



universität
wien

DIPLOMARBEIT / DIPLOMA THESIS

Titel der Diplomarbeit / Title of the Diploma Thesis

„Masculinity and Transgressions in the Contemporary
Animated Series BoJack Horseman (2014-2019) and
Rick and Morty (2013-2019)“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Magister der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2020/ Vienna, 2020

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 190 344 353

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Lehramtsstudium UF Englisch, UF Spanisch

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. phil. habil. Nadja Gernalzick

Mitbetreut von / Co-Supervisor:

Acknowledgements

It is done. I have finished my diploma thesis. These words feel like such a relief. And now that I can finally pronounce them and do not have to apologetically concede that “I’m still working on it ... No, unfortunately I still haven’t finished my thesis but I’m getting there...” I am just so grateful to the universe for aligning all the stars in the right constellation so that I finally got my things together and FINISHED IT.

First, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor Nadja Gernalzick for professionally assisting me in this difficult process, providing useful feedback, guidance and suggestions. Thank you for being patient concerning deadlines and the slow progress of my thesis and for being flexible adapting to all the changes this thesis has experienced.

I would like to thank my parents, Helmut and Karin, who have supported me throughout my life and academic career, for paying for my degree and the living expenses during my time as a student at the university of Vienna and for just being great, patient and loving parents. Thank you for everything!

I also want to say thank you to my amazing girlfriend, Berta, who has been patient, patient, so very very patient – she really had to be patient with me – and always supportive during this long and tiresome process. She is probably even happier than me now that I have submitted my thesis.

I do not want to forget Dirli and Mango, my two feline partners-in-crime and loyal companions during eternal hours of working on my thesis at home. You have contributed to the success of this endeavour with encouraging meows, unorthodox suggestions to my writing by constantly walking over my keyboard and attending to me during breaks with cuddles and affection.

Lastly, I want to thank all of my friends and family for their patience – yes basically everybody feels the same way about this thesis, I apologize – and support, for cheering me up, for holding me responsible for my procrastinating and for just being there all along the way. Without you all of this would have been way more difficult (not to say impossible) than it already was.

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1. Introduction

From the outset, animation has been faced with contradictions; blurring the line between infantile and adult art, animation and comics have often knowingly used the possibilities of their medium in order to create their characteristic satire. In spite of these contradictions, or rather because of the way writers and producers have utilized the inherent ambiguities of animation, this medium has attracted a wide audience across the globe. *The Simpsons*, created by Matt Groening, have changed the landscape of the animated sitcom by mastering this balancing act and attracting younger and older viewers alike. They paved the way for future generations of animated shows, which critically depict pertinent societal issues, such as politics, culture and religion. Evolving from this tradition, the animated series *South Park* has become notorious for its characteristic type of openly provocative and transgressive humor, which depicts controversial issues and breaks moral taboos. While the series initially provoked a public outcry, as concerns were raised about its harmful effects on younger viewers, by now it has become an established part of popular culture with scholars from different fields praising it for its radical satire (see Cogan, Weinstock).

Over the last two decades numerous animated series have utilized humor to comment on and criticize aspects of society. However, subversive and satirical qualities of such series have been criticized. Researchers such as Matthew W. Hughey and Sahara Muradi (2006) argue that, while many animated series certainly engage in a satirical discourse, some of them simultaneously promote stereotypical and racist depictions through their humor. Similarly to the individual emotional reactions of viewers to television and film, which can vary to a great extent (see Kristyn 79), humor can have different subjective facets to it as, for instance, Earl Monroe Kunkel III shows when he discusses why viewers laugh about rape in Adult Swim's animated series *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. He argues that

[h]umor means different things to different people in different contexts and/or different situations. Where one person laughs at a racist joke because they find racism funny, or find the joke's cruelty funny, another person in the same situation laughs at the person who finds racism funny; the joke takes on a different context for that individual. (Kunkel 13)

Thus, it seems to be necessary to analyze these transgressive moments in animated series, but also the audience's reaction to the ambiguities and incongruities created, in order to fully understand the appeal of these series and their controversial depictions. In the tradition of the carnivalesque as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, I will interpret transgressions as productive moments which subvert "the rules of hierarchies in any of a number of areas, including literary genres and conventions, psychic forms, the human body, geographical space, and social order"

(Booker 13). Reviewing the characteristics of typically subversive animation, I will provide a methodology which allows me to discuss and interpret the filmic composition of transgressive moments depicted in the series.

The issue of gender and sexuality in contemporary animated series is one which is also characterized by a number of incongruities. While femininity on television has been studied thoroughly over the years, masculinity has only recently been placed in the foreground. A current wave of feminism in the media landscape, most prominently exemplified by the #*Metoo* movement and the discussion of toxic masculinity, has led to an increased sensitivity when it comes to questions of sexuality in media productions. The academia also has turned its attention to the genre of animation, focusing on the depictions and influence of masculinity. While abundant research has been conducted on children's animation and masculinity¹ and on adult animation in the context of humor and satire², few scholars have also focused on masculinity within the genre of adult animation³. This limited number of publications indicates that the genre of adult animation, which enjoys a growing popularity, has only scarcely been scrutinized through the lens of masculinity. Furthermore, while most treaties apply a thematical approach with regard to masculinity, the *mise-en-scène*, which is an essential part of how aspects of masculinity are manifested on the small screen, has largely been neglected. Even major publications, such as Rebecca Feasey's *Masculinity and Popular Television*, have received criticism in this respect: "As in much recent feminist literature, narrative is the central focus of investigation, leaving other aspects of representation such as physique, framing and *mise-en-scène* widely ignored" (Weissmann 136).

Contemporary animated series like *Rick and Morty* and *BoJack Horseman*, which attract a large audience on their networks, Adult Swim and Netflix respectively, have been praised for their critical comments on society and culture in the 21st century. Both explicitly engage in a discourse about sexuality, especially masculinity. In the episode "The Light Bulb Scene" in *BoJack Horseman*, for instance, a series which stars the protagonist BoJack in his role as the hardboiled detective Philbert is described as "gratuitous and male-gazey" (4:38) and in the episode *Rickshank Rickdemption* in *Rick and Morty*, the protagonist Rick Sanchez declares himself the "de facto patriarch of [the] family" (21:20). While such references to the discussion on gender and sex indicate a certain engagement with these issues, the need for critical analysis arises in order to enquire whether these series actually provide a socially productive and

¹ see Bell, Haas and Sells; Cheu; Grimme; McCallum; Sales; Wooden and Gillam.

² see Cogan; DeRochi; Ezell; Farmer; Henry; Herhuth; Jezanyal; Sammond; Thompson; Weinstock.

³ see Feasey; Klein; Palmer-Metha's *Burdened Bodies* and *The Wisdom of Folly*; Wells.

progressive discourse about masculinity, as suggested by the reception in the media and by viewers, or if, at their core, they promote hegemonic patriarchal positions.

2. Methodology

In this thesis, I will analyze masculinity in two animated series, namely, *BoJack Horseman* and *Rick and Morty*. The notion of hegemonic masculinity as determined by R. W. Connell (1983) provides a starting point to contextualize the manifestations of masculinities in the series and identify how they compare with this fundamental concept of the study of male sexuality. Deriving from Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, hegemonic masculinity emphasizes men's dominant position in society and defines "the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities [...] cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or de-legitimization of alternatives [...] [as] widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities" (Connell and Messerschmidt 846). Considering the centrality of hegemonic masculinity when thinking about and depicting gender, I intend to focus on how this notion frames other types of masculinities. Inspired by Kristen L. Sales' study of subversive masculinity in children's animation, I will apply a list, developed by her, of characteristics of hegemonic masculinity in order to identify and categorize instances of masculine behavior in the series under scrutiny. Table 1 consists of characteristics which can be considered emblematic of hegemonic masculinity (see Saxton qtd. in Donaldson 644) and are frequently found on television:

1. Assertiveness
2. Aggression
3. Position of authority
4. Emotional dismissiveness
5. Physical strength

Table 1
Characteristics of Hegemonic Masculinity by Sales (24)

I will analyze if the male characters in the series exhibit a type of behavior or act in a manner that corresponds to these criteria of hegemonic masculinity, or whether they differ from them. While these characteristics in and of themselves can be found in characters of both sexes, they provide a collection of stereotypically male features and further the discourse of the hegemonic male. Despite the fact that these depictions fail to do justice to the variety of male identities within society, Mary Jiang Bresnahan et al. (2019) argue that "attitudes about gender are often reinforced by stereotypical depictions of gender in the media." These depictions make the viewer sensitive towards males who do not exhibit these characteristics, or who contrast to

them. Prevailing definitions of masculinity especially characterize themselves by the fact that they differ strongly from the concept of femininity, for instance. Derrida (41), expanding on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of binary oppositions, showed that we perceive difference in terms of dichotomies, "a violent hierarchy [...] [in which] one of the two terms governs the other." Following this train of thought, the female is defined through the male, namely, as something which the male is not and, thus, the female always upholds such negative associations based on this hierarchic relationship, thus, as a term that inherently lacks the positive and dominant male qualities. Therefore, when analyzing the way in which masculinity manifests itself in different contexts, one can refer to developments in identity construction which affect both masculinity and femininity alike. For instance, recent animation films such as *Brave* and *Moana* depict physically strong, self-confident heroines and thereby intentionally subvert the inherent masculine aspect of these characteristics. The mise-en-scène of the series under scrutiny will be a crucial part of my analysis, contextualizing the instances of masculine behavior observed in the narration and providing different layers of meaning to the action presented.

The concept of transgression will provide a framework to examine and discuss the different depictions of masculinities in the series and the composition of the episodes in general. Lubomir Dolezel (21) argues that "in the domain of literature no norm is safe" and refers to transgressions as "a permanent process of norm modification, creation and destruction." Mikhail Bakhtin established the idea of transgression in literary criticism with his analysis of the carnival in the work of French writer François Rabelais. His discussion of carnival laughter illustrates the potential of the carnival to subvert prevailing systems of meaning:

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore [sic] it is not an individual reaction to some isolated comic event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of the carnival. (Bakhtin 11–12)

Bakhtin emphasizes important aspects of the carnivalesque, such as the subversion of universal categories and realities. However, Bakhtin's understanding of the carnivalesque as transgressing a certain order implies that this transgressive behavior works within the boundaries of this established order and, in fact, acknowledges it (Jenks 7). During the carnival, kings and fools switch places and with the end of the carnival season and the return of normality, each individual again assumes his or her given role.

In this thesis, transgression as an analytical tool is not understood as "a radically alien or unimaginable phenomenon, but [...] [rather as] a constant, central presence of our imaginative lives, whose authority can be felt in the intensity with which it is resisted and

regulated both by individual agents and by larger social and discursive structures” (Adams 208). Transgressive practices, I argue, overcome the limits of established order and emphasize its inherent issues. In this context, transgressions are described as “irony, style, intervention or even exploration but essentially as a new way of behaving, as a new basis for social relations, as a denial of conventional classificatory schema” (Jenks 169). In the light of the complexity of present realities, transgressive behavior reacts to the growing demand in a discourse which requires more adequate depictions of gender. The depiction of behavior that transgresses hegemonic masculinity on television, for instance, helps to undermine the sovereignty of a binary system of meaning and exclusionary identarian politics concerning gender. Alexis Shotwell (4), in her publication *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, argues against such purity as a theoretical measure in favor of ‘impure’ social categories. Basing her observations of society on studies of the environment and human history, she manages to address a variety of topics, which require a fundamentally new perspective in order to provide adequate strategies for action and to enable change in times of complexity. In order to be able to achieve this goal, she urges society to abandon the idea of a moment of purity, a “primordial state we might wish to get back to” (Shotwell 5) and rather accept the “complicity and compromise” (Shotwell 5) of our current situation. It is this broad but also coherent approach which can be applied to critically review different aspects of contemporary life, such as sexuality. In our vain attempts to escape our impurity, Shotwell (7) argues that we “practice forms of defense against our own vulnerability.” Essentialism encourages such practice, promoting a set of ideals, which, in turn, produce the docile bodies (see Foucault 135) that conform to these ideals through participation and thus legitimize them. This clearly applies to all forms of purity within binary thinking, not just masculinity. Put into perspective, the notion of purity can contextualize, for instance, the discussion of masculinity in crisis (see Horrocks or Robinson, *Marked Men*) and the desire to “return ‘civilization’ to a point where the narratives of privileged masculine dominance are still intact” (Kennett 56). In his analysis of the novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk, Paul Kennett refers to an economical change in human history which has often been instrumentalized by conservatists’ theories when discussing the origin and crisis of masculinity. Used by Marxist theorists, the term late capitalism, among other things, refers to the growing industrialization and commodification of modern life (Mandel 387). World War II was followed by a period that saw more wealth and consumption than ever before. Civil rights, LBGT and women’s rights movements brought about positive changes for various groups of society, while the lives of white males apparently did not improve considerably; on the contrary, they saw “the transition from a manufacture-based economy to

an information based market, thereby transforming white middle-class working men from a vehicle of production to a womanish receptacle of consumption” (Faludi in Lynn 266). This moment has marked a turning point in masculine identity, the beginning of ‘impure’ masculinities. It is claimed that the changing culture has robbed men of their masculinity, “[t]he crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity” (Giroux 206). Capitalism, with its focus on consumption instead of production, specifically promotes the “forces which are coded as ‘feminizing’ [...] [, namely] phoniness over authenticity, the pleasures of indulgence over the rewards of self-denial, mass psychology over individual will and agency, and dependency over self-reliance” (Robinson, *Feminized* 2). Such a perspective, however, fails to acknowledge what Shotwell means to demonstrate with her argument against purity as a theoretical measure, which is that crisis and, for our purposes, impurity, is inherent in the definition of masculinity. The attempts to avoid a feminization of men are part of “purity practices” (Shotwell 13), which “attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous” (Shotwell 15).

Applying Shotwell’s concept of purity to my analysis of the characteristics of hegemonic masculine behavior in the series under scrutiny, I have created a list of criteria in order to read the masculinities depicted in the context of transgressions:

1. Depictions of characters are not coherent with the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.
2. Notions of purity (e.g. binary categories) are subverted.
3. Complicity and compromise are acknowledged.
4. References to the burden of a patriarchal history created in the past, the difficulty of discussing masculinity in the context of a present marked by complexity and the potential of a different future shaped by a new understanding of masculinities.

Table 2

Aspects of Transgressive Masculinity Inspired by Shotwell (5-8).

These aspects will help to analyze the filmic context in which the depictions of masculinity can be read. The discussion of hegemonic masculinity will be concerned with the question of whether masculine behavior in the series engages with aspects of transgressive masculinity. Additionally, I will interpret the term *transgression* in its Latin literal root, which translates as *crossing* or *going over* (“Transgress”). In this context, any movement across any system of meanings, such as culture, gender, and of the like will be read as transgressive. I have also included Shotwell’s notions of past, present and future in my criteria and I will apply them in

the discussion of masculinity in the series. Her explanation of these terms illustrates the critical and comprehensive position of human existence to which her argumentation leads:

It is hard for us to examine our connection with unbearable pasts with which we might reckon better, our implication in impossibly complex presents through which we might craft different modes of response, and our aspirations for different futures toward which we might shape different worlds-yet-to-come. (Shotwell 8)

These stances on past, present and future potentially allow for a discussion of masculinity, which is simultaneously self-reflective, critical and resolute. I will try to analyze the series under scrutiny in the light of these aspects in order to enquire, whether they provide useful perspectives concerning masculinity which contextualize the discourse of purity as a theoretical measure.

In terms of mediality, I will focus on how the composition creates and complements different types of meanings in the series. The notions of instantiation, commitment and coupling are essential to this discussion. Clare Painter, J. R. Martin and Len Unsworth (134) refer to M. A. K. Halliday and C. M. I. M. Matthiessen (27) in their definition of instantiation: “Instantiation is the relation between the potential for meaning that inheres in the system of language (and/or another semiotic) and the specific, actual text which incorporates limited choices and realisations from the overall system/s.” When it comes to the medium of film, various elements of the audiovisual production can instantiate meaning and the interplay between these types of meanings provides a range of dynamic possibilities. In this context, “commitment refers to the amount of meaning potential that is taken up from any particular meaning system in the process of instantiation” (Hood in Painter, Martin and Unsworth 134-135) and coupling “to the repeated co-patterning within a text of realisations from two or more systems” (Painter, Martin and Unsworth 143). Applied to my analysis of hegemonic masculinity, for instance, the masculine characteristic of aggression can be manifested in the offensive and direct speech of a character, which is coupled with a choice of extra diegetic low pitch sounds in order to intensify the aggressive impression. The complexity of the meanings produced, however, becomes evident when we take into consideration the fact that not only such “convergent couplings” but also especially “divergent” ones can emphasize certain aspects, since they can apply contrast to create new meanings (see Painter, Martin and Unsworth 144). The choice of a low camera angle can depict a character as proportionally bigger, thus, ascribing authority to him or her, for example, whereas the same character might be shown as the youngest of three siblings in the plot. This discrepancy could highlight the character’s special position of authority in the narration in spite of the social hierarchy presented. Therefore, the multimodal composition will be treated as an “integrated text” (Kress 177) in which different types of meanings interact by means of two main modes of composition, namely

spatial composition and temporal composition (see Kress 177). Kress (177) argues that the medium of film applies both types, given the fact that different elements are arranged spatially in a frame, as well as temporally across scenes, while the temporal aspect of composition will usually be more prominent.

In this thesis I argue that transgressive masculinities in contemporary animated series subvert binary social categories in a general critique of purity as a theoretical principle. This critique identifies the role of hegemonic masculinity as an inherent part of genre conventions and narratives in media productions. Questions of morals and ethics are subjected to the filmic logic in which masculine identity functions as a manifestation of stylized action. Filmic composition provides causality to masculine identities and to the gender binaries which define them.

