of conservatives constrained the network to cancel the show; instead, Herb was fired, with the support of BoJack, convinced by the executives to choose the replacement of the director over his friendship with Herb; a few years later, another scandal hits the show, as the child actor Sarah Lynn drinks a water bottle filled with vodka that belonged to BoJack, in the backstage; her parents threaten the show with lawsuits; BoJack, as a powerful leading actor, compelled the hairdresser Sharona to take the blame for the incident and she also got fired. All of these events were strategically hidden from the public in order to maintain the image of a cheerful production compatible to the show's tone.

In *BoJack's* timeline, the issues around the *Horsin Around* motif continue and acquire an even more tragic tone. Sarah Lynn eventually appears back in BoJack's life being a thirty-year-old pop star, addicted to drugs and mentally unstable. After *Horsin Around's* cancellation, she started a music career with a more sexualized appearance. Becoming famous and abundantly wealthy, people who surrounded her started to take advantage of her privilege. She then turned herself to consuming drugs and alcohol and developed some mental issues. When she returns to BoJack's life, they both enter abusive use several times. Until one day, she overdoses on heroin, and dies.

Both Herb Kazzaz and Sarah Lynn's storylines represent the flaws of an industry like Hollywood. Ambition that overcomes friendships, fame and wealth that contaminate the social relationships and mental stability of young talents, all these subjects are explored directly in *BoJack Horseman*'s tragicomedy tone. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of continuity in TV series, where imponderable actions in an episode serve not only to sweeten the dramatic impact of that episode, but also to force the characters to deal with the repercussions.

Also, in the treatment of consequences, it is worth taking a close look at the title sequence of the show. As a regular Netflix series, the title sequence usually comes after the first scene (also known as teaser) and in BoJack's case, it lasts around 55 seconds.

It starts with a wide shot of BoJack's mansion as the sky turns from night to day. The camera comes closer to the mansion, and it cuts to an aerial view of BoJack's face, lying in bed, sleeping. From then on, the shot fixes BoJack's face in the middle and only the background changes. BoJack wakes up and stands looking at the camera while his day happens behind him. In the background, various moments, characters, and places that occur frequently in BoJack's daily life emerge. It ends with BoJack, still in the middle of the shot, falling into his pool at night. The perspective finally changes to a point of view of BoJack. It then fades to a zoomed out shot of BoJack lying on an inflatable mattress sunbathing in his pool. The wide shot of the mansion returns, and the opening credits end.

The title sequence changes according to the story events. In season 1, the changes are very subtle. The big changes happen from season to season as new characters and sets are introduced or replaced. In a YouTube video, Johnny 2 Cellos registers all of the tiny and large changes that occur in the title sequence and how they comment on the show's themes and motifs.[32] I am particularly interested in the small details that change from one episode to another. In season 1, for example, there are at least three details that occur in the show and have an effect on the title sequence. In episode 3 of season 1, Todd breaks one of the legs of BoJack's bed. In addition to the fact that in the following episodes the bed is always broken or badly fixed, in the title sequence of the next episodes one also gets to see the bed patched up with a bunch of books. In the same episode, Sarah Lynn lights the living room's ottoman on fire, and from that moment on, the title sequence presents a burned ottoman. The third easter egg of the title sequence from season 1 is the 'D' of the Hollywood sign, which no longer appears after the event mentioned above (Johnny 2 Cellos 2021).[33]

These small but curious details offer interesting reflections on the idea of consequence. Actions, in Hollywoo, have real consequences. Even though most of these events tend to be nonsensical or surreal, they provoke realistic consequences and impact the life of the characters.

[32] One interesting motif that is explored in the title sequence is water. For deeper research on this, read Sherman 2021.
[33] You can see the frames in sequence in the annex B, as well as the changes.

This is where, I believe, absurdist humor of *BoJack Horseman* connects the real with the surreal[34], the logic with the nonsense. The events are surrealistic and nonsensical: surrealistic as they sometimes do not correspond to a realistic human behavior (a person alone taking the 'D' out of the Hollywood sign during the night) and nonsensical in that they do not serve any plausible purpose or logic sequence of events (why society suddenly accepts the name of the place as Hollywoo). Nevertheless, these actions are based on real and logical ideas: the real desperation of BoJack trying to do something big and meaningful for Diane, someone he is becoming to be in love with; also the real egocentrism and irresponsibility by BoJack, recognizable in this Hollywood incident, but also in the Herb Kazzaz and Sarah Lynn's storylines described earlier. Despite all the nonsensical and unrealistic features the series presents us with, it is hard not to think of it as a series about us, rational human beings.

When thinking about these moments and storylines, one can also compare their structure to the theory of 'appropriate incongruities', discussed in chapter 2 of part I. In short, the theory holds that humor "depends upon the perception of an incongruity that can nevertheless be seen as somehow appropriate" (Oring 2011, 213). The nonsensical actions of *BoJack's* characters, that are motivated by realistic and human reasons can be read as incongruities inserted in a somehow appropriate scenario. In the next section, I focus the analysis on one specific character, whose features and behaviors also work in this dualistic logic.

