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AMST 308
Response Paper 4
3/27/18

Schadenfruede and Cringe Comedy in the Modern Sitcom

In several of the shows assigned for the week, I found myself feeling wrong for laughing at the unfortunate, quasi-depressing plights that the characters were working through or floundering in. Specifically, *BoJack Horseman* and *The Office* were particularly filled with real emotional turmoil that was used as fuel for humor. This was effective, but did produce the kind of response that fuses guilt and pleasure together within the elicited laugh. However, stylistically they utilize different methods. *BoJack Horseman* utilized postmodernist irony while *The Office* is more metamodernist, as defined by Michial Farmer.

The pilot of *BoJack Horseman* was prime example of how the deadpan, apathetic irony of the 2000s dominated in retaliation to the saccharine sitcoms of the 80s and 90s. This is easily seen in this pilot due to the direct references and juxtaposition between the show the viewer is engaging with and the meta-TV show of *Horsin' Around*. The contrast between Bojack's attitude about life and his character in his show's is stark, and meant to emphasize the devolution from sincerity into the "postmodern cool" introduced by David Foster Wallace. The show's plot however takes this irony and internalizes it into the characters, creating a dark, almost sadistic humor centered around the mockery of Bojack despite his apparent inability to be sincere and increasingly obvious depressive tendencies. There was never a moment of genuine feeling or expression from Bojack despite being confronted with several discoveries and situations that might

otherwise inspire some emotion. Instead, they were replaced with quick one liners that continue that lean further away from anything remotely close to sincerity.

The Office, on the other hand, is unique in its ability to balance that irony and genuineness both within the overall structure of the show, but also within individual characters. Most notably, Michael Scott blends the cringe-worthy patheticness that induces laughter in spite of ourselves, and moments of emotional growth and expression that, although often interrupted, still provide an overall sense of real sentiment. In the episode we watched, "Sex Ed," Michael goes on a decently sad escapade to talk to all of his ex-lovers originally about his potential herpes, but ends up being about his tendency to ruin relationships by not being present. This issue is one that causes real pain for Michael, but it is displayed in a comedic way and the audience laughs at this horrifically awkward and painful interactions with these women. By the end of the episode, the series of conversations ends in a realization that there was really only one relationship that he valued above the rest, and he calls her and delivers a heartwarming little monologue into her voicemail about how much he valued her. This is inevitably undercut with the final line "And you should talk to a doctor because you also might have herpes bye!" which adds a comedic punchline to an otherwise genuine sentiment of emotion. This tactic, and sort of formula, is reflective of the metamodernist ideology that Farmer describes that allows for irony and sentimentality to co-exist within individuals and environments as long as one is occasionally mitigated by the other sporadically throughout the episode, or even the series.

Bojack Horseman and *The Office* are representatives of the two different ironic ideologies that Farmer has identified as rising out of the 90s and early 2000s in television and media. *Bojack's* short, bleak, and depressing one liners are examples of the postmodern form of irony that often mocks its own darkness and cynicism. Michael Scott is a figure of the more hopeful brand of cringe comedy: a character whose misfortune audiences can laugh at, but his ability to be genuine can diminish the harshness with which he is treated and can treat others. Stylistically, each of these are very different and utilize irony and humor in similar ways, but achieve opposite effects through the avoidance or maintenance of sincerity.