4. Analysis of *Escape From L.A.* (BoJack Horseman)

When focusing on the series *BoJack Horseman*, one can observe that throughout the six seasons, the protagonist BoJack Horseman engages in some typically masculine behavior, but he is also shown in situations in which he contrasts this concept markedly. This image can also be observed in this episode. Chronologically, there are far more instances of masculine behavior, with hardly any occurrences of hegemonic masculinity characteristics until what I argue is a turning point in the episode at around minute 13. From this turning point onwards, the protagonist exhibits these characteristics increasingly. Interestingly, this turning point divides the twenty-six-minutes-long episode almost exactly in two, which gives this behavioral shift a certain temporal balance.

I argue that this episode exemplifies a certain pattern in the series which has also been recognized by other critics:

It's humanizing in a way. BoJack's intentions are often honorable, yet his actions tend to execute otherwise – often backfiring, failing, or hurting the very people he cares deeply about. BoJack is a toxic person. But what's captivating about the series is how much he doesn't mean to be. His actions, shitty as they may be, are justified by his dramatic backstory. In what is one of the most authentic depictions of self-abuse and addiction portrayed on TV. (Angeles)

As observed by Christian Angeles, the series focuses not only on the protagonist's flaws and mistakes but also on his motivations, intentions and background in general. In this context, the function of the first half of this episode is to dramatize BoJack's motivations and to explain, or even to justify in a certain way, his inexcusable behavior in the second half of the episode. This becomes decidedly evident if one was to merely focus on the referential meaning (see Bordwell and Thompson 58) of the episode, which would be along the lines of:

Troubled Hollywood actor escapes his problems and obligations in L.A. and travels to New Mexico in an attempt to reconnect with a female acquaintance from his long distant past. After staying for two months with the married mother of two teenage children and her family under false pretenses, the protagonist fails to romantically connect with said woman and subsequently attempts to engage in sexual intercourse with her barely legal daughter. Caught in the act by the mother, the protagonist is removed from the family home and returns to L.A.

Certainly, the composition of this episode does not in the least correspond with this summary. Nevertheless, it indicates a certain discrepancy between the filmic dramatization of the events and the basic plot. This suggests, as Angeles and I have argued, that the composition of the episode humanizes BoJack's reprehensible behavior to a certain extent.

At the beginning of the episode the series juxtaposes BoJack, a dysfunctional und self-destructive person, with Charlotte's picture-perfect family. In order to introduce the family members, the series depicts a scene strongly resembling a sitcom theme song from the 1980s typically found in this format at the beginning of an episode. The camera pans in different directions on a wall of family pictures and repeatedly centers for a few seconds on a new picture of Charlotte's family engaging in typical family activities like holidays, trips, birthdays, sightseeing, which is accompanied by a theme soundtrack with a catchy and repetitive chorus that starts with the lines "Kyle and the kids" (*Escape from L.A.* 0:52). Intertextual references like this one, referring to the sitcom format, can be found in numerous episodes from *BoJack Horseman*, in which, for instance, news broadcasting, talk shows, movies and other media productions are featured (see *BoJack the Feminist*). The self-referentiality found in this scene causes an "empowering inversion of viewer relations" (Fiske 242), which lets viewers become aware of the artificiality of television and, subsequently, allows them to reflect on the reality presented on the small screen. The lyrics only underline, in a very obvious manner, what the cheerful music and the visual composition have already established, namely that "they're the perfect family" (*Escape from L.A.* 1:10). Furthermore, a potential complication of the plot is already hinted at with the line: "He loves his wife and there's nothing you can do" (1:15). This explicit introduction of the family before any action takes place creates certain expectations with regard to BoJack's function in this scenario. The characterization of BoJack throughout the series as a male celebrity who uses his fame to have sexual intercourse with numerous often younger women and the fact that he has already tried to sabotage a wedding (see *Horse Majeure*) certainly contextualize this scene and alludes to the line "He loves his wife and there's nothing you can do" (*Escape from L.A.* 1:15). In the light of the fact that being sexual is arguably considered "the mainstay of male identity" (Person 605), it can be argued that his sexual behavior in general and his motivation to visit Charlotte confirms his hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, it is all the more surprising to then observe that in the first half of the episode various scenes frame BoJack as an insecure, apologetic, rather passive character; features which

contrast the hegemonic masculinities depicted on television. When the camera pans down and the themed music from the sitcom stops, as a medium shot (*Escape from L.A.* 1:22) centers on all of the family members and BoJack gathered at the breakfast table, a very stylized setting within the sitcom format, BoJack is found at the center of the shot with the family focused on him from both sides. The staging already places BoJack in a defensive position, anticipating the question that will dominate the conversation, namely, the reasons for BoJack's visit. Tension builds up as Charlotte repeats and thus emphasizes Penny's pressing question "But what are you doing in New Mexico?" (2:05) as the camera rests on a close up of her. As BoJack tries to provide a plausible answer, the camera quickly jumps between closeups of BoJack and Penny's faces, who raises the question, which, from the viewer's perspective, is only rhetoric in nature: "You didn't drive all this way just to see my Mom, did you?" (2:17). Given that BoJack's motivation has already become obvious from the way he reacted to the names of Charlotte's family members, "Kyle and the kids? Please tell me that's the name of your band" (0:42), his characterization throughout the series leading up to the present episode and his nervousness at the breakfast table suggest that the function of this dialogue is not to present new information but to underline the absurdity of BoJack's motivation and, consequently, of the plot. Nevertheless, the series clearly wants to empathize this motif by repeating situations in which BoJack struggles to deny the fact that he had only traveled to New Mexico to see and probably reconnect with Charlotte. The outrageous question he poses to Charlotte's daughter, Penny, later in the episode, "Do you think your parents really love each other, or is it more of a just staying-together-for-the-kids situation?" (5:32), emphasizes BoJack's motivation once again, confirming the viewer's prior impression of him being a sexual predator. Not only character speech, but also character movement and staging depict BoJack's position as defensive, contrasting the assertiveness and aggressiveness of the hegemonic male: before BoJack avoids the question once again, there is a short dramatic pause and BoJack stands up from the breakfast table, visibly uncomfortable, while the others are still calmly seated and regard him with suspicion (3:16). The situation becomes only more absurd as BoJack repeats the fact that Charlotte has a family and that they have not spoken in 30 years, implying that it would be crazy to visit her under these circumstances. The dialogue, or rather, interrogation continues in this fashion as BoJack improvises an implausible story, namely, that he has come to New Mexico to buy a boat at the allegedly secret Santa Fe boat show. When he is faced with the irrefutable fact that he could have bought a boat in California, which is located on the coast, as oppose to the landlocked city of Santa Fe, BoJack is only able to circumvent the questioning a final time when he receives a call from his agent, Princess Caroline. Claiming that the call is

from his “boat guy” (3:22) and boasting about the equipment of the boat, such as an obviously nonsensical “poop deck” (3:38), he leaves the room.

In terms of masculinity, it can be observed that the series places BoJack in a defensive and insecure position during the conversation with the family members. The dialogue, as the predominating aspect, provides meaning in this scene, while character movement and action is rather static with the family sitting at the table. The only character at variance with this still image is BoJack himself, who stands up from his seat, gesticulates nervously and hastily. His nervous body language, as oppose to the calm characters around him, as well as the fact that he attempts to answer and explain himself when questioned by the family members instead of leading the conversation, portray him as insecure and defensive. Interestingly, the scene displays an attempted return to hegemonic masculine behavior when BoJack exhibits exaggerated assertiveness in his staged call to a boat vendor in order to reclaim his masculine position and dispel his manifest defensiveness. While boasting about the boat could be considered as an example of merely arrogant behavior, the fact that he regains control over the conversation by speaking at length, which allows him to control the narrative about the boat show without being interrupted or questioned, places this behavior (*Escape from L.A.* 3:22) in a context of hegemonic masculinity. The mise-en-scène also prioritizes BoJack and provides a stage for his assertive behavior, contrary to his initial display of passiveness: when talking on the phone, BoJack moves closer to the camera and places himself in front of the table, which places the other characters in the background, with BoJack’s body partially obscuring them from view (3:26).

The previous dialogue exemplifies how the series does not focus on the realism of the plot and the logic of the diegetic reality, but rather on how character behavior in these situations can be related to discussions of hegemonic masculinity and other issues. After BoJack finishes his call, Charlotte approaches him with an invitation to “make [himself] at home” (*Escape from L.A.* 4:28). The writers of the series introduce Penny as a means of integrating BoJack into the family. Since Kyle has to depart to a basketball game and Charlotte has to return to work, BoJack is the only adult left to accompany Penny who has to practice for her driving license. This plot development is, from the viewer’s perspective, obviously only another pretense, in the episode, however, it is a logical technique that enables BoJack’s stay in New Mexico to be prolonged. While the functions and motivations of different elements of the film medium are usually taken for granted by the audience (Bordwell and Thompson 63), the animated series highlights the textuality of the plot and invites the viewer to reflect on the composition as well as the character of BoJack in this new context of family life. The subsequent driving practice

scene only delays the moment when BoJack will have to face the music due to his fabricated boat show story. Penny confronts him over his implausible story and BoJack's reaction contrasts hegemonic masculinity with an honest display of his feelings as he confesses that he "didn't like the person [he] was in L.A." (*Escape from L.A.* 6:58). By diverging from the characteristic emotional dismissiveness, BoJack incarnates the image of a vulnerable, sensitive, passive male in the first half of the episode, which is consistent with the analysis of the film structure conducted so far in this section of my thesis. Nevertheless, the fact that BoJack's real motivation and romantic or sexual interest in Charlotte is still unresolved in the plotline, it maintains a certain subtle tension throughout the episode. Consequentially, BoJack follows Penny's advice and buys a boat in order to provide more credibility to his story and fill a major plot hole on the narrative level.

The absurdity of the scenario laid out so far is typical for animation. Clearly, the viewer should, as mentioned before, realize the artificiality of the filmic reality presented before him or her. The viewer can even take pleasure in the numerous creative ways in which the writers playfully maintain the coherence of the filmic reality. It is not the intention of the series, or this episode, for this matter, to provide a plausible and realistic plot, which would also work outside of the diegetic level of the series. The episode is an artificial experiment, which simulates a certain experience for the viewer. While the plot is absurd, the themes and topics which are dealt with in the course of the episode are based on authentic human experiences. Sam Higgs (100) confirms this evaluation when he argues that "[t]he world of BoJack Horseman seems pretty ridiculous at first, but it uses this ridiculousness as a foil for tackling issues such as emotional abuse, substance dependence and mental illness." The depictions of masculinities, for instance, have real implications. Characteristically of the subversive humor in animated series, a ridiculous plotline is juxtaposed with a serious one in order to "make an often surprising [sic] point about morality, art, social interaction, or difference" (Richardson 24). Applied to this episode, the ridiculous plotline would be the events leading up to BoJack buying the boat, while the serious one would be BoJack coming to terms with his personal issues and the attempt to sleep with Penny. The invented boat story, the driving practice and the ensuing prom date are all highly artificial, unrealistic and playfully comic scenarios that allow the viewer to perceive how the character BoJack behaves in a family environment. In terms of realism, the events that unfold in the episode are absurd but considering the psyche of the characters and their interactions, the show explores the essence of different contemporary social realities in detail and with great authenticity. Masculinity and its various manifestations are one of the realities depicted in the series.

The first major manifestation of hegemonic masculinity occurs at minute 13:10, as the viewer's expectations are intentionally overturned when BoJack's initial reaction to Maddy drinking alcohol from a flask suggests that he will, in fact, act like a "responsible adult" (*Escape from L.A.* 13:10) as he confiscates the alcohol. Yet he decides to get rid of the Red Bull and vodka and buys bourbon for the teenagers instead. Unlike the first half of the episode, BoJack is in a position of authority, which is typically male-connoted, when he makes the decision to not only accept underage drinking, but to encourage it. Depicting BoJack's morally ambiguous behavior, the series clearly "focuses on exploring taboo subject matter" (Richardson 24) and thereby engages with a discourse of characteristically subversive animation. Apart from providing an inconsistent image of masculinity, the series also rejects a binary categorization regarding morals as strictly good and bad or right and wrong by exploring these taboo subjects through the character of BoJack. Taboo subjects usually elicit a judgment from the viewer. However, by humanizing BoJack's behavior, despite his increasingly ambiguous decisions, the episode demonstrates the impossibility of binary categorizations due to the complexity associated with questions of gender and ethics.

Another important aspect of masculinity becomes evident when BoJack, for the first time in the episode, attains a position of authority. He does so not over his equals, adults, but exclusively over teenagers, which makes his display of masculinity even more questionable. His rhetoric becomes increasingly direct, marked by imperative forms, e.g. "Make a left!" (*Escape from L.A.* 13:25), "Just get in the car!" (15:10). Additionally, his behavior at the prom is also marked by aggression: when Maddy complains about the strong bourbon, he replies in a patronizing way; he also calls Penny, who refuses to drink alcohol, a "pussy" (13:45). Given the fact that Penny has to drive, his attitude becomes even more concerning as he is now not only encouraging underage drinking, but also driving under the influence. The episode not only depicts more hegemonic male behavior, compensating for the lack of it during the first half of the episode, but also becomes thematically darker and more serious. Given that the second part of the episode is set at night, the cool ambient colors emphasize this atmosphere. While the plot or other characters have determined BoJack's actions in the first half of the episode, for example, Charlotte asks him to take Penny driving and Penny then encourages him to buy a boat, he is strikingly more assertive and authoritative in the second half when, for instance, he buys alcohol for the teenager, removes the DJ and changes the music at the prom and eventually makes the group leave the prom.

The instances of morally questionable decisions continue when BoJack and Penny leave the vomiting Maddy behind with Pete as they decide to climb a water tower. The peaceful mise-

en-scène (*Escape from L.A.* 15:55) already foreshadows the next logical step in the plot: a typical love scene is expected with the night sky, the glowing balloons flying in the background, close ups of Penny and BoJack as they dance together symbolically, the dialogue, as exemplified by Penny's statement: "This night has been ... so perfect"(16:09), and finally, jump cuts between the two characters as they hold eye contact and the camera zooms in for what is usually the kissing scene. However, the context of the episode and the outrageousness of the situation suddenly become evident as BoJack utters, "You know, you look just like your mother" (16:11). While the signified meanings in the audiovisual composition create the convergent meaning for an upcoming love scene, the verbal utterances clash with this harmony by linking this scene to BoJack's feelings for Charlotte and the questionable ethics of the affair. The scene, however, is interrupted when Pete requests help because Maddy has passed out on the floor and the situation remains, for the moment, unresolved. Interestingly, in this situation when important decisions are necessary, BoJack fails to use his position of authority over the youngsters. His suggestion to take Maddy to Penny's place and let her spend the night there is potentially fatal. Pete, as oppose to the adult BoJack, has to be the one who warns the group about the dangers of alcohol poisoning. Nevertheless, the decision is still left to BoJack, which is demonstrated by a long shot (*Escape from L.A.* 16:40) with BoJack standing on the right side of the frame separated from the teenagers by a void in the middle of the frame. The placement of the characters underlines the teenage dependency on the masculine position of authority, although BoJack is unable to provide it due to his incoherent masculine identity. Penny squats next to the unconscious Maddy and looks up at BoJack to ask him what to do, while BoJack is taken by surprise and scratches his head, which emphasizes his inability to represent an authoritative figure.

What has become clear so far from this analysis of masculine behavior is that BoJack does not consistently exhibit masculine behavior, which nevertheless does not absolve him from being associated with it, especially the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity. He recurses to this behavior when it serves his purposes and he can use the situation to his advantage. This trait is exemplified when BoJack accompanies Pete and the unconscious Maddy to the hospital and decides to leave them there. Instead of facing the consequences of his irresponsible actions or at least supporting the teenager Pete in this difficult situation, he opts for protecting his own interests at any cost. He does not want to be linked to the alcohol and expects the teenagers to lie for him in order to avoid any repercussions for his actions. Initially, both Penny and Pete are hesitant and skeptical about this decision, so BoJack employs four characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, namely, aggression, assertiveness, physical strength and the position of authority,

to manipulate the teenagers. His physical strength, though it is partly metaphorical and overlaps with an authoritative image, is displayed by his threatening movement towards Pete, who, intimidated by this, tries to step back from BoJack. Also, in order to emphasize his strength, the scene depicts physical contact between BoJack and Pete when BoJack places his left arm on Pete's shoulder and shakes him, as if to make him see reason. The frame (*Escape from L.A.* 17:22) underlines BoJack's dominance in this situation.



Figure 1

Hegemonic masculine behavior emphasized by the audiovisual composition (*Escape from L.A.* 17:22).

The size proportion of BoJack and Pete in figure 1 highlights this: BoJack fills the shot on the left half of the frame entirely, while Pete only occupies the lower half of the horizontal frame, leaving a void above him, which illustrates the imbalance of power. Together with the image created by the frame, the dialogue once more centers on the image of the authoritative adult when BoJack emphasizes, “I’m the adult here, and I need you to listen to me” (*Escape from L.A.* 17:22). It is important to note that BoJack’s understanding of the concept of a responsible adult is very much ambiguous. Much like the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, BoJack embraces the role of an adult only when it serves his purposes and he does not see it as a role that implies responsibility and maturity. Tension builds as BoJack approaches Pete with his index finger pointed threateningly at him, the dramatic effect increased by an extradiegetic low-pitched bass and the sound of low bells, which adds another layer of musical composition as the scene progresses. His voice also alters in timbre to a dark and serious tone as he urges Pete, “Are we clear on this? I need you to be 100 percent with me here” (*Escape from L.A.* 17:25).