4.2 Todd: Character Analysis

> "In the Theatre of the Absurd, on the other hand, the audience is confronted with characters whose motives and action remain largely incomprehensible. With such characters it is almost impossible to identify".
>
> (Esslin 2004, 411)

Todd Chavéz is one of the main characters of the series. He is human and, at the start of the show's plot, he is living on BoJack's couch for no particular reason. While every other main character clearly demonstrates a complex personality - as it can be seen in their characterization

[34] My use of the word surreal is not intended to invoke surrealism as an art movement. In this context it is just an antonym for real, in the sense that it characterizes something not observable in reality. Still, I am not unaware that the surrealist movement would also be interesting to explore in this context, both from the historical perspective and from the ideas that the movement advocates and works with.

in chapter 1 part II - Todd seems to be an uninteresting character, who offers nothing more than comic relief moments to the show. His random life choices - such as building his own Disneyland (Season 2 Episode 2) or being President of Ad Sales at WhatTimeIsItRightNow.com, a website that just says what time it is, (Season 5 Episode 1) - and his general careless behavior made me think that he was the less interesting character to close read. Although he was strongly inspired by real people from Hollywood, who do not have a house and sleep on other people's couch without any professional and personal expectations for the future, his moments on the series feel so absurd that it makes it hard to believe that a person like him could ever exist. Nevertheless, along the show, the viewers gradually get in contact with the background story and intrinsic features of Todd, making him less clownish and more 'human'. This particular combination between nonsense and relatability in his characterization makes Todd an intricate absurdist character in the series.

From the main cast, Todd was the last one to get his visuality done (McDonnell 2018, 87) Between the pilot-presentation and the actual premiere on Netflix, his appearance was changed several times because the creators were not happy with his visual representation. Why was it so difficult to design such a simplistic character? He ended up being 160 centimeters tall, wearing a red zip hoodie with a plain white shirt underneath, dark gray sweatpants with white lines on the sides, and dark blue flip-flops. He always uses a yellow hat and has a bad shaved beard. A look that immediately associates him with a passive, laid-back lifestyle and makes him a bit of a 'clown' character, despite being one of the only two humans from the main cast. During season 5, he becomes president of Ad Sales at WhatTimeIsItRightNow.com and changes his outfit to a dark blue suit, maintaining his yellow hat and sloppy beard. A transformation that reveals more responsibility in his life, but at the same time, keeps his careless attitude by maintaining the hat and the beard.

Film critics often classify a weak character as flat and one-dimensional. According to Robert McKee and Syd Field[35], that means a character that has no substance behind his/her actions. A strong character needs a background story, problems, fears and contradictions. These qualities are crucial to make the character realistic, to give ground and explanation to the character's behavior during the show.

[35] Both theorists of storytelling and screenwriting, See McKee 2014 and Field 2005.

Todd's adventures in the series, despite being short and provoking ephemeral or minimal changes in his character, still make evident his absence of purpose and, therefore, his difficulty in finding his own identity. This makes him close in definition to a flat character but, at the same time, differentiates him from the other characters in the show. The viewers gradually discover that his random incidents and nonsensical behavior have in fact a substantial and realistic reason, that is, his lack of focus and self-esteem, his sense of estrangement in the society he lives in. Todd represents someone who is soon confronted with an existentialist problem: his existence precedes his essence. All the other characters also demonstrate this problem, as the writers tend to make the influence of Sartre and Camus' work quite evident in the show (Bauer 2016). For instance, BoJack is always questioning himself and the others about what he should do with his life; Princess Carolyn exposes an ongoing conscious battle between her professional and familiar ambitions, wondering if her full dedication to her work is not deviating her from the dream of having a child. The difference between these characters and Todd is the absurd and surreal way in which he confronts the problem.

Both Mckee and Field teach a process of building characters that are compatible with "existence preceding essence". After all, in order to create, for instance, a selfish character, they advise their readers/students to produce biographies of their fictional characters, in order to explain why the character is selfish and what events made him/her selfish (Field 2005, 57). Characters, as people or human beings, are a result of events, education, experiences that gradually conceive their essence.

On the other hand, this clear conception of characters and establishment of evident dramatic needs also contradicts the existentialist problem. A character that knows exactly what he/she wants - despite seeming real and relatable to the audience - is a little utopic for someone that identifies with the absurd problem. Not knowing the purpose of life can - it is not always the case, but it can - escalate to a questioning of a person's goals. This is where Todd best represents the absurd and more accurately embodies an absurdist character.

According to Syd Field, in *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, every character must have a strong and defined 'dramatic need': "Dramatic need is defined as what your main characters want to win, gain, get, or achieve during the course of your screenplay. The dramatic need is what drives your characters through the story line. It is their purpose, their mission, their motivation, driving them through the narrative action of the story line" (Field 2005, 63-64).

This is an interesting feature that puts the methods of the Theater of the Absurd against the conventional way of telling a story. In other words, characters in the absurdist plays often break this rule by not having a definite purpose throughout the story. As Esslin writes, their "motives and action remain largely incomprehensible". In Waiting for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for Godot, but it is not clear why they are doing that and what purposes support this activity in the story. In *BoJack Horseman*, one encounters a more conventional story, in the sense that the main characters have their purposes well defined: for BoJack is to find redemption of his past mistakes and overcome his rooted depression that is preventing from having a healthy and productive life; for Diane is, on a professional level, becoming a successful and thought-provoking writer, and on a personal level, overcoming her childhood traumas; for Princess Carolyn, as a workaholic who also has a maternal side, her general dramatic need is to find balance between personal and professional life; and for Mr. PeanutButter is to live a nihilistic life, best described in his motto: "the key to being happy is to just distract yourself with unimportant nonsense until you eventually die." (Season 1 Episode 12).

It is hard, however, to say what Todd's dramatic need is from the first three episodes of the show, other than just being BoJack's funny and friendly housemate. However, in episode 4, he is given some protagonism and suddenly vents: "I don't have a job. I don't have any prospects. I probably won't ever finish the rock opera I'm working on". After that, the episode becomes about Todd and his project of finishing and presenting his rock opera in a theater. The viewers get to know more about his personality, as the writers give him more realism and relatable issues. During the episode, Todd gets excited with his new mission of finishing the opera; he also gets true bonding with BoJack and reveals the story of how he never finished high school and was thrown out of his house by his mother. Some of his inner weaknesses are exposed: he has a problem with focus and determination, a tendency to procrastinate on important tasks; his slothful and wavering lifestyle made him lose the people that were close to him and therefore, the motivation to change the course of his behavior. His failures resulted in a lack of self-esteem ("I'm a total screw-up" episode 4, 13:05).

The rock opera project does not see the light of day, due to BoJack's sabotage. Fearing that Todd's success would make him move out of the couch and start a new life, BoJack executed a plan to make Todd addicted to a video game again (the same video game that had made him drop out of high school). Todd failed to finish the rock opera in time for an important

presentation, thinking that it was all his fault. He abandoned his dream, went back to his life with no prospects and without believing in himself again. Later in the season, he finds out about BoJack's intervention on his failure. He expresses not only anger, but mostly sadness at the fact that a supposed friend did something this bad to him (Season 1, episodes 9 and 10). In episode 10, Todd is co-directing a movie that has BoJack as an actor; after the shootings, the two are arguing about the rock opera:

> "Todd: Look, I figured out what you did [sabotaging the rock opera], but I've been trying to put it behind me and do my job [as co-director of the movie].
> Bojack: So, cutting my part down was not about revenge?
> Todd: No
> BoJack: And making BoJack the villain of your movie was not a coded statement of your feelings about me?
> Todd: No
> BoJack: Oh, okay. Great! Well, I'm glad we buried the hatched and everything is cool."
> Todd: Uh, actually, everything is not cool. You ruined my rock opera by using character actress Margo Martindale to trick me into playing an addictive video game. And saying it all together like that, it all sounds kind of ludicrous. But still, it was something that I cared about, and what you did really hurt me".

This storyline offers an interesting characterization of Todd. As I noted before, it makes the character more real and relatable, even though the attention given to Todd's personal emotions and issues does not lose the randomness and the nonsense initially associated with him. There is no better explanation for the fact that Todd has chosen to write a rock opera than 'why not?'. The same happens with the topic of the opera: it is called Newtopia Rising, Book I: The Search for a New Utopia, and tells the story of a group of space citizens escaping from slavery and looking for a new planet to establish. Why this plot? Maybe it was foreshadowing BoJack's sabotage, as he did not want Todd to leave his place and pursue his dreams, only to continue to be his slave and all-time company[36]. However, this reading seems to be too far-fetched to be connected with Todd's intentions in writing the plot for his opera. There is no evident proof in the show for this; there is no evident reason in the show for Todd to write a rock opera, only possible interpretations that require effort and some creativity from the viewers.

The important detail here is Todd's continuous search for a goal. In episode 8 of season 1, BoJack asks him to turn the car around and he cheerfully yells "Hooray! A task!", a simple

[36] The relationship between Todd and BoJack has a toxic side, in which BoJack finds some comfort and consolation in Todd's failures and non-productive lifestyle, making him feel less guilty about his own lack of productivity and success. Also, keeping Todd unsuccessful will also maintain him financially dependent on BoJack, which makes him feel empowered. This is something that is slowly realized by Todd along the show.

funny line, that maybe represents his whole attitude towards life: a genuine enthusiasm with every little goal that is given to him.

In season 2 episode 2, the viewers get to know another big life project that Todd has: building his own Disneyland. After asking BoJack to take him to the famous amusement park and BoJack rejected it with the excuse that Disneyland did not actually exist, it "was a made-up lie, like the tooth fairy, that parents use to get their kids to behave", Todd decides that he should build his own amusement park. As a result, he has spent the last five years building the park, always keeping BoJack updated about the process - even though he has always ignored it, and so now this is all a surprise to him. Todd's Disneyland is now ready to open.

This storyline is another example of how an absurd premise became a dramatic need for Todd. A goal that was born out of a lie and of the following logical reasoning stemming from that lie. In this case, the viewers only see the consummation of the goal. The reason why the writers decided to skip the process of building the park, and instead focus on the opening's aftermath, has to do with Todd's relationship with Mr. Penautbutter. A few episodes before, these two characters started to work together. Mr. Penautbutter saw in Todd a great partner for his also crazy and nonsensical ideas, so he hired him as his personal assistant:

> "Todd: What's 'PB Livin'?
> Mr. Peanutbutter: My film production company. Read your title.
> Todd: 'Executive Vice President of West Coast Operations'. Whoa! Does that mean I control the waves?
> Mr. Peanutbutter: No, it means you're my assistant. You've got a big future ahead of you, and I don't want you to waste any time looking back. So I got all my cars' mirrors taken off.
> Todd: Isn't that kind of dangerous?
> Mr. Peanutbutter: What do I care? I'm not driving." (S1 E9 - 22:50 to 23:15)

From this moment on, they embrace a number of absurd projects together, such as a Halloween store open in January and 'Smoodies', "a mood that you drink like a smoothie" (S1 E12 17:05 to 17:09). But after Todd builds the Disneyland by himself, Mr. Peanutbutter suggests joining the project, evoking a right of first refusal. Then, he brings a lawyer to check if everything was legal and it is discovered that there is already an amusement park called Disneyland. The Disney company decides to sue Todd for copyright violation. During the trial, Todd tries his only strategy: asking if, by any chance, the original Articles of Incorporation have written Disneyland wrong. Fortunately, there was a typo in the documents, Disneyland was written

with two i's, making Todd's surreal project legal again. After overcoming these challenges, Mr. Peanutbutter meets Todd at the celebration party and says, "We did it, buddy!". That is when it becomes clear the real topic of this storyline: Mr. Peanutbutter is trying to take credit for Todd's accomplishments, and their friendship has known better days.