The verbal message of a threat is in accordance with the other elements of the visual composition. The character movement intensifies the general atmosphere as Pete steps back holding up both arms in a defensive gesture. Penny mirrors this movement when the camera cuts to her and she steps back towards the car pleading in a nervous voice: “Just listen to him. He knows what he’s doing” (17:27). BoJack’s threatening posture causes both Pete as well as Penny to move away from him. While interaction is rather static throughout the episode and movement is limited to gestures and characters walking across the frame, this visual reaction to BoJack’s threat emphasizes the moment’s gravity. Embodying four of the five characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, namely, assertiveness, aggression, position of authority and physical strength, BoJack inverts his initial image as presented at the beginning of the episode. Before leaving Pete and Maddy behind at the emergency entrance, BoJack attempts to use comic relief as he engages in Pete’s odd tendency to repeat everything he says. While Pete lightens up slightly and agrees with BoJack, this stylistic device has a contrary effect on the viewer who is still left to process the bizarre situation he or she has just witnessed. Based on the analysis of the episode so far, it can be observed that the episode uses divergent couplings of meanings for effect. The love scene between BoJack and Penny, BoJack’s joke at the hospital entrance and the notion of the adult in general, which is used inappropriately and contrasted with BoJack’s actual behavior, all these scenes include an element that contradicts the meaning created by the other meaning systems present, thus, it can be argued that the series intentionally applies disparate compositions to not only explore taboo subjects, but to also embrace impurity as a theoretical measure on different levels of composition.

A climax is to be expected due to the episode progress that involves small slips escalating to serious felonies. The *mise-en-scène* alludes to this fact when a diminished chord progression, a typical device in movies to create suspense (see Schonbrun 128), plays out and creates a certain unease as the camera tilts down in an establishing shot from the full moon to Charlotte’s house as BoJack and Penny arrive. Initially, the dialogue centers around the decision of leaving Pete and Maddy behind, but suddenly Penny tries to make advances at BoJack and states that she wants to sleep with him. Although BoJack declines her offer and, in response to this, Penny runs off crying, the chord progression from the beginning of the scene continues, which suggests that the series of events marked by BoJack’s doubtful decisions and masculine behavior have not been brought to a conclusion. The camera cuts to a fireplace where Charlotte is reading. BoJack enters the frame and as he openly talks about his feelings and regrets making bad decisions and hurting people, the conversation between the two seems to lead to BoJack reversing his masculine behavior once again. When the conversation stops, they kiss, but

Charlotte interrupts the kiss and stands up. The mise-en-scène (*Escape from L.A.* 21:10) reflects BoJack's changed behavior as he is equally staged in the frame next to Charlotte, his utterances are longer and more expressive, as oppose to the short imperatives and remarks leading up to this point. Also, his gestures are more open and inviting when he gesticulates with both arms stretched forward, showing his open palms.

At this point, it is essential to touch upon questions of discourse in the episode. There are different narrative moments in the episode which hint at the possibility of a romantic union between BoJack and Charlotte, especially considering the fact that the viewer is aware of such allusions, as he or she follows the events centered on BoJack. There are different moments which depict intimacy and trust in figure 2, suggesting that Charlotte has certain feelings towards BoJack. For instance, when she takes his hand and leads him to her car to see her family at the beginning of the episode (*Escape from L.A.* 00:34), when she invites him to make himself at home, after he has had breakfast with the family (04:32), when she tells him to stay until the end of the week (08:56), which ultimately results in a two-month-long stay, and finally, when she snuggles up next to him in front of the fire (20:49). All of these moments apply very stylistic language both on the visual as well as on the verbal level, which signify intimacy and feelings of affection. Viewers are able to identify such signs quickly, given that they are part of a repertoire of generic filmic language.



Figure 2

Signs signifying affection as part of a generic repertoire of filmic language (*Escape from L.A.* 00:34 top left; 04:32 top right; 08:56 bottom left; 20:49 bottom right).

Additionally, considering the fact that the episode applies a perceptual subjectivity (see Bordwell & Thompson 92), which means that our experience of the filmic reality is limited to what BoJack sees, hears and does, one tends to interpret these sings in relation to BoJack who is at the center of attention. For instance, the visual composition of the frame in figure 2 at 04:32 characteristically portrays the idea of a romantic scene. The tight centering of the characters and the focus which is thus placed on Charlotte holding BoJack's hand suggest intimacy. Painter, Martin and Unsworth (16) support this observation when analyzing visual narratives in children's picture books as they argue that "[w]hether characters are shown well spaced [sic] from one another on the page, or in close proximity, or even touching, is very relevant to the way we read those relationships." Analyzing these moments mentioned above, I argue that an increasing level of intimacy is created by physical proximity as the episode progresses. While in the first frame in figure 2 this intimacy is depicted by Charlotte taking BoJack by the hand, in the second frame Charlotte already places both hands around BoJack's hand. In the next frame, physical contact increases as Charlotte touches BoJack on his shoulder, and finally, reaches its peak in the last scene when Charlotte snuggles up to BoJack. Like BoJack, the audience is encouraged to believe that there is, possibly, a happy ending for BoJack, thus, the viewers are more inclined to forgive or oversee his questionable decisions throughout the episode given the fact that the events leading up to this point have been experienced together with him. Also, viewers are more likely to tolerate and excuse immoral behavior if they are familiar with a character and his or her background and motivation, which contextualize the morally ambiguous action in a more acceptable way (see Baumeister, chapter 12 *Magnitude and Banality*). In this context the power of internalized filmic structures, such as the generic convention of the happy ending, are so dominant and can be reinforced by visual signifiers, they even surpass the viewer's desire for morality and, despite the action presented, which would usually lead to a negative moral evaluation. Toxic male behavior is often depicted in this field of tension between the structure of a happy ending and an evaluation of the behavior presented according to ethics and morals. This 'masking' of harmful male behavior within filmic composition provides an ambiguous message concerning how media productions deal with depictions of toxic male behavior. Certainly, series like *BoJack Horseman* which in a self-reflexive discourse and dialogue with the audience emphasize this 'masking effect' and intentionally create situations which make the viewer reflect on this fact, instead of "normaliz[ing it]" (*BoJack the Feminist* 20:35) play an important part in raising awareness about toxic male behavior in the context of media practices.

Returning to the analysis of the scene in *Escape from L.A.*, one can argue that the audience views the signs figure 2 in the context of the episode and expects them to logically comply with the narration. However, since Charlotte rejects BoJack's advances, it could be argued that due to the perspective being centered on his perspective, the viewer has been deceived into believing that Charlotte shares BoJack's feelings. This becomes evident if one takes into account that BoJack is present in every scene throughout the entirety of the episode. Nevertheless, this is not always the case, as other episodes of *BoJack Horseman* follow other main characters, such as Dianne, Todd, and Princess Caroline. This supports the argument that this episode wants to specifically center on BoJack's perception and prompts the viewer to identify with his point of view. In the context of masculinity, it can thus be argued that with a protagonist who displays characteristics of hegemonic masculinity at different points in the plot and abandons them at other moments, the series not only embraces incongruities in its depiction of masculinity, but transgresses the common and expected narrative elements, such as a happy ending, a narrative closure and fulfilled expectations, and generally centers on impurity when it comes to the plot, the characters and the logic of the episode presented.

However, despite this focus on the protagonist, the *mise-en-scène*, for the first and only time in this episode, relies on Charlotte's perceptual subjectivity for the narrative climax of the episode, namely, the moment when Charlotte catches BoJack as he is about to engage in sexual intercourse with her daughter Penny. This change in perspective adds an interesting layer to the episode that embraces impurity in terms of expectations, narration and character categorization. Even though so far, the action has mainly contributed to the image of impurity, now this new perspective provides another element of incertitude and incongruity. The questionable decisions made in this episode so far, which center around BoJack's responsibility for Maddy's alcohol poisoning, are witnessed, in their entirety, by the viewer. From BoJack's initial involvement, to how these moments play out, how BoJack behaves and how they are resolved, only fragments and cues are provided as to the final climax, which leaves considerable room for ambiguity. The scene (*Escape from L.A.* 22:48) starts with a long shot showing Charlotte still sitting alone at the campfire positioned on the right half of the frame when a glowing balloon floats from the top of the frame, moves towards the left and attracts Charlotte's attention. The luminous green color of the balloon stands out against the cool colors of the night sky. Such contrastive color choices are usually applied to highlight important objects within the story (see Bordwell and Thompson 145). The anticipation and suspense created are underlined by a distant gloomy howl and one chord of a low-pitched piano in the minor key. Charlotte follows the balloon and when she arrives at the boat, she hears noises inside. As the music intensifies, and different layers of

sound are added such as bells and strings, it dramatically increases in pitch and loudness as an empty medium long shot of the cabin door from a low angle is shown. The low angle makes the door appear bigger and highlights the importance of what lies behind it. There is a slight zoom towards the cabin door, followed by Charlotte approaching the door from the left, anticipating the climactic scene which will occur upon opening the door. When Charlotte opens the door, the camera quickly zooms in on BoJack and Penny, who are in a highly suggestive position on the bed. They are both shocked as the camera zooms in on them, the sound accompaniment stops and they look offscreen to Charlotte, who is only seen from behind and is mostly cut off from the frame. The camera jumps across the line of action and turns 180 degrees now centering on Charlotte's face. She breaks the silence with a single "No" (23:10) as the scene zooms out, shooting BoJack and Penny over the shoulder, while they look at Charlotte's shocked expression as she stands in the doorway in the middle of the frame. The lighting in figure 3 only illuminates BoJack and Penny's frontal axis, giving them a sinister look as they are covered in shadows, which underlines the feeling of guilt that they experience.



Figure 3

The mediated focalization and the character's gaze challenge the viewer by empathizing with two perspectives (*Escape from L.A.* 23:12).

Charlotte's gaze, while directed at BoJack and Penny, also falls directly upon the viewer. In this context, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (118), who adopt M. A. K. Halliday's approach, have argued that "the participant's gaze (and the gesture, if present) demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her." This "demand" relates to the two perspectives provided in the episode,

namely, BoJack's perspective, which is the predominant point of view for most of the episode, and the focus on Charlotte's perspective, which was provided during the sequence leading up to the climax. Charlotte's gaze demands the viewers to empathize with her reaction and identify with her. Painter, Martin and Unsworth (20) refer to this type of focalization as contact and explain that it "is often made to heighten identification or empathy at key moments in the story." This is the case in this moment when the audience, having followed BoJack throughout this episode, is challenged to abandon this position. The camera position, however, does not entirely allow this demand to be satisfied. Located in close proximity behind the protagonist, the viewer takes a dual perspective, namely, he or she sees and experiences the scene from BoJack's perspective while maintaining a certain emotional and spatial distance (see Painter, Martin and Unsworth 27). This "inscribed mediated focalization [...] allows for empathy without complete identification" (Painter, Martin and Unsworth 29). Considering these circumstances, it becomes clear that the series refrains from providing a clear judgment. The composition and its different elements even pose a certain dilemma for the audience, challenging them to empathize either with BoJack or Charlotte.

If the question of possible identifications that have been laid out so far were to be expanded, the subsequent scene discusses the question of guilt and complicity and how they relate to masculinity. Although Penny protests that they "didn't even do anything" (*Escape from L.A.* 23:18), which is true, given the fact that they are both still fully dressed, Charlotte tells her to leave in a serious tone. The establishing shot (23:18) that shows the inside of the boat and all of the characters involved jumps back to BoJack as Penny leaves through the door. Now, as opposed to the previous over the shoulder shot in figure 3, BoJack's profile (23:21), again with a shadow cast across his face, is demonstrated in order to focus on his facial expressions as Charlotte tells him to leave immediately and warns him not to contact her family ever again. This perspective again emphasizes the sadness and disappointment felt by BoJack. He is not the salient element (Kress 177) of the frame, covered by shadows and barely moving, as oppose to Charlotte who is placed further away from the camera but is illuminated and is at the center of attention because of her movements and speech. The proximity of BoJack allows for an identification with the character and his feelings and, in the context of masculinity, with a certain position of victimhood that contrasts to the hegemonic masculinity. Certainly, he cannot be considered as a victim in the literal sense of the word, but rather a victim of circumstances and poor decision making. The dramatization of events and the composition analyzed so far certainly allow for this interpretation. While it can be argued that the series utilizes this situation

to minimize the masculine behavior exhibited, I argue that series attempt to discuss complex questions of complicity in relation to masculine identity and patriarchal society.

Not only aspects of focalization and perspective play an important part in creating empathy and enabling identification with the protagonist and his situation, but the medium of animation and its typical cartoon style provide a basis, in terms of visual perception, for such an active engagement of the audience. Scott McCloud (36) in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* makes a convincing case that the simplistic and iconic cartoon style provides a vacuum for identification with its form. He (37) argues that the cartoon style, as opposed to photorealism, highlights the message while placing the messenger, namely the iconic character, into the background. “[B]y filling up this very iconic cartoony form” the viewer is able to identify with the experience of the cartoon character (McCloud 37). Within the cartoon form the viewer changes his or her position of a spectator to the one of an active participant (McCloud 36). Thus, the series *BoJack Horseman*, while emphasizing empathy by means of the cartoon form and other filmic techniques, such as a perspective centered on BoJack, places the audience intentionally in a conflictive situation, when confronting them with complex issues such as masculinity and morality. Lauren Lavin, discussing mental illness in *BoJack Horseman*, affirms the potential of a cartoon character in such a context:

The simplistic nature of a cartoon, and of cartoon animals in general, helps people understand real-life concepts by making them less overtly anchored in reality and more universal [...] Since [the character of Bojack] is surreal and divorced from our own reality, perhaps we’re better able to relate to his emotional truth without the distraction of a recognizable human actor, who comes with their own baggage. (Lavin)

Thus, the series is able to involve the viewer in the absurd scenarios and complex discussions of issues presented through the protagonist. In terms of aesthetics, both series under scrutiny employ a rather iconic style. Despite the fact that the character design in *BoJack Horseman* is slightly more realistic and detailed in terms of costumes and distinctive facial features as compared to the typically cartoony and simplistic characters of *Rick and Morty*, the anthropomorphic characters of *BoJack Horseman* allow for abstraction.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the episode embraces impurity as represented by the incoherent masculine character BoJack, but also in terms of transgressive and divergent meaning oppositions within its structure. BoJack as a character is sensitive and empathetic but at times, he is able to ignorantly and egoistically disregard others in his own self-interest. A similar observation can be made about his masculine identity. The episode exemplifies the two extremes of BoJack’s behavior. On the one hand, BoJack is clearly a troubled character suffering from his addiction to alcohol and, later in the series, pills, as well as his mental and personal issues. He appears visibly insecure about his life and his decisions and is transparent about his feelings. He even seems to embrace his negative emotions to the extent that he engages

in self-destructive behavior and self-pity. In the episode under scrutiny, he also confesses his insecurities in front of Penny (*Escape from L.A.* 6:58) and his feelings and regrets in front of Charlotte (21:10). Therefore, he contrasts markedly with the archetype of the stoic and emotionless male hero. On the other hand, he displays aggressive and authoritative behavior towards the teenagers (17:25). He embraces the notions of masculinity and adulthood when he makes decisions and gives orders. Therefore, it can be argued that the series depicts certain aspects of hegemonic masculinity but balances them out with contrasting behavior in order to provide an incoherent image of masculinity. The instances of hegemonic masculinity are further highlighted by the mise-en-scène and by the camera movements and zoom, the lighting, and the layers of sound. While hegemonic masculinity cannot be directly linked to the final climatic moment in the episode, certain questionable decisions leading up to this point are marked by such behavior, thus, it can be argued that hegemonic masculinity generally manifests itself in negative contexts in the episode. However, in the light of purity as a theoretical concept, not only does the series abandon notions of purity when it comes to masculinity, with no coherent depiction of BoJack as a masculine character, but also in terms of morality. While displaying all of his morally questionable decisions in detail, BoJack's attempt to sleep with Penny is intentionally left ambiguous. The series denies an absolute categorization of BoJack and the narrative reflects this. BoJack's actions are often despicable, nevertheless, it is difficult to categorize him as an amoral individual due to the fact that his (good) intentions and the events leading up to his mistakes are witnessed by the audience. Individuals usually cannot be completely categorized within terms such as good or bad, given that there are many layers to these categories, and in its artificiality the series provides layers to a scenario which is considered taboo. In consequence, such scenarios are usually depicted in a certain attitude and without such complexity. The self-reflexive nature of the episode manipulates signs and devices used in television language. It has been analyzed how certain signifiers of intimacy have confused the viewers. Filmic language depends on viewers understanding it as such and using it to make sense of the filmic reality. However, in *Escape from L.A.* the contrary is true. Stylized devices such as love scenes, cues throughout the plot and the plot in general, are manipulated to create incongruities and reveal the viewer's centeredness on the protagonist when interpreting these meanings. Narrative closure is denied similarly to how the episode's perspective denies absolute moral judgment. This is emphasized by a perceptual change when depicting the climactic moment in the plot. The audience witnesses how BoJack rejects Penny's advances and telling her again, when she returns, to go to bed (22:37). Therefore, BoJack's intentions and actions are clearly displayed. Nevertheless, this is contradicted moments later

when BoJack is found in a situation which suggests otherwise. The open ending, so to speak, does not allow a clear categorization of BoJack (and his actions) as good or bad. Moreover, Charlotte's gaze in the frame analyzed in figure 3 confronts the audience with the "demand" (see Kress and van Leeuwen 118) to agree or disagree with her shocked emotion and her interpretation of the situation, which they are unable or at least hesitant to do, considering the information provided in the episode. The inscribed mediated focalization poses the problem of empathy versus judgment. While the series by no means attempts to justify BoJack's behavior, it does attempt to explore the mind of a troubled individual. It can be argued that the series aims to elicit the viewer's identification with unmoral behavior.