Once again, the writers are dealing with Todd's little goals and life achievements. And, despite the nonsense that surrounds him and his choices, there is a lot of realism in his motivations. On one hand, he has the need to pursue a project, something that fulfills his days, but also that answers his desires (in this last case, his wish to go to Disneyland made him build his own). On the other hand, his struggles with other people that do not value him enough. First, BoJack, who does not recognize Todd as a friend and does not give any importance to what he says or does. Then, Mr. Peanutbutter, who subtly tries to take advantage of him, by forcingly getting involved in the project that was mostly put together by Todd alone, instead of giving him credit and recognition.

If describing a character is to say what the character wants, then Todd is most likely the hardest character to describe in just a few words. On an interpretative level, he may be an accurate representation of the early twenties people from a contemporary western society. He captures the feeling of being lost in a world full of options and opportunities, where young people cannot decide what they want to do professionally and, in their daily lives, what they want to pursue as life goals. Todd struggles to find his main purpose in life, as many youngsters do nowadays, because of the amount of different and diverse interests he has. Nevertheless, his kindness, one of his strongest personal traits, leads him to embrace other people's activities and pursuits.

When in episode 5 of season 2 he is left alone with nothing to do, his existential crisis begins to awaken:

> "Todd (on the phone with Princess Carolyn): Princess Carolyn, I need something to do. A job, or a task, or a direction in life… You're my agent. Can you give my life meaning?
> Princess Carolyn: I really don't have time for this (...)
> Todd: Princess Carolyn, do I have a purpose?"

Until seconds later, an opportunity comes out literally at the window (Todd is looking at the window when a chicken appears). He spends the rest of the episode aiming to save Becca, a genetically modified chicken, from the fate of being killed in a slaughterhouse by a food chain

company. He begins this adventure by developing an emotional attachment to Becca, which makes the following task of saving her all the more intense and motivating. Within moments, his life shifts, and his dramatic need is clear and strong: to save his beloved Becca. In the end, Todd and the rest of the people who were trying to save the chicken are arrested, though BoJack manages to take them out of jail and also save the chicken. Todd's goals are reset into vagueness.

Some of his story arcs are circular, offering no personal development, while others add change or revelation. I believe that both categories have interesting content to our analysis. While the circular and non-developing arcs make evident his absence of purpose and, therefore, difficulty in finding his own identity, the progressive arcs emphasize important themes. One of them is related with his sexual and romantic life. Little or almost nothing is revealed about Todd's relationships until season 3. In episode 5, he runs into an old high school friend called Emily, who immediately manifests an attraction to Todd. However, he avoids getting sexually involved with her, in a behavior that nor Emily nor BoJack understand. They stay friends but, as it happened also in high school, Todd always avoids getting involved with her. A few episodes later, Todd announces to BoJack the true reason: he is asexual.

This is one the most interesting features about Todd. It explains part of his uniqueness. For the most part of his life, he was not conscious of his asexuality, although he certainly had felt that something was not in accordance with the rest of the people that surrounded him. The show represents a society that is not ready for people like Todd, particularly in moments such as season 5, episode 3: Todd is dating Yolanda, an asexual girl, and she invites him to meet her parents at a family dinner; before the dinner, she makes the disclaimer that she has not told her parents yet about her asexuality, and asks Todd to pretend they were sexually active; Todd finds this really weird, after all, it is a family dinner so their sexuality should not be a topic; but in a absurd scenario, the topic is very common in Yolanda's family; her father is an erotic novelist, her mother is a famous adult film star, and her identical twin sister is a sex adviser columnist; Yolanda is trying to convince her parents that she is also sexually active and implicates Todd in her acting. The exaggeration with which this family is presented seems to suggest a perspective on how asexual people feel in our society. Sexuality, despite being on one hand a taboo topic, might also be, on the other hand, an imposition to a person's identity and behavior. How can Todd love or pursue a romantic relationship if he does not feel sexually attracted to

anyone? Not even to people that he thinks he enjoys spending time with? In this sense, it is only natural that a person like Todd feels strange in our culture.

This is an interesting storyline to see how Todd, who at first sight appears to be a character "whose motives and action remain largely incomprehensible" (from Esslin's quote which opens this chapter), subtly gains some issues that the audience can identify with. The exaggerated sexualized behavior of Yolanda's family is absurd; however, the way in which this situation represents the lonely feeling of not belonging to other people's standards, the way in which Todd feels unfitted in that environment is relatable to most of us. After all, Todd can be a character to whom it is possible to identify.

At this point, it is difficult to imagine a character like Todd in an absurdist play, since his problems and motivations seem too logical for the Theater of Absurd tradition. However, one should not discard the possibility of reading his characterization with those absurdist principles in mind. He is, at first sight, illogical and irrational as a Beckett's character. However, he is also 'appropriately' identifiable, relatable and representative of issues that exist in our society: being asexual (or part of a minority group regarding sexuality); being lost and without ambitions that can shape his life and motivate him; and being part of a toxic relationship where someone takes advantage of his weaknesses (Todd's relationship with BoJack). Once again, Todd's incongruities are part of an appropriate framework.