BoJack's behavior can generally be associated with the analysis of impurity. He attempts to escape his past, which can be related to Shotwell's (8) discussion of impurity and how human beings deal with their unbearable past burdens. While in this episode this past is represented by the L.A. setting, more specifically, by his completely chaotic house, the series in general also especially focuses on his traumatic childhood. In this context, his *Escape from L.A.*, as the title of the episode suggests, is a defensive practice of purity (see Shotwell 7). The two settings symbolize this notion, namely, the urban, human Moloch and the corrupted society of L.A. and the idyllic Tesuque countryside. The idea that purity can be found in such places is manifested metaphorically in many aspects, such as the clean environment and the simple but authentic lifestyle. This setting and the decision to go there mirrors our way of thinking about purity and the idea "that we can buy a product that brings this natural state of purity back" (Shotwell 3). Whether it is a product, a place or a practice, the engagement with purity politics is based on the same fundamental concept. The fact that the episode does not allow BoJack's toxic behavior, marked by alcoholism and problematic relationships, to be purified in the 'pure' country setting is an exemplary affirmation of impurity on the level of narration. Comparing the purity of Charlotte's family home with BoJack's visibly chaotic house underlines this. Additionally, the desire to achieve purity is manifested not only spatially, but also temporally. BoJack revisits a friend from his past when things were good and simple. This becomes evident not only when BoJack becomes nostalgic, but also when he attempts to recreate a moment from their shared past with the glowing balloons (15:21). In a conversation between BoJack and Charlotte, the viewer finds out that BoJack, after having let the balloons go with Penny and her friends, has done the same thing with Charlotte and her former boyfriend Herb when they were young. So BoJack not only tries to escape from the impurity of L.A., he also tries to return to a moment of purity in the past, his imagined Eden. With his return to L.A. at the end of the episode (24:26) he realizes that nothing has changed, which is an affirmation of "complexity

and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives, rather than as things we should avoid” (Shotwell 8).

While the series not only aims to encourage empathy towards, or at least acceptance of, BoJack, the object of masculine and moral impurity, it also shows how many approaches to confronting impurity are inherently flawed. Shotwell (8) argues that our obsession with purity and our “attempts to meet and control a complex situation that is fundamentally outside our control [...] shuts down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective action.” Similarly, BoJack’s attempts to undo all the harm he has caused and turn his life around completely, sets him up for failure by disregarding his mental issues and the impossibility of a blank slate due to the complex situation he finds himself in. Charlotte persuades him to acknowledge his, or rather, everyone’s impurity by speaking in general terms when they discuss whether L.A. is a figurative “tarpit” (*Escape from L.A.* 19:55), attracting negativity and misery. She responds by urging him to acknowledge his own impurity and accept that “everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate” (Shotwell 5). When she disagrees with the assumption that L.A. is to be blamed in this context, she claims that the individual is responsible and says that “you can’t escape you” (*Escape from L.A.* 20:19). However, BoJack is characterized as purity’s tragic hero due to his good intentions that contrast with his immoral actions, he

shuns impurity, ambiguity, multiplicity as they threaten his own fiction. The enormity of the threat keeps him from understanding it. So, the lover of purity remains ignorant of his own impurity, and thus the threat of all impurity remains significantly uncontaminated. (Lugones 132)

This description fittingly describes BoJack’s dilemma and summarizes the concept that the episode attempts to present when it comes to our fundamental view of purity. BoJack incorporates the male victim role as “damaged and damage doing” (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 483), and, thus, is unable provide critical practices for masculinity, which would acknowledge his impurity. He places himself in the victim position of a “damage doing” (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 483) masculinity and when he admits that he “keep[s] making these bad decisions and hurting people,” (*Escape from L.A.* 20:36) “the threat of all [his] impurity remains significantly uncontaminated” (Lugones 132).

5. Analysis of *The Rickshank Rickdemption* (*Rick and Morty*)

While the episode of *BoJack Horseman* analyzed so far mainly centers on the masculinity of the protagonist, the episode *The Rickshank Rickdemption* from *Rick and Morty* provides differing images of masculine identity. Also, *BoJack Horseman* does not display a consistent

image of hegemonic masculinity and often even contradicts this image, whereas *Rick and Morty* depicts certain types of characters who emblematically embody certain features.

Before focusing on the protagonist Rick, allow us analyze Jerry and his version of masculinity depicted in the series. The episode under scrutiny shows a futuristic image of the earth, which forms part of the Galactic Federation⁴ and has thereby been introduced to advanced alien technology, a society controlled by robots and an economy that pays its workers in pills. While the characters Beth and Summer feel that the new rule has changed things for the worse, Jerry seems to have adapted perfectly to this new system. Throughout the series, Jerry has been depicted as a character distinguished by self-doubt and insecurities. Due to his naivety paired with a certain amount of ignorance, he has lost his job and has been unemployed ever since, thus, he struggles to find self-validation and recognition in his family and broken marriage. However, he can thrive in this new society, which mainly relies on conformism and obedience. He is associated with typically non masculine attributes, given that a strong, confident and authoritative male would not accept such a system of government, unlike Jerry, who has “got [his] sixth promotion this week and [...] still [doesn’t] know what [he does]” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 2:08). While Jerry by no means embodies the position of authority in terms of hegemonic masculinity, this new system provides him with the opportunity to feel like an authority in this context and occupy the position of a successful employee who makes a “six-chewable figure income” (2:25). His new appearance in a uniform decorated with medals and badges of rank, as opposed to his typical casual green T-shirt and blue pants, indicates his new symbols of power (2:11). Up to this point, the series has always denied Jerry this chance and he has repeatedly found himself unable to thrive in his environment or disappointed by the structure of society. Married to a horse surgeon, he has constantly tried to overachieve to compensate for the fact that he is unable to provide for his family. Pleck (65) argues that men “prid[e] themselves on the hard work and personal sacrifice they are making to be breadwinners for their families. Accepting these hardships reaffirms their role as family providers and therefore as true men.” So far, Jerry has not been able to receive this recognition and affirm his masculinity. In this new situation, however, the roles are reversed, and Beth finds herself unemployed due to advanced alien medicine that replaces her profession. The absurdity of the situation that one can be promoted several times within a week and have a large income (even if it consists only of pills) without working at all undermines the idea of a male breadwinner. Nevertheless, the overwhelming and decade-long focus on the role of the breadwinner in society

⁴ “The Galactic Federation [is] a major galactic or intergalactic organization which control[s] significant areas of the universe” in the series *Rick and Morty* (see “Galactic Federation”).

has generated immense expectations of men since the majority of these perceptions of masculinity prevail. Howe (80) argues that these expectations might cause men who cannot attain professional success to feel less masculine. This economic burden is also manifested in the traditional widespread belief of “every-man-for-himself,” which claims that adulthood and masculinity go hand in hand with financial independence (Noxon 174). In this context, Jerry’s delight at this new government is understandable, given the fact that it allows him to feel more masculine, even though he obviously still does not embody the typical characteristics of the hegemonic male.

Nevertheless, a number of behavioral patterns of hegemonic masculinity are highlighted by the character of Jerry with his behavior. For instance, he employs a typical gesture of a traditional authoritative father when he hits his fist on the table in order to deliver his statement with more authority, as done before him by Beth and Summer (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 2:22). While the two women actually made a point for their argument, Jerry only utters, “Willem Dafoe! Th-That’s the guy I couldn’t think of this morning” (2:37). This action illustrates the markers that Jerry uses to signify power, such as medals, a job and an aggressive gesture. However, as with a job that is not real since it does not exist within the context of work, which would include certain qualifications for a job, a job description with certain tasks and obligations, a salary equivalent to the work accomplished, etc., the gesture of hitting one’s fist on a table without giving this gesture a rhetoric meaning, does not symbolize authority. Jerry’s understanding of masculinity is apparently inspired by the tradition of sitcom fathers like in *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, which display a father figure who was “stern and almost infallible [...] the primary voice in the household [...] [and] the wise and knowledgeable authority” (Reimers 114). The behavior Jerry usually exhibits, however, relates more to the 1970s image of the father with characters like Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* and “his lack of wisdom[,] [...] his low level of education [on top of his] [...] arrogant self-assurance of infallibility” (Reimers 115). It is this combination of contrary father images, of an ideal and of a reality, or rather the discrepancy between the two, that characterize Jerry in the context of masculinity. Analyzing the animated TV series *King of the Hill*, Rebecca Feasey (38) also identifies different perceptions of fatherhood when she discusses “three very different (although all potentially dysfunctional) generations of Hill men and examin[es] the sometimes struggling [sic] relationships between them.” While she describes different males, who embody these contradictory ideas, she makes an important argument, which is in line with my observations about Jerry in *Rick and Morty*, when referring to the psychiatrist Anthony Clare:

Anthony Clare makes this point when he comments that today's fathers cannot help but be affected by their own experiences of being fathered, pointing out that these men sometimes struggle to combine their own recollections of being fathered with their own ideas of what a parent should be. The very fact that the programme [King of the Hill] provides a range of competing and often contradictory masculinities goes some way towards challenging the myth of the hegemonic male. (Clare 169 In Feasey 38)

Both *Rick and Morty*, and *BoJack Horseman* depict characters with a “range of competing and often contradictory masculinities,” Jerry is the most prominent example, a character that can only embody the male position of authority in an absurd system which subverts common concepts of human society; but also BoJack, who embraces masculine characteristics at different points in the series while contradicting them at other moments in the narration. While traditional sitcoms depict and thereby privilege a certain type of masculinity, the series under scrutiny deliberately provide a variety of aspects of masculinities. The discourse created in this process contains both affirming as well as criticizing qualities. Hall calls this an attempt to frame “all competing definitions of reality” (333).

The episode, nevertheless, establishes the hegemonic masculine order once again at the end of the episode with the collapse of the alien government. Consequently, masculine identities, such as Jerry's, which differ from the model of hegemonic masculinity are subject to a process of subordination. While earth finds itself in a state of anarchy and people charge at each other, Jerry, terrified by the chaos and destruction around him, tries to save his life by crawling on his knees. The series has returned to the initial depiction of Jerry with his typical weak and cowardly nature, which is only emphasized when Jerry admits: “I'm not proud to share this, but the truth is, I just kept crawling and it kept working” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 19:24). With this turn of events Jerry is “placed in a ‘feminized’ position” (Christopher 266). This situation is also emblematic for Jerry's emasculated identity, which is also depicted very graphically, for instance, in the episode *Big Trouble in Little Sanchez* (4:02), in which Beth's perception of her husband literally manifests itself in the form of a creature that resembles a worm⁵. The privilege Jerry has enjoyed for one episode is gone as soon as order is established again and with it, the rules defining hegemonic masculinity. The series mocks the influence of these concepts, especially within the generic reality of the sitcom. The emotional reunion scene between Beth and Jerry, in which they promise to always stay by each other's side in the face of destruction and terror, such as that which they have just witnessed, is juxtaposed to the return of Rick, the real patriarch of the family. The mise-en-scène reflects this sudden shift of power. Initially, Beth and Jerry could be found on one side of the frame, yet as soon as the portal opens and Rick, Morty and Summer return, Beth moves towards them,

⁵ In *Big Trouble in Little Sanchez* Beth and Jerry apply for marriage counseling on an alien planet and as a part of their treatment they use a device that allows them to manifest their perceptions of each other via a symbolic creature called a ‘mytholog’.

leaving Jerry alone on the other side. Jerry tries to exhibit strength and authority, opposing the return of Rick, as he utters, “It’s him or me” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* (2004)), and the camera cuts to a medium shot of the rest of the family gazing into the camera in total silence and without any movement. Again, similarly to the episode *Escape from L.A.*, a certain demand (see Kress & van Leeuwen 118) is created by this gaze, which in this case can be related to the viewers identifying with the moment when Jerry loses his power. The tension of the confrontation is maintained when the camera jump cuts back to Jerry. Rick breaks the silence and everybody leaves, while Beth and Jerry are still standing opposite each other, now in a shot showing their profiles. The conflict is never resolved visually as the camera cuts to Rick’s garage, but Beth subsequently informs the viewer during a conversation with Rick that she will get a divorce.

While Jerry temporarily enjoyed the position of the breadwinner in the family, the reestablishment of former order and hegemonic masculinity negates his privilege and the power it carries. Erica Scharrer (23), who argues that humor and, specifically, joke telling, can be viewed as a means of expressing power between the sexes, has found in her study that sitcom fathers have noticeably found themselves “to be on the weaker end of the power differential in joke-telling scenarios, the target of the humor” (Scharrer 25) due to “the loss of [...] privileges in the home to which being the breadwinner has entitled them” (Wilkie 227). Across the decades, the development of the ‘foolish father’ image can be associated with the emergence of working-class fathers in sitcoms. Scharrer’s (33) data clearly indicates that “the lower the social class of the sitcom father, the more foolish the portrayal will be.” This illustrates how socioeconomic aspects, such as class and income, are directly linked to questions of masculinity. The episode illustrates this idea when it shows how Jerry’s masculine identity is dramatically affected by rapid socioeconomic change.

As opposed to Jerry’s version of masculinity, Rick displays nearly all of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. His most prominent masculine trait is his emotional dismissiveness. He is generally considered “the smartest man in the universe” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 1:25), which means that he does not recognize any authority and, in the nature of hegemonic phallogocentrism, he considers feelings such as, for instance, love to be merely “a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed” (*Rick Potion No. 9*. 2:13). The episode *The Rickshank Rickdemption* mainly centers on this characteristic and attempts to explore Rick’s motivation. Typically for subversive animation, one absurd and offensive plot line is juxtaposed with a more serious one (see Richardson 24). The former is Rick’s escape from the space prison and the destruction and chaos it causes, and the latter explores Rick’s past and how he became

the cynical and emotionally dismissive person he is. Concerning the serious plot line, the audience expects to witness an emotional origin story that would explain Rick's attitude towards life, which is also how the episode progresses. The clues leading up to this point, which allude to the loss of a loved one that caused him to invent the portal gun and lead the life of an adventurous scientist, are explicitly depicted for the audience when Rick concedes: "That's the three lines of math that separate my life as a man from my life as an unfeeling ghost" (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 10:17). This image of a hard-boiled male hero devoid of emotion is typical for popular television (see Feasey 64) and different motivations and reasons for such behavior are often included in the narration in order to provide causality, a necessity of filmic logic (Bordwell and Thompson 73) for the masculinity depicted on-screen.

These clues within the plot and the structure rely on the stylistic language of drama, which emphasizes the emotions of characters and their reception by the audience. This would suggest that there is a deeper emotional layer to the character of Rick, which is hidden by his typical display of emotional dismissiveness. The first clue is provided after a confrontation with an agent of the Galactic Federation who interrogates Rick about the portal gun. Not afraid to challenge others physically or mentally, Rick often engages in competitive behavior, such as in this case, when he opposes the agent despite the fact that a laser is being applied to his brain. His assertiveness and aggressiveness are underlined by an over the shoulder shot of Rick (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 3:40), who narrows his eyes while speaking, as an atmospheric and loud synthesizer intensifies the tension of the moment. However, the confrontation is interrupted as both look out of the window into a purple and red horizon where different characters are aligned. Given the fact that this part of the episode is set inside Rick's mind, which the agent has entered in order to access Rick's memories of crafting the portal gun⁶, the view towards the horizon symbolizes Rick's memories. When the agent turns his attention to one of Rick's emotional memories that displays a black silhouette of a mother and child, the synthesizer fades out and an electronic piano playing a subtle melody, which contrasts the loudness and aggressiveness of the synthesizer with a melancholy and a discrete feeling of suspense, is introduced. The composition now centers on the emotions created by these memories, when a medium close up shot from a reversed angle frames Rick, as he dramatically touches a window of the restaurant and looks offscreen in the camera direction towards the two silhouettes, which are shown in the reflection of the window. The frame is illuminated by the green light of the portal gun, before the two silhouettes disappear in an explosion of green light,

⁶ The portal gun is a device which allows Rick to create portals in which he can travel to other dimensions and places within the universe.

while Rick maintains his position, glued to the window. The camera then pans to the right and slightly zooms out to frame both Rick and the agent. With an expression of sadness and despair on his face, Rick slides down the windowpane and admits that “the day [he] invented the portal gun [was also] the day [he] lost her” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 4:08). As in *Escape from L.A.*, the producers of *Rick and Morty* play with stylized devices of filmic compositions. While in *BoJack Horseman* scenes that manipulate signifiers of affection have been used to create expectations within the plot and emphasize the misleading perspective of the male protagonist, *Rick and Morty* mocks the idea of theoretical purity and coherence in character development and narration by using stylized scenes marked by an intensified display of emotions. In the subplot, while Morty and Summer discuss the personality of their grandfather as well as Rick’s emotional dismissiveness and indifference, the main plot with Rick revisiting his memories aims to provide causality (Bordwell and Thompson 73) for his emotional dismissiveness. However, this expectation is not met, for the episode applies a plot twist which is in favor of the absurd rather than filmic causality.