4.3 Secretariat's Advice "Run Straightforward": Scene Analysis

> "The spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith; meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time."
>
> (Esslin 2010, 33)

The last episode of season 1 kicks off with a suicide scene. Considering *BoJack* an animated TV comedy series, it is hard to think about how the idea of showing a heavy suicide scene of a character fits the show. How this tragic moment is done and how it balances the comic that was put in the scene is going to be the object of close reading through the next section.

The episode starts with a black card saying “1973”, while a man's voice, that is then revealed as a TV presenter, is introducing the guest and his recent controversy. The image fades into a scene where Secretariat is being interviewed in “The Dick Cavett Show"[37]. Secretariat is relaxed, answering Dick Cavett’s question on the recent news that he was under investigation due to illegal horse racing betting. Secretariat smoothly says, “I have never bet on horse racing, and I certainly did not bet on my own races”. Then, he adds a joke, friendly provoking the presenter: “Although I did bet the network is going to give your show back to Joey Bishop”. Dick Cavett and the audience of the talk show laugh.

After this, Cavett changes subject. He explains that the show frequently receives letters from the audience and there was one that “struck a chord” with the producers. The letter, he says, was from BoJack H, a nine-year-old, and he starts to read it out loud: “Dear Secretariat, I am a horse just like you. I like to watch racing, and you are my favorite racer”. “Smart kid” interrupts Secretariat, making the audience laugh. “When I grow up, I want to be just like you, and I think I am on the right track. Get it? Track, because horses run on tracks, and you are a horse, and I am a horse. Do you get it? Do you get my joke about the track?”. Dick Cavett stops reading to say there is a whole page of this and Secretariat answers with another joke: “Should I write him back and tell him I get it?”. The audience laughs.

Cavett continues the reading: “My question for you is, I am a good kid, and I like to play, and I like to go to school, but sometimes I get sad. What do you do when you get sad? How do you not be sad? Sincerely, BoJack”.

“That is a great letter”, reacts Secretariat, seemingly affected. And then, facing the camera, he says:

> “BoJack, when I was your age, I got sad. A lot. I didn't come from such a great home, but one day, I started running, and that seemed to make sense, so then I just kept running. BoJack, when you get sad, you run straight ahead and you keep running forward, no matter what. There are people in your life who are gonna try to hold you back, slow you down, but you don't let them. Don't you stop running and don't you ever look behind you. There's nothing for you behind you. All that exists is what's ahead.”

[37] A reference to the real “The Dick Cavett Show”. This was the name of various talk shows that Dick Cavett presented in several American television networks between 1968 and 2007.

Then, it cuts to a black card saying, “One month later”. The voices of two radio announcers give the latest news: Secretariat was banned for life from horse racing. The image fades into a big shot of a bridge that is gradually zooming into a person standing on the edge, ready to jump. As the shot goes closer, we recognize Secretariat and continue to hear the announcers: “[announcer 1] It’s a disgrace is what it is. This is the 70s. You cannot cheat in sports and get away with it. [announcer 2] You know, I think it just goes on to show you, you can be the fastest runner in the world, but you can’t outrun the truth”

With the shot fully closed in Secretariat's face, the wind blows, and he lets himself fall down the bridge in silence. The image turns into the initial wide shot of the bridge, making us see the very small body fall in the river. Meanwhile, a different radio announcer reports the traffic in a loosened tone: “And the traffic is jammed today coming to Louisville. Looks like some idiot parked his car on the bridge”. End of scene.

The character Secretariat is based on a real racehorse from the United States. Between 1970 and 1989, the horse became famous for his impressive career with speed records that are still standing today (Maranzani 2021). His name is still a reference, not only due to several books written about him, but also because of the 2010’s film, named Secretariat, directed by Randall Walace and starred by Diane Lane and John Malkovich.

BoJack’s writers used this real figure to create a character in their universe that served as an idol to BoJack. In this anthropomorphic world, Secretariat has human features, although maintaining his horse appearance (which makes him more relatable to BoJack) and portrays a kind of acclaimed sports athlete living around controversy.

At the beginning of the interview scene, Secretariat is in his comfort zone. Cheerful, funny and confident, he answers to the allegations with jokes and does not get insecure for any moment. He only shows some uneasiness when he hears the last part of BoJack’s letter on sadness. He denounces that behind all that confidence there was a period of sadness or something similar. From his motivational speech, one can confirm that he had a difficult childhood. However, by finding his passion and talent for racing, he could manage to overcome that sadness. Running and competing became his primary focus and although he does not say it directly, it is concluded that it was the solution to his sadness. Having a purpose in life, literally or metaphorically running “straight ahead”, might keep BoJack out of sadness, since it gets him distracted with

his goal. And that is the advice he gives to the young fan: finding something in life that he likes to do, that keeps him happy and just doing it.

How far can this advice go? In Secretariat's case, his ambitions got out of control. He is banned from competition. At first, the act of racing seems to him the perfect combination between a task that gives him pleasure and, at the same time, a means to be successful, to have a job, to gain fame and admiration from others. Everything seems to fit together until he becomes too greedy. In episode 9 of season 2, when BoJack is starring in a film about Secretariat, it is revealed another reason why he committed suicide. A year before, Secretariat was about to be sent as a soldier to the Vietnam war. He met with President Nixon and asked him not to go. Nixon agrees with not sending him but demands two conditions: Secretariat has to publicly advocate the war and let his brother Jeffretariat go to war in his place. Secretariat agrees. Later, he is banned from competition because he has rigged results in order to make money in betting. Around that time, he also finds out his brother died at war. What corrupts him goes beyond the initial goal of "running straightforward". He started to add other interests and purposes, despising the relationships with those closest to him, all in pursuit of an excessive ambition. And this ambition was everything he had. There was only weakness behind his goal. When the purpose of running was taken from him, he had no other solution to his life other than committing suicide.

All these complex issues and choices can be read and discussed in light of the existentialist problem. From this case, several philosophical questions can be raised: how far should we take ambition? What distinguishes greed from ambition and from the pursuit of a purpose we have set for life? How can we face and overcome difficulties without resorting to suicide, like Secretariat? Remembering Camus, how can we, as Sisyphus, see the stone rolling down the mountain, see our career and life dreams being destroyed, and have the will to push it back up to the top of the mountain? What values should prevail in a choice, like the one Secretariat made when his brother went to war, if there is no predefined essence and if our existence is defined and characterized precisely through these choices?

As I have been demonstrating in chapter 4, the philosophical themes worked in part I can be identified both in content and form in this show. In content, because the themes that are raised by the characters and their actions refer directly or indirectly to the theories of Sartre and Camus. In form, since the scenes are constructed with an interesting opening for interpretation,

that is, the scene is given to the viewer and no moral lesson is evidently offered. It is as if the essence of the scene came after the existence of the scene. The viewer has room to decide who is the hero and who is the villain; the viewer is often led to sympathize with villain-like characters, as it happens with BoJack and Secretariat, both undoubtably villains if the show and the scene respectively were not written from their perspective.

And still in terms of form, one has to pay attention to the humor used in this scene. It is a tragic suicide scene, from one of the characters that, despite not having many minutes of screen in the series, it is the protagonist's idol. His death, the opening of the last episode of season 1, does not serve a comic gag, but rather an important moment for BoJack's characterization. The role model of BoJack could not face a great setback in life and committed suicide. The scene was strong and heavy, but at the same time maintained some of the comic tone of the show. In the interview part, one sees a parody of the real "Dick Cavett Show"; both Secretariat and the interviewer behave like classic interviewers and interviewees on a talk show, mimicking the oral and corporal mannerisms in a funny way.

But the most interesting and possibly disturbing moment that represents this balance between comedy and tragedy at the same time is the suicidal jump. We see the body falling from the bridge, and at the same time, the radio announcer says "And the traffic is jammed today coming to Louisville. Looks like some idiot parked his car on the bridge", referring to the exact same event. In my view, this is the best representation of an absurdist joke. In other words, the writers did not just put the comedy and the tragedy randomly side by side; it is rather plausible that, in real life, that situation could actually happen. At the exact same moment, a person taking his own life, and the radio announcer referring to the person's car as an idiot, obviously without knowing that he parked there to commit suicide. That is the absurd. Here, a car parked in the middle of a bridge is, simultaneously, an act of suicide and a bad traffic day for several people. The writers present this absurd reality contrasting a dark moment with a light comment. And the combination, as disturbing it may seem, is entirely realistic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the definition of absurdist humor, with the particular interest of discovering how the concept has evolved through the years and how it lives in today's texts. For this project, at first it was necessary to define absurdist humor in a systematic approach, and then, to use this framework to read the contemporary TV series comedy *BoJack Horseman*.

The literature review done for this research in the absurdist humor field has unveiled a very intricate territory: it was not clear how this concept should be discussed, since the only source that literally mentioned 'absurdist humor' was the *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*' entry (Noonan 2014). The lack of literature on the topic motivated me, on one hand, to produce something useful and unusual. On the other hand, the lack of references from works like this did not provide me with guidelines for what I should or should not write. This entry was an essential text to which I resorted several times in the search for connections between the "absurdist humor" and other concepts or fields of study.

Facing the question of how to approach a concept scattered across various disciplines, I attempted to formulate a structure that was transdisciplinary and appropriate for the scope of this project. Part one is, therefore, divided into three chapters, looking at absurdist humor from three different disciplines: philosophy, humor theories, and genre studies. The introduction of this dissertation explains in more detail what motivates and substantiates this division into three areas. At this stage of conclusion, we are more interested in examining the efficiency of the structure and what is drawn from the research itself.

The results of looking at the philosophy behind absurdist humor, the texts on the 'absurd' and its relationship with Sartre's existentialism, support the idea that absurdist humor is not interested in producing meaning. This is not saying that it is based on useless and unsubstantial texts. Instead, by assuming a belief on the absurdity of reality - a belief on the "the unreasonable silence of the world" - the absurdist humor merely portrays reality. Representing an absurd reality is not the same as producing meaning, since, in the later, one is creating knowledge or proposing new ideas. Absurdist humor is nothing but observation of a meaningless world.

Regarding this discussion, one can easily think about humor theories, and how each theory has something to argue about the humor's intention. That is what happened in this dissertation. In chapter 2 of Part I, I supported this argument with a dialogue between the main humor theories. The incongruity theory seemed to fit the proposition: it does not imply any moral or intellectual superiority from the joke's author to anyone. If it establishes an inequitable relation, it does so regarding us, humans, above the incongruity of reality.