The scene that starts at 9:44 relies to a great extent on a dramatic composition and an apparent climax in order to confirm the expectations created by various clues throughout the episode and provide the necessary causality to Rick’s emotional dismissiveness. In the scene, Rick and the agent stand on a street watching the events unfold as a younger and happier Rick is about to pick up his wife and daughter and take them to buy ice cream. The exaggerated lightheartedness of the moment depicted by the happy family and the activity of buying ice cream is juxtaposed to a moment of violence and death when a bomb drops from a portal behind Diane and Beth, apparently killing them. The scene employs the generic signifiers of a dramatic scene: a huge explosion shot from a high angle in a wide shot depicts the wreckage and chaos caused by the explosion, Rick falls down on his knees and buries his face in his hands, the younger Rick looks offscreen to where his family was just standing and screams out a long “No!” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 9:53), the musical notes intensify rapidly and culminate in a dramatic *orchestra hit* (see “Orchestra hit”) sound effect as the bomb explodes, etc. This scene, humanizing Rick as an emotional, vulnerable and sensitive being, is contrasted by Rick’s subsequent revenge with explicit violence and aggression. In terms of an analysis of masculinity, it can be argued that a segment which negated Rick’s hegemonically male dismissiveness, or at least contextualized it, is followed by a segment which not only negates the function of the former segment, but also greatly relies on depictions of characteristics of hegemonic masculinity such as aggression, assertiveness as well as physical strength. This reversal is achieved by the plot twist (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 10:35) that reveals Rick’s

origin story was only a lie to deceive the Galactic Federation. Not only does the plot twist deny Rick a narrative background and causality for his emotional dismissiveness, it is a reflection of television productions that rely on such devices in order to (try to) justify the behavior of their male characters whose masculinities are part of an overall patriarchal agenda present in various sources of media. The series thereby reveals that various plot structures, character types and other devices applied in film and television have been accepted as normal, despite the fact that they merely intend to justify the problematic depictions of masculinities. Similar to the symbols of intimacy which alluding to a happy ending in *Escape from L.A.*, the stylistic composition of emotional scenes in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* encourages viewers to identify with the protagonist in order to humanize his behavior and create a sense of filmic causality. However, both episodes defy these expectations and thereby engage in a more realistic discussion of problematic masculine identities and character traits. Instead of justifying the characters' actions and exploring their motivations, the series, in their respective ways, acknowledge the complicity and toxicity of their characters. By playing with the expectations created and provoked in the viewers, the series not only conceptualize the process of creating and perceiving filmic logic, but also encourage, through triggers of surprise of defied expectations, reflection on these processes that manipulate the context of different depictions, such as masculinities. Predominantly, these processes pursue the goal of creating binary categorizations not only with regard to masculinity but also in general terms. Thus, it can be argued that both series embrace complexity in their respective way and argue against purity as a theoretical measure.

When analyzing the scenes following the plot twist one can observe that exaggeration is used most prominently as a stylistic device in the depictions of masculinity. The expectations created around the notorious character of Rick during the series are now confirmed with a wave of numerous deaths and destruction. The fighting scenes characterize Rick in the light of hegemonic masculinity as a hero in control, typical to mainstream media productions (Neale 12).

The fact that the series provides multiple dimensions inhabited by multiple versions of the same characters allows for an elevation of the protagonist as a superlative character, who is “the most himself” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 12:52) or “a fucked-up God” (14:12). The episode underlines this statement not only by action, as Rick is able to kill a multitude of enemies within seconds, among them other Ricks as well, but also by a very literal depiction of Rick (11:12), framing him like a God rising up towards the ceiling, surrounded by a yellow beam of light in a low angle shot, which makes him appear even bigger and more powerful, as can be seen in figure 4.



Figure 4

Exaggeration as a device to contrast depictions of masculinities (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 11:12).

The characteristics of aggression, assertiveness as well as physical strength dominate this sequence of explicit violence and gore, which resembles the splatter film genre (12:04). Compared to the serious and dark atmosphere surrounding the scenes of hegemonically masculine depictions in *Escape from L.A.*, hegemonic masculinity in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* can be interpreted as part of a comically absurd contrast to the coherent and serious narrative prior to the plot twist. This is especially true if one considers the contrast between the seriousness of the plot leading up to the plot twist and the absurdity of the violence succeeding it, with explicit scenes depicting corpses, body parts and other graphic content. Sam Higgs (99) also argues that “through the lens of animation, where physics isn’t as important, the extremely violent simply translates into a cheap laugh.” Interestingly, the series has already made use of this potential of animation as a medium in the *Pilot* episode (16:20) by mocking the way violence is usually perceived in animation. When escaping security guards at intergalactic customs, Morty is faced with a moral dilemma when he needs to return fire at the security personal of the Galactic Federation. Rick urges him to do so, arguing that the guards are only robots. When Morty obeys him, Rick’s statement, in a shocking manner, proves to be false when an injured guard is shown on the floor crying for help while others attend to him, pronouncing his name as well as mentioning his wife and children. This explicit depiction of humanizing qualities, such as a name and a family, during an action sequence functions as a meta-discourse in terms of media productions. The viewer is challenged to critically question

the reality which is presented before him or her and the genre conventions that influence the viewing experience. The scene embraces a certain incongruity inherent in animation. On the one hand, the violence and destruction presented in animation is perceived as less serious (see Higgs 99). On the other hand, the episode pauses to reflect on the artificiality of its own production and how viewers consume it. Richardson (25) mentions that in subversive adult animation shock is typically applied “as a means of reflection for the audience to consider why they are being shocked.” In this case the audience does not expect animation to confront them with serious or moral questions and “[b]ecause we are conditioned to expect animation to be incapable of dramatic weight, works that subvert this tendency can be highly affecting” (Higgs 99). *Rick and Morty* embraces both sides of this discussion, depending on the effect the series intends to produce. In the *Pilot* episode, the “dramatic weight” (Higgs 99) of the scene around minute 16 juxtaposes the humorous and absurd plot preceding this moment, whereas in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* the absurdly extreme violence creates a contrast between the serious plot prior to the plot twist. Additionally, the episode clearly disregards that “dramatic weight” (Higgs 99) and narrative closure can provide causality in the context of masculine depictions, as described earlier, and its engagement with the cartoonish portrayal of violence thus subverts Rick’s tragic origin story which is presented before the plot twist.

The final scene of the episode reinforces the argument of a hegemonic male identity motivated by the plot when Rick concedes that his imprisonment, the escape and the ensuing chaos have all been part of his plan, which was not motivated by an emotional origin story, such as the death of a loved one, but merely by his desire to obtain the iconic Szechuan McNugget sauce from his memories: “That’s what it’s all about Morty. I’m not driven by avenging my dead family, Morty. That was fake. I’m driven by finding that McNugget sauce” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 21:53). The series refuses to provide causality for the plot and embraces the concept of the absurd instead, a notion defined by Albert Camus who criticizes man’s attempt to find a deeper meaning to existence when the universe does not provide such a thing (Foley 6). The Szechuan sauce is only the absurd answer to the attempts to identify a particular motivation behind the behavior of Rick Sanchez. Rene Candelaria (7), who compares the book series *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams and *Rick and Morty*, also observes how the concept of the absurd manifests itself on different levels in these series: “The absurd can also be seen in the anticlimactic structure of both series. Whenever the plot goes in a meaningful direction, it backtracks and devolves into absurdity.” This anticlimactic structure can also be identified in *The Rickshank Rickdemption*, which abandons the tragic narrative that characterizes Rick as an emotionally dismissive and troubled individual in favor of depictions

of an absurd amount of violence and death. Compared to the episode *Escape from L.A.*, which contextualizes the protagonist's hegemonic masculinity and simultaneously contrasts it throughout the episode, *The Rickshank Rickdemption* refrains from providing such a context. Nevertheless, the implied masculinity in the episode indicates the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity. The return of Rick and the removal of Jerry marks the reestablishment of hegemonic masculinity.

The mise-en-scène of Rick's triumphant soliloquy at the end of the episode (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 21:15) reflects his aggressive behavior by means of dialogue and framing. A low angle is used to shoot the close ups of Rick's face with dramatic effect. He seizes Morty and drags him around the garage while the camera follows his rapid movements accompanied by a heroic march, which provides a juxtaposition of sound and action and an uncomfortably dark contrast to the type of outrageous dialogue delivered. At one point, Morty stumbles and falls when trying to keep his distance from Rick, who leans over to him and keeps pointing and gesticulating aggressively at him. While Morty initially responds with short, expressive statements to Rick's obvious madness, at some point he is only able to mutter backchannel cues, with expressions like "oh man" (21:38) and "oho" (21:40) when the pauses in Rick's monologue shorten and Rick increases the pace. As the speech reaches its climax, the camera shoots Rick in a close up from a very low angle while the fluorescent tube on the ceiling behind him flickers nervously and illuminates the outlines of his body with its blue light. His grotesque face, which is emphasized by the sharp contrast of the light behind him, is contorted, his eyes are squinted and he is salivating heavily. With this focus, the episode enters into a discussion of the grotesque functions of the body (see Bakhtin 26) in the tradition of the carnival. On the one hand, his transgressive soliloquy celebrates the toppling of the order that provided by the Galactic Federation and the Citadel of Ricks⁷, which is similar to the reversal of social order during the carnival. His "radically individualist and antiauthoritarian" (Richardson 24) attitude is exemplified not only by his disapproval of the rule of the Galactic Federation, but also by the fact that he refuses any kind of government structure or organization, even if it is provided by Ricks just like him from other universes. This stance, which is typical for subversive contemporary animation, might suggest the removal of any type of hierarchy, however, as with the dynamics in the carnivalesque, our analysis of masculinities in the episode has shown that the previous order of hegemonic masculinity is restored once again. Rick illustrates his masculine identity in this context when he refers to his position of authority, given

⁷ "The Citadel, originally known as The Citadel of Ricks, is the secret society where Ricks and Mortys have formed a society built by their counterparts from an infinite amount of realities" ("The Citadel").

that he “replaced [...] both [Jerry and the rule of the Galactic Federation] as the de facto patriarch of [Morty’s] family and [his] universe” (21:32). On the other hand, the subversion of the causality in the plot, which depicts the absurd quest for the Szechuan sauce, also refers to the upside-down world of the carnival. In this context, Angela Farmer (54) argues that the “rejection of traditional narrative form and intentional lack of structure goes to the heart of Rabelaisian carnival, which lampoons traditional forms, rituals, and structures.” A critique of “traditional narrative forms and intentional lack of structure” (Farmer 54) in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* has already been identified, in the analysis, as characteristic of this episode, thus, this argument is enforced by carnivalesque theories. Terrance R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton (203) add another aspect to this discussion when they argue that self-reflexive animation shares “the playful dynamism of the carnival spirit.”

Animate films demonstrate self-reflexivity in three general and overlapping ways. First, by commenting on filmmaking and the film industry and by unveiling the raw materials and methods of the filmmaking process, cartoons reveal their own textuality. Second, animated films possess the ability to function as discourse, speaking directly to their audiences. Third, animated films reflect their relationships to their creator. The animators themselves enter their cartoons and become deconstructive agents of their own artifice. (Lindvall and Melton 204-205)

Rick’s metalepsis when he refers to nine seasons as a possible timeframe to find the desired Szechuan sauce can be considered as a characteristic of self-reflexivity. Alerted by such emphasis on the textuality of the series, the audience generally becomes more conscious of other metatextual discourse. Lindvall and Melton (210) mention Tex Avery in *The Wacky World of Tex Avery* as an example since he is presented to the viewer as the hero and justifies his behavior by explaining that his imitation of a dog bark is “dog talk.” Such a self-reflexive discourse is also present in the series under scrutiny. Morty, who explores different dimensions with his sister in order to show her the consequences of Rick’s ruthless actions, gives a compassionate speech about his grandfather, in which he tells his sister that “he’s not a villain but he shouldn’t be your hero” (*The Rickshank Rickdemption* 14:00). Arguably, on the level of narration and dialogue the series depicts Rick as a complex character, to say the least. The visual composition mentioned in the scene where Rick’s appearance portrays him like a God in figure 4, for instance, as well as the scene that shows him outsmarting, challenging and outdoing all of his adversaries in spectacular fashion provides a complex image in this context. This complexity might lead to the fact that Rick’s masculinity and his acceptance of the absurd are received and interpreted in an ambiguous manner by the audience. A recent case of toxic fan culture in which viewers took the protagonist’s obsession with the Szechuan McNugget sauce too literally exemplifies this issue. Upon the release of the third season of *Rick and Morty* in 2017, McDonald’s revived the Szechuan sauce featured in the series as part of a one-day promotion in a few selected locations (see Chandler). However, the insufficiently stocked

restaurants were overrun by fans of the series and the police had to intervene as customers aggressively demanded the sauce and started to harass McDonald's employees (see Chandler).

There is a similar metatextual discourse surrounding the protagonist in the *BoJack Horseman* episode *BoJack the Feminist* as the series explores the issue of toxic masculinity in mass media. While the notion of toxic masculinity is not consistently used in the academia, it has become a popular term in the public discussion of gender, generally referring to harmful manifestations of masculine behavior. T. A. Kupers (714) defined the term in the discipline of psychology as "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence." In gender studies, Connell and Messerschmidt (840) refrain from using this term and merely mention "toxic practices" within hegemonic masculinity. These definitions will also be applied in the present thesis when examining aspects of masculinity. When commenting on Philbert, a television series within the world of *BoJack Horseman*, BoJack, similarly to Morty's mention of his grandfather, argues that "you're not supposed to like John Philbert or agree with the things he does. It's a TV show. It doesn't glamorize anything. But ... maybe it normalizes it" (20:35). BoJack's comment not only emphasizes the self-reflexivity of animated series "unveiling the raw materials and methods of the filmmaking" (Lindvall and Melton 204-205), it also produces a metaleptic moment regarding the issues associated with his masculinity in the series. The series plays with these similarities between Philbert and BoJack by shooting Philbert in a setting which greatly resembles BoJack's house, which he realizes as he asks, "Why does John Philbert's house look the same as my house?" (*The Lightbulb Scene* 3:24). By playing with a medium within a medium and by blurring the lines between two media texts, the series highlights its ability to reflect on its own textuality and demonstrates how the series enters into a discourse about media productions on various levels of the composition. It is this self-reflexive capacity of both series under scrutiny which allows them to depict offensive and characteristically masculine behavior and simultaneously discuss it in a critical context.

Concluding the analysis of *The Rickshank Rickdemption* episode, one can argue that the series uses the generic conventions of character development and causality and subverts them with a plot twist and absurd violence. Therefore, the episode mocks the fact that media productions tend to utilize narratives and imagery which rely on hegemonically masculine behavior and thereby attempt to justify these depictions and their prevalence within the mainstream media. In a present-day context of a widespread awareness about sexist practices in society and culture, the series contributes to a critical discussion about gender and media by identifying manifestations of hegemonic masculinity as part of common media practices.

Abandoning a meaningful and serious plot in favor of absurd violence in order to highlight the skewed process of relativizing toxic male behavior in film and television, the episode functions as a typical example of the “the coexistence of the subversive with the ridiculous” (Richardson 24).

6. Analysis of *BoJack the Feminist* (*BoJack Horseman*)

While in the episode *Escape from L.A.* BoJack Horseman’s masculinity was the focus of attention, in *BoJack the Feminist* there are various depictions of masculinity that juxtapose different aspects of male identity. The first one on which we will focus on is the caricature of toxic male behavior depicted by the character Vance Waggoner. He predominantly embodies male aggression in combination with assertiveness. The episode opens with a windshield view from a camera lens that appears to be placed inside a police car. The image is pixelated and shows the typical features of a police camera footage with a time code, date and police unit number. A visibly inebriated Vance walks from his car towards a female police officer and utters sexist comments before attempting to touch the officer’s breasts. Overpowered by the well-trained officer, Vance finds himself on the hood of the police car pressed against the windshield. Interestingly, while depicting masculine aggression, the scene ends in a visual defeat of the male character in terms of physical strength and ability, as the female police officer pins him to the hood of the car and arrests him. The frame with a medium shot, however, does not center on the police officer but rather on Vance in his emasculated position. He utters, “I’m movie star Vance Waggoner and I hate Jews,” (0:18) before the camera cuts to a radio talk show, in which Vance tries to make amends for his behavior. Vance’s statement conforms in meaning to the visual image of an aggressive and arrogant male. However, his mention of antisemitism in this situation does not serve any communicative goal apart from characterizing him as a politically incorrect troublemaker. Questions of realism concerning the depiction of Vance can be neglected, given “that animation produces emotional effects not by reproducing reality, but by heightening and simplifying it, so that many of the sequences are about ideas, not experiences” (Ebert). This idea is developed in the following scandals, in which he also declares his hatred of women and, absurdly, of Swedes. Comically, whenever he apologizes for his latest scandal he is accompanied by a Jew, his wife and daughter as well as a Swede, who vouch for him and serve to demonstrate his sympathy for these groups of individuals. While the obvious hypocrisy of this public stunt is overtly evident to the viewer, the episode provides a context, inspired by reality, in which even repeated outrageous and immoral behavior is forgiven.

The episode comments on the hypocritical media practices when they refer to the fact that Mark Feuerstein, the Jewish actor who pleaded to forgive Vance, was motivated to do so when Vance “offered him a supporting role in his next movie” (*BoJack the Feminist* 0:52). The spectacle of scandal and forgiveness and how Hollywood seems to suffer from collective amnesia concerning the behavior of its male actors is a motif in this episode, which is manifestly illustrated by the “Apology Tour” (3:32) and, most prominently, by the very literal “We Forgive You Awards” (3:35). The episode is part of a discourse on impurity and the lack of critical practices (Shotwell 5) in Hollywood regarding masculinity. While the issue in *Escape from L.A.* was BoJack’s inability to think about his “complicity and compromise as a starting point for action” (Shotwell 5) and to change, instead of dwelling on a binary perception of his identity as unchangeably bad, immoral and harmful, this episode mocks the idea of compromise as part of an empty and meaningless practice. The episode criticizes the tendency of the media industry to turn a blind eye on issues of sexism and discrimination and to even use these scandals for publicity.