Still in this chapter, I mention the "Appropriate Incongruities" theory which, I argue, serves our concept of absurdist humor on a structural level. This means that if one thinks of how a joke works, what is the textual mechanism that generates something comically amusing in absurdist terms, it results from a combination between sense and nonsense, truth and inaccuracies, reality and imagination. The theory of "appropriate incongruities" is, so far, the most suitable explanation of absurdist humor.

This dissertation moves on to an examination of genres. Inspired by Martin Esslin's assertion that the Theater of the Absurd stands above the categories of comedy and tragedy, I look at the old and new conceptions that over the years tried to describe what stood between the comic and the tragic. It was interesting to take this research back to Ancient Greece plays and explore the origins of tragicomedy that revealed absurdist humor centuries before Camus and the absurd.

And this approach to genres is also encouraged by what has been written about the case study of this dissertation. *BoJack Horseman*, an animated TV series, is often described as a tragicomedy and a sadcom, both concepts that intersect the principles of comedy and tragedy. In part II, I introduce the series and its several features, as well as situate it in the context of its kind of comedy.

The general overview of the series has revealed a strong influence of existentialism and absurdism in the show's content - particularly evident in the character's existentialist problems -, along with similarities to absurdist theater regarding the type of humor. However, *BoJack Horseman* distances itself from the resemblance to absurdist plays since it incorporates quite a few conventions related to the structure of the narrative - which is, in *BoJack*, quite organized and logical when compared to the Theater of the Absurd - and to the realism of the characters - who are, in *BoJack*, more plausible to exist than those of the Theater of the Absurd. In addition, the textual and visual analysis of episodes, characters and plotlines in chapter 4 of part II

reinforce this view with a more detailed analysis. *BoJack* does not fulfill all the criteria to be called an absurdist play, although it shows that there is still an influence of this movement in contemporary humor.

Nevertheless, this conclusion does not discredit the choice of *BoJack* as a case to examine in a study on absurdist humor. In fact, the unclear presence of absurdist features made the case more challenging and interesting, in the sense that the research objective was slightly changed: I started wanting to understand how absurdism, which on the one hand is evidently present in the series' influences, is combined with the conventional approach of the series.

The definition of absurdist humor takes away from this research an important resolution: it is not limited to manifesting itself in texts or works of art that fall outside the mainstream. *BoJack Horseman* has proved to be on both sides: with a conventionally structured narrative and an absurd way of presenting it.

The questions raised by this study were broad and ambitious for a document of this dimension. However, by bringing together such different fields of study and questions regarding humor, I hope to have made evident the importance of considering the interdisciplinary nature of Humor Studies, as well as the correlations between these fields which almost demand a global look. More work can be done in order to explore the uses of the concept, so as to arrive to a more precise definition of absurdist humor.

A further study on this topic could also be, for instance, a more exhaustive comparison between *BoJack Horseman* and a play from the Theater of the Absurd. This kind of study would point to small parallels, which would strengthen the absurdist side of this series, but also understand better how the absurdist features have traveled through time until the contemporary TV series.

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Annex A - *BoJack's* Critique

Some articles of relevant magazines that listed BoJack Horseman in their best series selections.

IndieWire

Travers, Ben and Hanh Nguyen. 2022. "The Best Animated Series of All Time". *IndieWire*. March 3, 2022.
https://www.indiewire.com/feature/best-animated-series-all-time-cartoons-anime-tv-1202021835/

(listed BoJack in number 1) "Perhaps it's too soon to call "BoJack Horseman" the best animated TV series of all time. Perhaps five stellar seasons of 12 episodes each, arguably improving with each subsequent entry, aren't enough of a sample to hold against series that either ran for decades or withheld scrutiny for just as long. Perhaps a serialized existential drama about a washed-up Hollywood horse looking to salvage his career along with his life shouldn't be compared to kids' shows and episodic satires. No matter. "BoJack Horseman" has accomplished more in five seasons than most TV series, animated or otherwise, do in twice that span, and it does so with the most economical storytelling every put to screen. From the five-second spans of dialogue that bridge heartbreak and hilarity, to the hidden jokes populating every square inch of the frame, to the inventive, eye-catching animation that builds worlds without a drop of exposition, "BoJack Horseman" is an incredible story to behold. That it makes us laugh and cry in unprecedented amounts is almost secondary to how much is being offered. We may never catch up with every astounding facet of this young series, which means it's not too soon to list it at No. 1. If anything, we're already late"

TIME

Berman, Judy. 2019. "The 10 Best TV Shows of the 2010s". *TIME*. November 15, 2019. https://time.com/5722419/best-tv-shows-2010s-decade/

"No development has changed the 21st-century television landscape as profoundly as the rise of streaming—and, in particular, Netflix's transformation into an original-content behemoth. But before the service started angling to replace, rather than merely supplement, cable, it endeared itself to TV connoisseurs by throwing money at prestige projects like Orange Is the New Black and House of Cards. So when Netflix announced the first season of BoJack Horseman in 2014, the show seemed like it would be a bit out of its league. Despite a stellar

voice cast led by Will Arnett, BoJack was a cartoon from untested creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg about a gloomy talking horse who used to star in a hit ’90s sitcom. Little did we know, at the time, that it would soon evolve into not just a sharp parody of Hollywood, but also a bracing exploration of ambition, responsibility and familial trauma, as well as an empathetic portrait of mental illness. By season 3, Bob-Waksberg and production designer Lisa Hanawalt had given us a virtuosic, nearly silent underwater episode; two years later, BoJack’s emotional half-hour eulogy for his mother could make you forget you were watching anything other than a flesh-and-blood human. Midway through its final season, BoJack has become both Netflix’s masterpiece and the best animated series of its generation.”