The episode not only mirrors how Hollywood lacks critical practices when it comes to masculine behavior offscreen, but also demonstrates how the image of the aggressive male is utilized as a part of a predominant narrative and style on television. The reference to a multitude of media outlets within the first two minutes of the episode, namely, a police car footage, a radio talk show, a television interview and a press conference, establishes the focus of the episode on meta-commentary and general media discourse regarding the topic of sexuality. In the course of the episode many other media outlets and the way in which they cover the events in the episode are depicted in different scenes. In this context, a multitude of voices portray masculinity not only as “the raw materials and methods of the filmmaking process” (Lindvall and Melton 204) but also show how masculinity is received in the media and by the public. Masculine behavior exemplified by Vance Waggoner is also discussed on these platforms. What the episode skillfully references is how certain types of characters that embody characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are part of an established repertoire of major characters and are accepted as part of common media culture. Thus, their behavior outside of the movies they star in is usually in accordance with the image of a certain masculine type of character. The episode depicts the interrelation between filmic reality and how it relates to a certain perception of individuals in society. When considering casting an individual as a partner for BoJack’s character in his TV series *Philbert*, the director Flip McVicker and producer Princess Carolyn discuss which actor would be best suited to embody the dangerous and troubled male. This scene follows Vance Waggoner’s series of scandals and his announced

retirement from public life. Although the scene is set five years later as indicated by a white text on an entirely black frame, the immediate temporal juxtaposition between Flip and Princess Carolyn's dialogue and Vance's scandals provides a thematical connection. The verbal reference to a "bad boy [...] [s]omeone dangerous, someone you see coming and think, 'This guy is trouble'" (*BoJack the Feminist* 2:15) have the same semantic meaning as Vance's depicted actions and hateful statements a few moments earlier. Princess Carolyn announces that she might have a potential candidate and the camera first cuts to the introduction of the series and then to a restaurant where she meets Vance to offer him the supporting cast role in Philbert. The episode makes various observations about the process of generating media content through the character of Flip and through the depictions of different media outlets. Their reliance on the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity is emphasized, for instance, when Flip's office, his notes and ideas about the series are shown on a whiteboard. The connoted male concept of aggression in terms of sexuality is manifested particularly prominently as some of the apparent show ideas read "classy violence [...], sexy violent sex [...], sexy twist (violent??)" (2:20).

However, an analysis of actors and character types should generally not focus on the actor as an individual, but on their ability to play a certain role as part of their performance. Nevertheless, what is referenced in this episode is not the wide range of acting abilities of individual actors, but the fact that these masculine character types have become a major part of a process of producing, promoting and consuming media content. Interestingly, when it comes to the question of complicity in the promotion of masculine ideals, the episode shows that "everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate" (Shotwell 5), and even female characters, such as Princess Carolyn, participate in this process:

DIANE. Princess Carolyn, if you hire this guy, what kind of message does that send?

PRINCESS CAROLYN. Diane, we both know the industry is screwed up.

DIANE. I'm not talking about the industry. I'm talking about you. Take some responsibility. (*BoJack the Feminist* 6:35-6:44)

She agrees to hire the actor Vance Waggoner, which, according to Diane who criticizes her decision, makes her complicit. Clearly, Princess Carolyn is in a position where she could potentially influence the situation, thus, her responsibility is greater as oppose to, for instance, a consumer of this type of media content.

This discourse about hegemonic masculinity in television productions continues when Mr. Peanutbutter, a character who displays untypically male characteristics, is rejected for a role because of his deviant masculine identity. Mr. Peanutbutter defies the image of the hegemonic male. He is always friendly and cheerful, and his non-confrontational and peaceful demeanor qualify him perfectly for jobs like the one of a TV host, a sales associate in a shoe

store and, in the given episode, a red-carpet reporter. When he interviews his manager Princess Carolyn, he asks her why he has been rejected, to which she responds that “people don’t see [him] as the tough guy” (*BoJack the Feminist* 5:16) and that he would not be able to adequately portray a certain type of masculine character. From this point onwards, Mr. Peanutbutter attempts to prove her wrong and engages in a variety of typically masculine practices which, as he believes, will characterize him as ‘tough’. In the episode, his attempts to intentionally embody toughness or assertiveness in combination with aggression, highlight how the composition in filmic productions usually intensifies these signifiers of toughness and masculinity. Mr. Peanutbutter’s attempts to participate in this “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 194) only refers to the omnipresence of these characters and how we have come to accept them as part of media culture. His active engagement in gendered behavior elevates the subconscious acts of gender performance, as argued by Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, to the comic level of an act:

[Gender is] a stylized repetition of acts which are internally discontinuous [...] [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179)

While gender performativity, as argued by Butler in this quote, is as prevalent and dominant due to the fact that it is not perceived as an ‘act’ by the participants and audience, within the cartoony reality of *BoJack Horseman* such an exaggerated behavior is in line with the logic of other depictions of behavior, such as the one concerning Vance Waggoner. After having been confronted with Princess Carolyn’s views, Mr. Peanutbutter takes on a tense and aggressive posture and forms a fist as he utters in a serious tone “I’ll show them how tough I can be” (5:48). The camera zooms in on him as he frowns angrily while a minor piano chord and high pitch strings raise the tension of the scene, but he suddenly switches from this artificially angry and tough character back to the role of the enthusiastic red-carpet reporter as evidenced by his change of voice, posture and the extradiegetic upbeat electronic dance music in the background. However, before the camera cuts to the award show, Mr. Peanutbutter switches back once more to his tough persona as a crash zoom⁸ (see “Crash Zoom”) focuses on the angry look on his face, which is accompanied by a dull metallic thud sound effect as he warns the implied viewer of the award show: “So don’t touch that remote... or else!” (5:57). This switch between the two personas and its supporting compositional choices have illustrated what elements of the mise-en-scène engage in these different depictions and how these binary options of tough and cheerful, masculine and feminine, etc. are an inherent part of mainstream television. For

⁸ A dramatic camera movement typically applied in action films, which imitates the movement of a car crash as the camera rapidly zooms in on an object in order to come to an abrupt halt (see “Crash Zoom”).

instance, the decision to underline Mr. Peanutbutter's 'tough' persona with a sound effect that does not emanate from any action on the scene makes the presented masculinity resemble that of a cartoon character. Many traditional cartoons experimented with such sound effects, which provided divergent couplings in terms of the action presented and the respective coupled sound in order to create the effect, for instance, of a character sprinting, coupled with the sound of a locomotive (see Furniss 89). Given that this style of divergent action-to-sound-coupling was mainly applied in predominantly 'infantile art forms', a certain association with humor in slapstick cartoons is created. Thus, this connotation makes Mr. Peanutbutter's attempts to be tough appear more ridiculous and highlights the artificiality of the masculinity he tries to embody. While certain genres, such as action films, make use of some of these stylistic choices, such as the thud sound effect or quick cuts and zooms, the series mocks the artificiality of the 'tough' and pure masculinities depicted in these genres and underlined by these compositions.

Fittingly, the asexual male Todd, as a symbolic character of non-hegemonic masculinity, is able to add another context to this masculine language. He not only emphasizes the fact that such gendered behavior is based on arbitrary and artificial signifiers, but also that these signifiers can come to have the opposite meaning. A scene in Todd's office (*BoJack the Feminist* 8:05) exemplifies this subversion of coded masculine actions. Mr. Peanutbutter enters the room without knocking while carrying sunglasses and sticking his chest out, which is accompanied by an electronic guitar riff, and greets Todd in a deep voice. The audiovisual code utilized in this scene is widely associated with the characteristics of toughness and assertiveness, therefore, Mr. Peanutbutter expects an adequate reaction to this behavior from Todd. However, Todd denies him such acknowledgement, stating that "it read as amiable and familiar. Like [their] friendship has an assumed open door policy" (8:12). Although Todd's interpretation clearly contradicts the generic conventions established in television culture concerning the notions of toughness and masculinity, thus characterizes him as a somehow non-proficient reader of this cultural sign, he provides a plausible interpretation which provides an alternative understanding of these notions that is not based on binary categorizations. Todd's utterance exemplifies the possibility of a non-binary reading of behavior and identity. While a binary categorization of the observed behavior would always follow the male versus female dualism concerning different characteristics, such as strong versus weak, tough versus soft, aggressive versus defensive, etc., Todd acknowledges an individual, non-essentialist perspective to the identity discourse. Similarly to the episode *Escape from L.A.* in which demonstrative masculine behavior of assertiveness during a staged phone call was utilized by the character BoJack to compensate for his prior passivity and insecurity at the breakfast table

(1:22), this tactic is also applied here by Mr. Peanutbutter who is faced with his inability to be 'tough', which makes him hit his fist against the wall, as if to negate his previously unsuccessful demonstration of assertiveness with an action of physical strength. Once again, however, he is unable to continue in this manner, as his reaction is that of screaming in pain and whining as he holds his hands. The connection between masculinity and adulthood (see Noxon 174) becomes visible when Mr. Peanutbutter engages in infantile behaviorisms in response to his disappointment, which contribute to him being characterized as non-masculine. This observation can be made when analyzing his somewhat infantile body language as he takes a seat on Todd's desk and lets his legs dangle from the edge of the desk. Sulkily, he confesses his problem and asks Todd for help. When comparing *BoJack Horseman* to *Rick and Morty* in the light of characters who unsuccessfully aspire ideals of hegemonic masculinity, one can associate Mr. Peanutbutter's attempts at embodying aggression and assertiveness with Jerry's short-lived experience of being the family patriarch in *The Rickshank Rickdemption*. Both characters, despite the numerous difficulties they encounter as they try to adhere to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, accept the negative outcome of their enterprise instead of abandoning these ideals. This situation is emblematic for its pervasiveness and predominance of hegemonic masculinity.

The episode continues to show Mr. Peanutbutter's effort to establish himself as a tough and masculine character, emphasizing important aspects of the performativity of gender. The presence of masculine depictions on various platforms and media outlets is essential to creating the image of a tough male, therefore, Mr. Peanutbutter and Todd attempt to record such material presenting Mr. Peanutbutter in a situation that would change the public perception of him. Despite engaging in staged aggressive behavior with other individuals, which would usually provoke confrontations, Mr. Peanutbutter is received positively by these people, given that his behavior unintentionally causes a positive effect, which was not the reaction they wished to provoke. First, Mr. Peanutbutter knocks a cigarette out of the hand of a muscular and seemingly dangerous Rhinoceros (*BoJack the Feminist* 13:05) who thanks him for helping him to quit smoking. Then he scares two reporters (18:15) who fall down, which, miraculously, heals their temporomandibular joint disorder and crossed eyes, respectively. Finally, Mr. Peanutbutter enters a shady bar (21:45) in search of trouble. However, his provocative statements are taken as helpful remarks and he is met with politeness and kindness. In this context, notions of purity are intentionally subverted as the visual appearance of the individuals Mr. Peanutbutter encounters, consisting of tattooed and muscular bikers, fit the pattern of the aggressive male. However, the visual appearance is contrasted with characteristics quite untypical for 'tough'

males, such as emotional openness and vulnerability in the case of the Rhinoceros and pacifism and good manners in the case of the bar crowd. In essence, through his vain attempts Mr. Peanutbutter discovers the complex nature of gender according to Butler, who argues that “[i]t is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary” (*Gender Trouble* 187). Gender is not a performance in which there exists a doer, but a “grid of cultural intelligibility” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 194). It is not based on voluntarism and while repetition can be found at the heart of the concept, this repetition is not defined by choice but rather by the fact that “oppressive and painful gender norms” (Butler, *The Body* 84) constitute our identity and our behavior. These norms define Mr. Peanutbutter in his unhappy relationship with the expected tough male Hollywood persona. In the context of acting and movie production, one can agree with the fact that Mr. Peanutbutter attempts to embody the role of the ‘tough’ male, given the fact that he wants to star in a movie, which requires a performance. However, in real life gender performativity is not a conscious decision, but a process of assimilation. Butler refers to this misreading of *Gender Trouble*:

The bad reading goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender, stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be something radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism [...] [treating] gender deliberately, as if it’s an object out there, when my whole point was that the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, presupposes gender in a certain way—that gender is not to be chosen and that ‘performativity’ is not radical choice and it’s not voluntarism. (Butler, *The Body* 83)

Mr. Peanutbutter, similarly to Jerry in *Rick and Morty*, attempts to embody certain ideals of hegemonic masculinity. By depicting their absurd and ridiculous behavior as they repeatedly fail to successfully exhibit masculine behavior, the series criticizes these notions of masculinity and how they are part of the practice of purism. By depicting the vain attempts of these characters and their unsatisfying involvement in practices of purity, by perceiving their identity characteristics as the inferior couple on a binary scale of definitions, the series addresses purity as a theoretical measure and how it negatively affects individuals and society as a whole. In order to tackle the issues created by patriarchy regarding problematic behavior and identities and masculinities, a stance against purity is vital to acknowledge the complicity of many problems that are inherent in masculine concepts and to create critical practices to deal with this kind of harmful behavior.

Returning to the character of BoJack Horseman, the episode shows how the engagement in a feminist discourse can be based on a male agenda and on different aspects of hegemonic masculinity. It can be argued that BoJack Horseman’s failure to make meaningful decisions on his own and inability to voice his opinion means that his behavior differs from characteristics of assertiveness and position of authority. Despite the fact that BoJack is an arguably well-

known and wealthy actor, throughout the series he is depicted as a rather passive individual complying with the expectations and demands of his agent and others, struggling to regain control over his professional and private life. Due to an unfortunate coincidence, an angry picture of BoJack's face is taken at the "We forgive you awards" (*BoJack the Feminist* 6:50) while the audience applauds Vance Waggoner on stage. Unlike depictions of masculinity which are hegemonically encoded, BoJack's irritated face is placed in random contexts (7:05) and interpreted as various forms of protest, even though he did not intend to give off this message. The fact that he is unable to control the message he (or rather his body) creates is characteristic of his deviant masculinity throughout the series. In season one, due to his inability to write his autobiography, Diane is hired as a ghostwriter. The published text reveals many private and unpleasant aspects of BoJack's career and personal life and is at variance with the way he intended to present himself. This inability to control the narrative about himself defines him as a passive feminine object in terms of hegemonic masculinity, thus, this scenario can be compared to the situation presented before in *BoJack the Feminist*. The series continues to depict BoJack in this context when, pressured by his agent, he appears in a television talk show in order to explain himself. While previously his body was misused, now his words are arbitrarily taken out of context, which can be observed in the following dialogue:

BOJACK. Well, there was this cheese –

HOST 1. And you're lactose intolerant, which reminded you that Vance lacks tolerance?

BOJACK. No, it –

HOST 2. The cheese stands alone, but no woman should stand alone, when standing up to sexual harassment?

HOST 3. Squawk!

BOJACK. No, it wasn't any of those things!

HOST 4. So, you're saying it wasn't any one thing, more of an accumulation?

BOJACK. It –

HOST 1. BoJack, it is really incredible, your taking a stand against your co-star.

BOJACK. No, I'm not taking any stand – (*BoJack the Feminist* 8:35-8:52)

BoJack's words and attempts to explain himself are interpreted in numerous ways before he can actually declare his point of view. Although he is positioned at the center of a long shot (8:41), he is surrounded by two female talk show hosts on both sides and, nervously, he tries to respond as he is being addressed from left and right, as if he was in a cross-examination. On the verbal level it can be observed that he is repeatedly interrupted in his speaking turns, without being able to even finish a sentence. Not only can he not finish his utterances, the short communicative utterances he is able to provide are altered by his interlocutors in order to comply with their own opinions. This inability to embody an authoritative voice and display assertiveness in his actions contrasts to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.



Figure 5

Framing and staging deviant masculinity (*BoJack the Feminist* 08:35 top left; 08:39 top right; 08:42 bottom left; 08:45 bottom right.)

On the level of framing and camera movement, an inability to be the salient and dominant part of the composition can also be observed, which emphasizes the verbal analysis. Despite the fact that he is at the center of a long shot (8:41), which functions as an establishing shot to present the setting and characters, the camera repeatedly cuts to medium shots of the female hosts. Thus, the composition centers on the hosts and their contributions not only verbally, given that they dominate the conversation, but also visually. A very illustrative frame at 8:39 in figure 5, depicts BoJack's vain attempts to take the floor and contribute with his own opinion. Only BoJack's hand with his stretched index finger is shown on the very right side of the frame, which is proportionally insignificant when compared to the fully framed upper bodies of the female hosts. By placing the rest of his body offscreen, the frame visually depicts his absence in the dialogue and his inability to contribute to the conversation. The small portion of his body which appears in the frame illustrates his vain attempts to regain control of the conversation. Surprisingly, despite the fact that he is the guest of the show, he does not receive noticeable attention by the camera. The hosts, who give their opinion and interpret BoJack's words, dictate the conversation. The small portion of his body which appears in the frame illustrates his vain attempts to regain control of the conversation. Surprisingly, despite the fact that he is the guest of the show, he does not receive noticeable attention by the camera. The hosts, who give their opinion and interpret BoJack's words, dictate the conversation.

However, all of these elements mentioned above are reversed as soon as BoJack engages in an arguably very simplistic feminist discourse and is thereby able to gain confidence and

claim a certain position of authority as a feminist activist. Unintentionally, BoJack makes a “bold statement” (*BoJack the Feminist* 9:10) about sexism in the course of the conversation, which visibly resonates throughout the audience. Motivated by this reaction, he starts to repeatedly recur to this kind of language. Jump cuts between BoJack and the audience depict this dynamic, as he waits for their response and reacts accordingly, gaining momentum in his speech. Utilizing this general feminist rhetoric in his speech, he is now able to finish his utterances as the camera rests longer on him. Also, he adapts his body language to a comfortably relaxed posture and calm movements. Encouraged by the positive reaction of the audience who respond to every word of vague criticism with cheer and applause, BoJack starts to voice rallying cries, such as “Don’t choke women!” (10:00), as he rises from his seat. A certain pattern consisting of demonstrations of hegemonic masculinity in order to compensate for a prior lack of this behavior has been discussed already in relation to the scene at breakfast table in the episode *Escape from L.A.* and Mr. Peanutbutter’s ‘tough’ behavior. This pattern can also be found in the changing dynamics of the dialogue in the talk show. Such a perspective allows us to interpret BoJack’s engagement in a feminist discourse to be based on his desire to exhibit hegemonic masculinity, specifically, the characteristics of assertiveness and position of authority.

What becomes clear from the analysis of the talk show scene is that BoJack’s engagement with feminism is not based on the desire to raise awareness of the issue of sexism in our society, but on a personal agenda to utilize this discourse as a means to embody the masculine position of authority and display assertiveness. In this context the episode highlights the fact that the position of authority will always be predominately male connoted. Diane realizes this predisposition, when she receives the offer to use BoJack as vessel for her feminist critique, given the fact that he is obviously unable to provide any relevant criticism apart from empty slogans. While BoJack’s embrace of the feminine discourse is greeted by applause and praise among the wide public, which is exemplified by the talk show host’s comment, “Can I just tell you how amazing it is to hear *a man* say that?” (*BoJack the Feminist* 9:20), there exists a double standard for women who try to raise awareness of the same issues, given that the perception of authority is coined by hegemonic masculinity. Women who attempt to occupy these ‘male’ domains or positions will either be received as utterly masculine in their behavior, a characteristic which bears a negative connotation applied in a context of femininity, or their discourse will not be read as coming from an authority in this field, but from a nagging woman. Diane reflects on this critically as she remarks: “So, through BoJack, I can say whatever I want to a huge audience without being called ‘shrill’ or ‘naggy’ or ‘classic Diane’” (12:08). The male

dominated position of the main breadwinner of a family provides another example of how expectations about gendered behavior influence the perception of certain actions. Nick Lee (qtd. in Lee, *All kids*) showed that women who occupied this position were considered as less feminine, given that they were allegedly imitating the ‘male’ role of the family. Fittingly, the episode exemplifies this double standard when BoJack’s engagement with feminism is phrased as “taking a stand” (*BoJack the Feminist* 9:00), whereas Diane’s potential arguments would be perceived as “naggy” (12:08). The episode explicitly emphasizes this male position in an ironic way when BoJack, in a blatantly ignorant statement, argues that “the problem with feminism, all along, [was] it just wasn’t men doing it” (12:15). Even the female character Princess Carolyn agrees with this argumentation when she claims that “[a]ll they need to listen to women is the right voice – a man’s voice” (12:01).

First and foremost, the episode demonstrates how engaging in a feminist discourse can be based on hegemonic masculinity and shows its focus on the position of authority and assertiveness as defining characteristics. While BoJack engages in this form of feminist discourse when, for instance, he recites isolated arguments such as that female agents like Princess Carolyn “only make ten cents for every dollar [their] clients make” (*BoJack the Feminist* 11:05) and bold statements, such as “[c]hoking your wife is bad,” (9:15) he proves that he is unaware of the implications of such content, given that the series *Philbert*, in which he stars as the protagonist, relies on sexist imagery and depictions of toxic masculine practices. Vance Waggoner, in an attempt to downplay the criticism of his personality, refers to this complicity of *Philbert* in depicting harmful masculine values as a reason why he decided not to star in BoJack’s series: “Gratuitous sexual violence. Protracted, lascivious nude scenes [...] And if I took part in it, I would be complicit – no, culpable for that toxicity” (16:30). Certainly, this criticism of the *Philbert* series holds true and this is why BoJack subsequently attempts to depart from the hypocrisy of embracing a feminist’s rhetoric, while at the same time participating in a sexist series. Nevertheless, the feminist discourse which the two of them engage in develops into a duel between two males who appropriate the arguments of complicity and critical practices in the name of their own agenda. As mentioned before with regard to the complicity of Princess Carolyn in hiring Vance, the episode refers to different participants in the production of media contents, from the actors, producers, directors, to the audience and the production companies, it emphasizes that complicity applies to us all. Interestingly, with his argument (16:30) Vance only repeats a point Diane has made previously in a discussion with Vance’s publicist, where she refers to women’s complicity in the propagation of depictions of hegemonic masculinity. The series thereby reflects these different layers of complicity and how

different parties, from principal perpetrators and accomplices to consumers, affect this discussion.

Nevertheless, the series provides an example of criticism to improve the skewed process of sexist media content in theory. BoJack, the ambivalent male symbol who is mostly ignorant of his complicity, or ignores it in favor of the privileges he enjoys, has a moment of epiphany, when he realizes that his series “normalizes” (*BoJack the Feminist* 20:35) depictions of toxic male behavior. When BoJack urges Diane to work as an advisor for the production company in order to make the Philbert series less sexist, the episode illustrates that, in theory, it is possible to acknowledge one’s complicity in the process of maintaining hegemonic and oppressive norms. However, the reality of implementing a critical practice with such an objective is shown when Flip reveals that Diane will not be included in any creative decisions concerning the series and that hiring her was merely a publicity stunt. The general public with its blind eagerness to focus on feminist slogans rather than on the actual practices involved in media productions is portrayed as naïve in this context, which is exemplified by Flip’s statement: “ [W]hen the show comes out people will see your name in the credits and say. Huh, a lady worked on the show. Guess it’s not sexist“ (23:15). The lack of critical criteria in these discussions and the fact that a great deal of attention is given to vague and symbolic language, such as the feminist slogans mentioned, are the reasons why “a no-nonsense commitment” (Shotwell 5) to issues like sexism is difficult to achieve in the context of ideologies marked by purism. Furthermore, the series shows how hegemonic masculinity dominates other ways of thinking concerning not only media content but general ideology, given that feminism, as long as it can be utilized for masculine politics, is treated as a fashionable trend. Compared to the binary thinking proposed by masculinity, feminism embodies the ideological position of *the other* and men attending to this marginal issue is thus interpreted as an act of tolerance and generosity. The way feminism is perceived in the episode is explained in Diane’s comment: “Being a woman isn’t a hobby, or a pet interest of mine. You get to drop in, and play Joss Whedon, and everybody cheers. But when you move on to your next thing, I’m still here” (19:40). In the context of masculine politics, namely, the media duel between the two male actors, feminism only functions as a platform for their power struggle, which is ultimately motivated by the desire to embody characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

This analysis of the episode *BoJack the Feminist* has shown how a critique of the hegemonic male as a part of a filmic repertoire of characters and narratives can address aspects of media production and reception by exaggerating the plot and audiovisual composition in order to comically depict masculinity. Also, the prevalence of binary categories concerning

behavior is exemplified when the episode depicts how characters are perceived differently in terms of their engagement in a feminist discourse. The discussion of toxic male behavior in the context of film and television centers on questions of complicity and how discourses addressing these issues often fail to provide critical practices which in fact are able to change current media realities.

7. Analysis of *Raising Gazorpazorp* (*Rick and Morty*)

The episode *Raising Gazorpazorp* in the series *Rick and Morty*, does not focus on the masculinity of the main characters, but on a general discussion of patriarchy and gender norms as portrayed by the character of Morty Junior. Similarly to the character of Vance Waggoner in *BoJack the Feminist* who embodies the essence of toxic male behavior, Morty Junior is predominantly defined by the characteristic of aggression. However, the gender discussion becomes generally more abstract, surpassing the character of Morty Junior, as this character forms part of a species of inherently aggressive males who are juxtaposed to a futuristic matriarchal system defined by the contrary characteristics of hegemonic masculinity.

The idea of a binary gender system and its implications for society are manifested in the science fiction setting of the planet Gazorpazorp, where the female population of an alien species that inhabits the sparse surface of the planet has separated from the dangerously aggressive and destructive male Gazorpians and has created a highly developed underground civilization under matriarchal rule. The episode mocks the concept that certain gendered characteristics are inherently rooted in biology when it shows how strictly sex segregation is practiced among the female rulers from an early age. The explanation provided by the female Gazorpians is that “within a day [the male offspring will] be an adult male Gazorpian, one of the most aggressively violent creatures in the universe” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 10:15). This process of coming of age is depicted when Morty becomes the father of a male Gazorpian after having impregnated a sex robot used by the female Gazorpians to control their population⁹. His son, whom he calls Morty Junior, functions as a literal depiction of the male characteristic of aggression. This can be observed on different levels of composition and character design. This is first established in the verbal dimension. When Morty Junior utters his first words, namely, “death [...], domination [...] [and] destruction,” (9:10) they are characteristic of how the behavior of his race and gender is portrayed in the episode. This image is contrasted with the

⁹ Due to the fact that society is separated by sex on the planet of Gazorpazorp, female Gazorpians distribute sex robots, which are able to give birth after having been impregnated by the males. This means of birth control allows them to maintain and control their population without directly interacting with the male Gazorpians on the surface of the planet.

infantile voice and body of Morty Junior and the action of toying around. As the infant grows, his desire to engage in his ‘natural’ behavior increases. This tendency is also exemplified by his first drawings, which depict graphic violence. Figure 6 shows a frame from a scene in which Morty, upon receiving a disturbing drawing from his son, attempts to explain to him why violence is bad. The mediated viewing in the frame in figure 6 where Morty’s arms are depicted in order to indicate Morty’s point of view (see Painter, Martin and Unsworth 27), displays Morty Junior’s aggressive potential to the audience.



Figure 6
Aggression as inherent to masculinity depicted by a drawing (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 11:54).

This perspective creates empathy with Morty and his attempts to contain and channel his son’s violent nature. While in both episodes of *BoJack Horseman* analyzed in this thesis, empathy was created for the character of BoJack and his masculinity, in this episode masculinity is being observed from the point of view of another person, thus, the emphasis is not placed on the individual and the implications of masculinity for him, but on the negative effects of masculinity on society. This perspective of the outside as oppose to the affected observer is also maintained in the depiction of the utopian matriarchal society in the episode. These two perspectives are based on the conceptual categories of what Kress and van Leeuwen (118-119) describe as “demand” and “offer”, referring to images which directly engage with the viewer, by means of a gaze, for instance, or those which encourage the perspective of an observer. The verbal meaning provided in the episode highlights the prominence of Morty Junior’s biological predisposition to violence. When Morty tries to direct his son’s energy towards something positive, such as dancing, he responds that he “would like to dance – on the graves of [his]

enemies” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 12:08). In response to this alarming statement and Morty Junior’s increasing interest in the world outside his home, Morty decides to contain his aggressive tendencies as much as possible and protect society from him by inventing a lie, namely, that the earth’s atmosphere is poisonous for him. However, given that the rebellious and aggressive attitude of the fast-growing boy intensifies, the tensions between father and son culminate in a confrontation between the, by then, teenage Morty Junior with his father, which causes Morty Junior to finally run away.

The episode culminates in the depictions of aggression according to hegemonic masculinity when Morty Junior goes on a rampage. A variety of scenes from minute 17 onwards depict the meaning of aggression on various levels of composition. First of all, his male muscular body and physical strength are emphasized. While angrily dancing through an abandoned warehouse setting, he rips off his clothes as the camera quickly zooms down on him from a bird view. A classic rock soundtrack with meaningful lyrics underlines this image: “Running wild. Running hot. Burning inside with the youth in the blood and the age of the heat” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 17:05). Similarly to Mr. Peanutbutter’s staged toughness in *BoJack the Feminist*, a tendency to accompany the spectacle of masculinity with a series of dramatic and intensifying elements in the audiovisual composition, such as (quick) zooms, high or low angles, sound effects and prominent as well as loud music, can be observed in the series under scrutiny. Also, different types of action, such as ripping off his clothes and growling, running through a brick wall, lifting cars, pulling out streetlamps and throwing them into buildings and chasing people, accompanied by dramatic string instruments and horns create the image of an aggressive and uncontrollable monster (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 17:00-18:00). This minute-long-sequence that is marked by different systems of meaning, creating the image of an aggressive male monster, can be compared to Rick’s vengeance sequence in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* due to the fact that the characteristic of aggression and the resulting destruction is intensified by an audiovisual composition in both sequences. However, in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* violence and aggression are exaggerated in a cartoonish and comical fashion (see Higgs 99), while the aggression in *Raising Gazorpazorp* is depicted as a tragic and inevitable consequence of masculine identity which Morty tries to contain.

Nevertheless, the series provides a happy ending for masculinity as Morty Junior is stopped by his father. When they face each other and Morty Junior holds a vehicle above his head ready to crush Morty and Jerry, Morty is able to calm him down by reminding him of a nursery rhyme. The first frame in figure 7, using different visual elements depicting aggression

and physical strength, such as Morty Junior's sharp teeth, his immense body and muscles, as well as his aggressive facial expression, shows the confrontation between the two.



Figure 7

Male aggression in the context of spectacle and empathy (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 17:53 left; 18:22 right).

Morty is positioned close to the camera as he gazes at the monstrous appearance of his son with a shocked expression on his face. In figure 6, a mediated focalization allowed the viewer to be directly engaged in Morty's parenting process and empathize with his concerns over his son's potential for violence. The first frame in figure 7 provides a similar point of view with an over the shoulder shot and a focalization through the character of Morty. The lighting illuminates Morty Junior's body from above and invites the viewer to look at the terrifying embodiment of aggression and violence as a detached object in the spotlight. This observation would relate to the "offer" (Kress and van Leeuwen 119) aspect of the frame, treating aggression and masculinity as a spectacle of filmic composition. However, the position alongside Morty with a focus on his face and expression also creates empathy with Morty's feeling of responsibility and regret at his father-son relationship, translating this dynamic to an interpretation of masculine aggression in the context of complicity. The special perspective of involvement combined with a certain distance allows for a critical discussion of masculinity and the possibility to create practices that do not idealize or demonize aspects of identity and therefore automatically prevent a potential for change. Obviously, the episode deals with an exaggerated and simplified image of masculinity, however, the process of seeing and treating this masculinity in the context of complicity offers practical options for action. The second frame in figure 7 is entirely engaged in this empathic atmosphere and removes any lighting in order to depict the characters in a dark setting with the natural colors of the night. As the focus on the threatening imagery of Morty Junior is now removed and the character is shown in a long shot, which does not center on his terrifying aspects, such as his muscles or teeth, the sad body language is on full display and impacts the appearance of the character. The male position of a victim, a "damaged and damage doing" (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 483), which was

discussed earlier in the context of BoJack Horseman in *Escape from L.A.*, seems to be present here as well. Throughout the episode aggression, as depicted through the metaphor of the Gazorpian alien species, is defined as something biologically related to masculinity.

At the end of the episode a conversation between Morty and his son, who suddenly shows a capacity for emotional openness as he is confronted with doubts concerning his identity, addresses the issue of this aggressive potential in individuals, which, according to them, is a universal quality of human beings. In a cameo appearance, the comic strip writer Brad Anderson suddenly appears out of nowhere and suggests the possibility of “channel[ing] [these aggressive drives] into [creative] work” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 19:00), like he does. What is referred to here is the concept of the id, which is attributed to Freud’s (105-6) model of the human psyche and its sexual and aggressive drives, which have to be controlled by the other parts of the psyche in order to be able to function as a successfully socialized individual in society. Given that the id, as Freud argues, is the only part which is already present at birth, it seems that Morty Junior, despite his rapid physical growth, has not sufficiently developed these other parts of his psyche yet and is thus predominantly controlled by the forces of the id. The fact that, in this episode, male Gazorpians are born with these drives, which they need to learn how to control, as oppose to the female Gazorpians, who incarnate exactly the opposite of such characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, contextualizes the discussion of gender within the predominant ideology of binary categories and purism as a theoretical concept.

The alien species, as a metaphor of gender in human society, refers to our complicity upon birth, which involves being born into a patriarchal society with its corrupted structure which individuals engage in because “the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 178). The use of such science fiction metaphors is also described by Candelaria (3), who applies the concept of cosmic horror in her comparison of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and *Rick and Morty*. The notion of cosmic horror or Lovecraftian horror was attributed to the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft and refers to the “fear and awe we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension, whose scope extends beyond the narrow field of human affairs and boasts of cosmic significance” (Ralickas 364). Candelaria (3) demonstrates how both series depict events that have dramatic consequences but, in the light of cosmic forces, they are presented as comically insignificant. She refers to the fact that, for instance, in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* earth is destroyed in order to create an express route to travel in the universe, which ironically translates into a relatable human experience for the protagonist, Arthur Dent, when one considers the fact that the

protagonist's house on earth has been awaiting a similar fate because of the construction of a highway in Great Britain.

This context of cosmic horror and comedy allows us to interpret the species of Gazorpians and their sex segregation in the episode under scrutiny as a critique of hegemonic masculinity and gender stereotypes. Applying the concept of cosmic horror, the writers of the series utilize the male characteristic of aggression to create their own alien species based on this fundamental aspect of masculinity. In accordance with binary categories, the female Gazorpian race is also based, in an exaggerated way, on the opposing meanings of these male characteristics. For instance, while the males exhibit aggressive behavior and emotional dismissiveness, the females contrast this with a high degree of emotional sensitivity, which is exemplified by the way female Gazorpians greet each other, "I'm here if you need to talk," (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 9:43) and by a traffic jam information, "The spider in sector C is still alive. Plan your route accordingly and expect delays. We're not telling you what to do. We are just sharing how we feel" (9:28). The obvious use of female stereotypes is not only evident on a verbal level but also on a visual level, with restaurants and bars called "Just a Bite of Yours" (9:35) and "The Cuddle Puddle" (9:36), respectively, which contributes to the general image of exaggerated binary identities. The humor, which applies cosmic horror to create a society based on human experience, like for instance, gender stereotypes, exaggerates these aspects on a cosmic scale. Our ability to relate to these experiences and reflect upon them, as they are manifested in the absurd universe of *Rick and Morty*, allows us to appreciate the humor in depictions which we do not take at face value but which are connected to human experiences that they are based on. According to the filmic logic of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the destruction of a planet and the extinction of an entire population is presented to be as normal as the bureaucratic decisions involved in creating a highway. Confronted with such a situation in a novel, we might initially feel outraged, given the casual and indifferent treatment of the loss of human life, however, as soon as we start to read these depictions in the context of cosmic horror and human experience, we begin to engage in the humor depicted in series such as *Rick and Morty* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. A scene that illustrates this use of cosmic horror can also be found in *Raising Gazorpazorp*. The episode depicts a radical scene (9:58) of sex segregation including infants, which would definitely qualify as tasteless and outrageous in a different context.