Vanity Fair

Saraiya, Sonia. 2019. “The 10 Best TV Shows of the 2010s” *Vanity Fair*. November 26, 2019. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/11/best-tv-shows-decade-2010s

“It’s an animated show about a talking horse—and oh yes, the horse is depressed. When BoJack Horseman debuted in 2014, I nearly overlooked it. I’m glad I gave it a second chance. By turning Hollywood into a zoo—and the antihero into an antihorse—showrunner Raphael Bob-Waksbergfound a way to tell involving, complex stories about personal failure and celebrity worship, creative success and corporate sellout, the tense relationship between shame and narcissism, and the candy-coated circus of nonsense that is the media-entertainment industry. Over the course of six seasons—the final eight episodes will drop in January 2020—BoJack Horseman has constructed some of the most complex and relatable characters on television, who occasionally are swept up by ridiculous hijinks in the midst of working through divorce, recovery, or adoption. Thanks to Lisa Hanawalt’s production design, those stories take place in a vividly tinted world of glorious Los Angeles sunsets, crowded with pun-based visual gags, and many different kinds of animal-people (including a complicated ecosystem of sentient chickens). Gentle, daring, nuanced, and very funny, BoJack Horseman is the best show of the decade.”

GQ

Varghese, Daniel. 2019. “The 24 TV Shows That Shaped The 2010s”. GQ. December 18, 2019. https://www.gq.com/story/the-24-tv-shows-that-shaped-the-2010s

“You could be forgiven for calling the 2010s the decade of the "cartoon for adults." (Remember when Rick and Morty fans wrought havoc at multiple McDonald's locations over a stunt condiment?) None of them were as consistently marvelous as BoJack Horseman, though, a

show that takes place in an alternate reality in which anthropomorphized animals and humans coexist. It mainly tells the story of a washed-up actor grappling with his own has-been status, with a cast of similarly self-obsessed characters constantly in his orbit. It consistently grapples with difficult subjects—depression, sexual assault, unfair working conditions, journalistic integrity—without sacrificing laughs or losing narrative trajectory. And though these characters are often put through visually-spectacular hell, it still manages to be uproariously funny. It is the benchmark by which all comedies of the decade can be judged"

RollingStone

Sepinwall, Alan. 2019. "50 Best TV Shows of the 2010s" *RollingStone.* December 4, 2019 https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-lists/50-best-tv-shows-of-decade-2010s-914737/

"Yet another series capable of making you laugh or weep uncontrollably from one moment to the next. What had initially seemed like a clever but familiar animated showbiz satire — about a washed-up Nineties sitcom star (Will Arnett, never better) struggling with his own irrelevance — soon revealed itself to be something much deeper, even as it never lost its comic edge. As BoJack battles depression and addiction, the series (created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg) is simultaneously a hysterical parody of TV antihero clichés and a genuinely moving example of the genre. BoJack deploys every comic tool in the book, from wordplay (as BoJack's manager/ex Princess Carolyn, Amy Sedaris is frequently called upon to deliver shockingly intricate tongue-twisters) to bawdy slapstick (BoJack's asexual buddy Todd, voiced by Aaron Paul, once got into a lube-soaked brawl with his girlfriend's libertine parents). But it's also keenly aware of the loneliness that can cripple BoJack, Princess Carolyn, Todd, Diane (Alison Brie), and even the gregarious Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins). The show can go anywhere and be anything, from BoJack's silent misadventures at the bottom of the ocean, to him delivering an episode-length monologue about his late mother. Most Netflix shows top out at very good; this one is phenomenal."

Annex B - Title Sequence

Figure 1: The title sequence in frames.

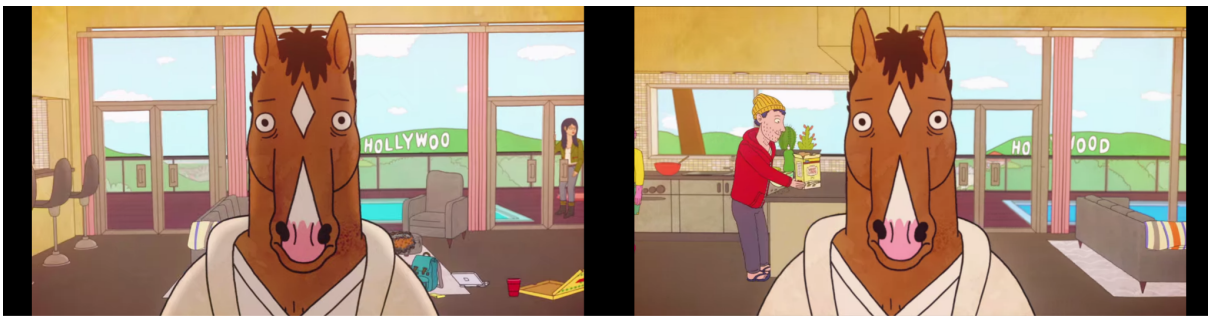

Figure 2: The Hollywoo change in the title sequence (before and after)

Figure 3: The bed change in the title sequence. In the middle, a frame from the moment when Todd breaks the bed in the series.

Figure 4: The ottoman change in the title sequence. In the middle, a frame from the moment when Sarah Lynn burns it.