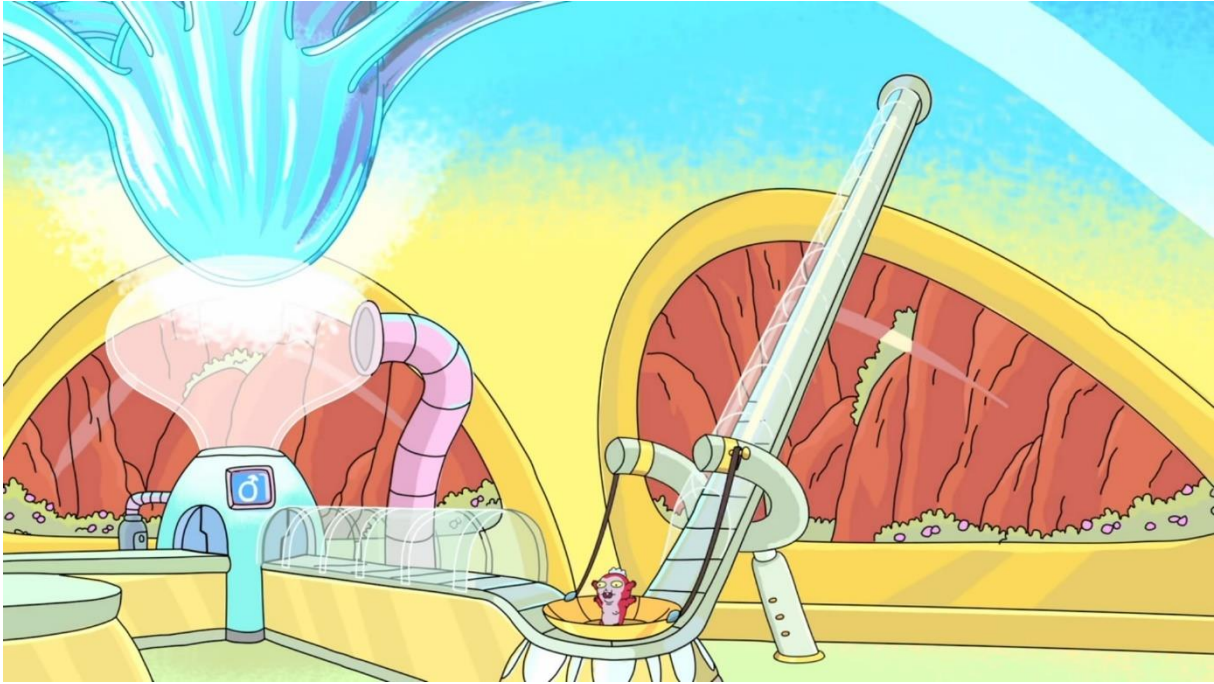


Figure 8

Cosmic horror relativizes a radical method of sex segregation on the alien planet of Gazorpazorp (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 10:10).

Mar-Sha, the ruler of the planet, introduces the visitors Rick and Summer to their method of population control, when she demonstrates in a shocking way how the Gazorpians deal with their male population:

MAR-SHA. The females are placed into educational programs, where they can discover a service to our paradise that fulfills them most. The males...they get to play outside.

SUMMER. That was just a baby.

GAZORPIAN. And within a day he will be an adult male Gazorpian one of the most aggressively violent creatures in the universe. (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 9:58-10:28)

Summer is appalled by the fact that the male infants are placed on a device resembling a giant slingshot and are thus removed from the underground paradise created by the females. The divergent verbal and visual meanings in Figure 8 concerning the treatment of the male infants illustrates the effect of cosmic horror and how it engages in taboo subjects, such as hurting or potentially killing infants. While the literal meaning of “they get to play outside” implies an appropriate and typical activity for children, the coupling of this statement with the action of placing an infant in a giant slingshot results in a radical euphemism. Nevertheless, the context of cosmic horror with a planet full of dangerously aggressive males allows for an interpretation of a normal method of sex segregation, such as public toilets separated by sex.

The discussion of binary identity categories can be concluded with a recognition of impure social categories on the level of the narration when Rick and Summer are faced with

their imminent execution. The episode functions as a lesson in binary thinking concerning gender, which is especially true for the character Rick. A scene at the beginning of the episode centers on the issue that Rick does not “do adventures with chicks” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 5:02) and the discussion about inherent characteristics of sex, which is exemplified by Summer’s response: “Oh right! Because there is something about having a wiener that would make me better at walking through a hole¹⁰?” (5:08). Rick’s comment in this episode, similarly to Mr. Peanutbutter’s attempts to embody the televised masculinity of the ‘tough’ male, refers to gender politics in media productions and the predominance of male heroes in the context of the quest narrative. In order to make the critique of purity as a theoretical measure more powerful, Rick is characterized at different moments of the episode by his sexist attitude when he explicitly refers to Summer’s anatomy, “Great! Now I have to take over a whole planet because of your stupid boobs,” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 5:39) and the implications of gender typical behavior, “The least you could do is be ashamed of your gender” (6:51). In the end, however, it is a fact that, despite our society being strongly influenced by binary thinking when it comes to gender behavior, not all individuals accept this dualism as a defining criterion for them and thus engage in ‘untypical’ or ‘deviant’ gender behavior, which saves Summer and Rick from their execution. When Summer emphasizes that her top, which the Gazorpian ruler complimented previously, was made by a man, the Gazorpians agree that on earth, unlike Gazorpazorp, binary categories defining individuals are not as definite or inherently rooted in biology as on the planet Gazorpazorp. In the context of sex segregation on the planet Gazorpazorp, the demonstration of transgressive masculine behavior subverts the fundamental concept that Gazorpian society is based on – and for this matter, human society as well, although obviously to a less extreme extent– which is the metaphor that the alien species refer to, namely, that binary identity categories are universal. When Mar-Sha sends Rick and Summer “back to their weird planet where women are kind of equal, but not really,” (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 15:15) she acknowledges that impurity is more present on earth than on Gazorpazorp, however, while Gazorpazorp embodies the extreme manifestation of binary gender politics, earth, despite its less extreme involvement in this matter, is still largely defined by such an ideology. The ‘cartoony’ portrayal of gender binaries in *Raising Gazorpazorp* allows for a discussion of this issue in a special context. McCloud argues that “[w]hen we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential meaning an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (McCloud 30). This is also the case in *Raising Gazorpazorp*, given that

¹⁰ The *hole* mentioned by Sumer is a portal, which Rick uses on his adventures to travel to other dimensions.

the hegemonic masculine characteristic of aggression is manifested in the cartoony image of the alien Morty Junior. The fictional planet of Gazorpazorp juxtaposed to earth lets the audience reflect on the binary categorization of human society in institutions, in the media, and many other aspects. Gender equality is mocked with this type of American humor which “possesses a critical, often ironic, strain that highlights the incongruity between the rhetoric that promises equality, wealth, and prosperity in American culture and the failure of America to fulfill those promises” (Ezell 2). In this context, the radical division of sexes on Gazorpazorp refers to this discrepancy in American culture between the ideal of equality and the reality of binary gender categorizations which influences numerous aspects of society.

Returning to the issues of gender roles manifested in common types of narrations, such as the quest, one can argue that the episode subverts the idea of purity as a theoretical measure by emphasizing Summer’s crucial role in avoiding their execution. However, given that the character of Rick neglects any moral statements and epiphanic realizations, similarly to the ending of *The Rickshank Rickdemption* in which he embraces the absurd, he also maintains this sentiment in the present episode:

RICK. Isn’t it interesting Summer that after all that stuff we just did, nothing really mattered and there was no point to it. It kind of makes you wonder, huh? About nothing.

SUMMER. Are you sure it doesn’t make you reevaluate your policy about taking girls on adventures?

RICK. No. I’d say given what we’ve been through that I was right the whole time and any epiphanies about gender politics were a projection of your feminine insecurity. (*Raising Gazorpazorp* 20:05)

Despite Rick’s embrace of the absurd instead of a meaningful moral or conclusion, which has become his characteristic trait as a cynical and nihilistic character, due to the fact that the plot relates to the female heroine Summer, the series engages in a discourse about gender politics and subverts the male dominated quest narrative.

The episode *Raising Gazorpazorp* subverts binary categorizations of gender with the depiction of the alien planet Gazorpazorp. Applying humor in the light of cosmic horror, the episode discusses gender stereotypes by means of exaggerations in order to mock the influence of purity as a theoretical measure concerning gender politics in media productions and in society in general. Gretchen Sisson emphasizes the possibilities of humor in a similar context when she analyzes how abortion is dealt with on television. She (252) argues that the episode *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew* in *BoJack Horseman* “is not just making jokes about abortion—it is offering a theory of what humor can contribute to the cultural conversation about abortion. Here, the humor is ultimately helpful to the teenage girl getting the abortion. It makes it less scary, less taboo.” While the serious topic of abortion is depicted in a cartoony way in *Brrap Brrap Pew Pew*, in

Raising Gazorpazorp the effect functions in the opposite direction, given that the harmful effects of binary gender politics are actually depicted in the comical and absurd reality of *Rick and Morty*. Similar to the carnivalesque depiction of Rick's soliloquy in *The Rickshank Rickdemption* celebrating the reestablishing of patriarchal rule, the episode *Raising Gazorpazorp* also provides an absurd element of humor when Rick offends the matriarchal society on Gazorpazorp by farting outrageously loud and long (11:00). Thereby, he engages in a transgressive humor exemplified by "[t]he farting, vomiting and verbal spewing of the South Park boys" (Tueth 29). As compared to *BoJack the Feminist* and *The Rickshank Rickdemption*, which discuss masculinity as a part of narration and style in television and film, *Raising Gazorpazorp* refers to the quest narrative in the context of adventures in general when the episode mocks the prevalence of the male hero. Rick's offensive attitude towards women in the context of adventures functions as a satire of this genre convention. The fact that Summer as a female heroine was able to save their lives subverts this tendency of hegemonic masculinity within the quest narrative in general, but also as part of a self-reflexive comment on *Rick and Morty*, which primarily depicts the male characters Rick and Morty as protagonists in the adventures of the series.

8. Conclusion

Hegemonic masculinity depicted in the series under scrutiny appears predominantly in a negative context concerning morals and ethics; however, many television series also present the harmfulness of hegemonic male behavior in such a way and, by doing so, they simultaneously promote and propagate these images of male identity, creating a certain fetishism about the troubled but 'cool' male anti-hero. This argument, explicitly stated by the character Diane Nguyen when she emphasizes that these series "pos[e] as a deconstruction of the edifice of toxic masculinity [...] [b]ut [they are] just using that, as an excuse to relish in [their] own excesses" (*BoJack the Feminist* 19:31), forms the basis of *BoJack Horseman's* and *Rick and Morty's* critique of media practices involving depictions of hegemonic masculinity.

Given that the series under scrutiny also find themselves confronted with similar criticism (see Stahler) concerning their protagonists, they markedly involve themselves in a discourse about purity as a theoretical measure to highlight the position and critical approach they take in this discussion. When incoherent images of masculinity are displayed, for example in the case of *BoJack Horseman* and Jerry Smith, the series engage in questions of complexity and complicity concerning male identity. These characters not only embody the reality of non-binary categorizations by transgressing definitions of good versus bad, male versus female,

weak versus strong, etc. with their behavior in the series, the series also provides the argument that their attempts at achieving purity show how, on the one hand, hegemonic masculinity negatively affects individuals who correspond with this notion and those who do not alike, and on the other hand, the process of perusing purity on different levels is inherently flawed and absurd. Definitions of purity disenable individuals to critically adapt to situations and implement critical practices concerning their behavior, instead they create “paradoxical politics of despair” (Shotwell 9).

When it comes to coherent depictions of hegemonic masculinity manifested, for instance, by the characters Rick Sanchez and Morty Junior, the series mock the fact that these depictions belong to a repertoire of character types which have become an established part of numerous filmic narratives. By illustrating in an exaggerated manner which function these characters serve, how they are characterized, how these characters are contextualized in terms of motivation, their function in the narration and other questions along these lines, the series criticize certain genres and styles which use these types of ‘pure’ narratives but also emphasize how hegemonic masculinity is presented as an inherent and logical part of this process. By playing with viewers’ expectations and by engaging them on an emotional level by means of cartoon style characters and focalization, the series do not only raise awareness about the process of creating and perceiving filmic logic, but also encourage reflection of how these processes manipulate the context of different depictions. For instance, the analyses indicate that characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are usually provided with causality in the plot.

It is the self-reflexive capacity of these series which differentiate them from other contemporary series and allow them to discuss genre conventions on a meta-level, but also their own complicity in the process. For instance, by exaggerating violence and aggressions, and by manipulating viewer’s expectations concerning the plot and characters, the series make a statement against our consuming of these gender stereotypes in filmic compositions and common narrative elements, such as happy ending, narrative closure and fulfilled expectations. Their refusal to peruse these genre conventions which embody “purity practices” (Shotwell 13) characterize these series as a continuation of the tradition of subversive animation.

Based on the results presented in this thesis, I suggest future research to focus on the audience’s response to discussions of purity as a theoretical practice and transgressive masculine behavior. I have referred to an implied viewer in my analysis of hegemonic masculinity and genre conventions only to illustrate the aspects the series address in terms of common filmic practices. Despite the explicit reference to issues like sexism and stereotypes combined with the use of exaggeration to emphasize the critical comments implied in these so

obviously satirical depictions, responses to the series and interpretations of the content and form vary extremely. For instance, the outrage from some fans over the addition of female writers to the team of *Rick and Morty* for season 3 of the series shows how many viewers interact with satirical and provocative attitudes of fictional characters in a very literal way (see Chandler). While arguably ambiguity and contradictions are attributed as characteristic of the generation of millennial adults (see Shugart 164) it seems that the discussion of transgressive masculinity in the series under scrutiny by means of cosmic horror, taboos, and offensive humor is not perceived as a coherent critique of purity as a theoretical measure by its main young adult viewership.

Word count: 28 003

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Appendix

Abstract in English

In the light of public discussions about the #metoo movement and the notion of toxic masculinity, questions of sex and gender have recently received wide public attention. While research in the field of animation has focused on a variety of topics, few scholars have addressed the issue of masculinity within the genre of adult animation. This diploma thesis analyzes how the contemporary animated series *Rick and Morty* and *BoJack Horseman* engage in a critical discourse about masculinity. Male behavior and its manifestation in the audiovisual composition are analyzed by applying a list of characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. The results of this analysis are subsequently discussed in the context of transgressive masculinity, a notion which subverts the binary categorization of gender politics. Both series discuss in a meta-discourse how hegemonic masculinity is commonly presented as an inherent part of media productions, such as character types, narratives and imagery. Manipulating viewer's expectations and emotions, the series not only create a critical awareness about the process of producing and perceiving filmic logic, but also make an important argument against purity as a theoretical principle in terms of gender binaries. Acknowledging complicity in promoting hegemonic masculinity and discussing critical practices concerning identity politics in media productions, *BoJack Horseman* provides a constructive critique of masculinity, while *Rick and Morty* in general does not discuss concrete measures in this context.

Keywords: Adult animation, animated series, hegemonic masculinity, gender binaries, purity as a theoretical principle, transgressive male behavior.

Zusammenfassung auf Deutsch

Genderfragen und das Thema Sexismus haben im Anbetracht der öffentlichen Debatte um die #metoo Bewegung und den Begriff der toxischen Männlichkeit (*toxic masculinity*) in letzter Zeit zunehmend Aufmerksamkeit auf sich gezogen. Während sich wissenschaftliche Publikationen im Bereich Animation und Zeichentrick mit einer Vielzahl von Aspekten beschäftigt haben, wurde das Thema der Männlichkeit in Animationsserien für Erwachsene bisher deutlich vernachlässigt. Diese Diplomarbeit untersucht inwiefern die zeitgenössischen Animationsserien *Rick and Morty* und *BoJack Horseman* in einen kritischen Diskurs zum Thema Männlichkeit treten. Anhand einer Liste von Eigenschaften der hegemonialen Männlichkeit wird das Verhalten der männlichen Charaktere und wie sich dieses Verhalten in der audiovisuellen Gestaltung widerspiegelt analysiert. Die Ergebnisse dieser Analyse werden anschließend im Kontext von grenzüberschreitender Männlichkeit, welche eine Auflösung binärer Genderkategorien impliziert, diskutiert. Beide Serien setzen sich in einem Metadiskurs mit der Tatsache auseinander, dass hegemoniale Männlichkeit für gewöhnlich als ein immanenter Teil von filmischen Produktionen, z.B. in Form von Charaktertypen, Narrativen und Bildsprache, dargestellt wird. Indem sie gezielt mit den Erwartungen und Emotionen der Zuschauer spielen, schaffen diese Serien nicht nur ein kritisches Bewusstsein bezüglich der Prozesse, die die Produktion und Wahrnehmung von filmischer Logik beeinflussen, sondern widersprechen auch dem Konzept der Reinheit als theoretisches Grundprinzip bezüglich einer binären Geschlechtsidentität. Die Serie *BoJack Horseman*, die sich mit Fragen der Komplizenschaft bezüglich der Verbreitung von Idealen der hegemonialen Männlichkeit und kritischen Maßnahmen zur Abschaffung binärer Identitäten in Film und TV auseinandersetzt, trägt zu einer konstruktiven Kritik von Männlichkeit bei, während *Rick and Morty* in diesem Kontext keine konkreten Ansätze liefert.

Stichwörter: Animationsserien für Erwachsene, Zeichentrickserien, hegemoniale Männlichkeit, binäre Geschlechtsidentität, Reinheit als theoretisches Grundprinzip, grenzüberschreitendes männliches Verhalten.