Post45
Leaving Hollywoo: Essays After
BoJack Horseman

The Lost Futures of BoJack and Diane

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Just before the credits roll in *BoJack Horseman*'s final episode, the camera tilts leaving BoJack and Diane visible from only the mid-chest up. If we weren't already paying attention to Diane's expressive fidgeting then here it is unavoidable. She briefly glances at BoJack from the corner of her eye. A few seconds later, BoJack looks down, then turns his head to her and lingers on her face. Their gazes never meet. And how could they? Across the show's six seasons, from what initially appeared a generic "will-they-won't-they" coupling to

what becomes their complex interdependency, their friendship retains the palpable tension of an unsaid something. As Catherine Feeny's "Mr. Blue" cuts across the silence, a swell of lost and, maybe, still possible futures haunt the small abyss of night sky separating their shoulders.

While Feeny's dulcet tones rang through the tinny speakers of

Doug's aging laptop in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on the other side of the Atlantic, in Nottingham, England, Teresa's smartphone lit up. It read: "Finished Bojack. Cried." [1] Throughout our (the authors') years of separate but synchronous watching, BoJack and Diane's relationship seemed to provide an imperfect mirror for our own, which had similarly endured a long-distance relocation, a marriage beginning and ending, and spells of patchy communication. That final scene on the roof therefore held considerable emotional weight for us both. It represented more than the ending of a show that had been a central talking point for us over the years. It marked the culmination of the on-screen relationship that had served as a proxy for navigating our own, and thus a disconcerting sense that the closure of their story perhaps reflected and effected an ending of sorts for us, too.

Our readings of *BoJack Horseman* take up Mark Fisher's proposition that what continuously haunts us in the 21st century "is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate." [2] Fisher's hauntological thesis hinges upon a two-directional perspective that incorporates, on the one hand, that which "(in actuality is) *no longer*" but continues to impinge on the present and, on the other, an always already operative *not yet*, the anticipation of which informs our behaviors in the present. [3] Fisher contends that this double perspective manifests as an inability to envision a future radically different from what our cultural imagination has already presented, an inability he finds expressed in the retro aesthetics of music and film.

BoJack Horseman exemplifies the hauntological dynamic that Fisher proposes. Take, for example, the montages filled with conspicuously dated popular culture references that often announce analepsis (see Season 3's "Generic 2007 Pop Song"). We can also locate the "compulsion to repeat" wherever we're invited to anticipate the self-referential ticks and tropes that punctuate characters' interactions (such as the inevitability of Mr. Peanutbutter's off-screen conversation with "Erica!"). Less

frivolously, the *not yet* looms large for every character, perhaps most poignantly in the Season 4 episode that projects forward to a future in which Princess Carolyn's great-great-granddaughter speaks proudly of her to a classroom of peers. Yet the episode's closing moments reveal that this is a purely imagined future created by Princess Carolyn to buoy her against her melancholic present. This indiscernibility of when such flirtation with lingering specters of both the *no longer* and the *not yet* marks critique, indulgence, or something else entirely comprises one of the show's joys.

We focus our attention on how "the idea of being haunted by events that had not actually happened, futures that failed to materialize and remained spectral" operates at an interpersonal level, in the show's development of BoJack and Diane's friendship. [4] By attending to communicative gaps and physiognomic flickers, we interrogate how the unsaid charges BoJack and Diane's interactions, such that it is often the indeterminacy of the future that sustains their connection in the present. We explore how, conversely, a mutual identification with these characters gives voice to the ineffable within our own friendship. We thus read *BoJack Horseman* as a series that conspicuously resists stereotypical, heteronormative trajectories for its characters while allowing these potentialities to linger at its peripheries. Indeed, we argue that it is the simultaneous galvanizing and undermining of these reductive, finite plotlines that invigorates the show's male-female relationships, and particularly BoJack and Diane's shared narrative arc. As such, we find in *BoJack Horseman* the capacity to capture and retain the ambiguities and ambivalences that permeate adult social life. This leads us to a consideration of how shared media consumption practices can go some way to making the unsayable sensible, and to the recognition that much of the enjoyment found in our own shared-separate watching of *BoJack Horseman* derives from its having spoken something of us to ourselves and to each other whilst retaining the integrity of leaving the unsayable unsaid.

"There's always later, right?"

> ***B:*** *"Not big on parties, huh?"*
>
> ***D:*** *"No, I never know what to do with my hands."*

So begins BoJack and Diane's final conversation in Season 1. Their dislike of parties speaks to their perceived marginality in the Hollywoo scene.[5] Despite their pronounced differences, they have bonded over shared anxieties and mutual contrarianism from the first time we see them together at Todd's impromptu cartel Quinceañera.[6] The show cuts between BoJack and Diane's witty repartee out on the decking and Mr. Peanutbutter's obnoxious antics indoors. BoJack's literally vomit-inducing realization a few moments later that Diane is currently dating BoJack's rival plays into heteronormative plotting. In these early episodes, their initial meetings foretell a blossoming love story with Diane as the generic "smart girl" the bachelor can't have but uncharacteristically wants.

A book, an ill-advised kiss, and a thwarted wedding sabotage later, we find them hanging out on the roof at the periphery of

the party once again. [7] BoJack reveals that he has been cast in *Secretariat* — "everything [he] ever wanted" — off the back of their successful ghost-writing collaboration on BoJack's memoir. But, Diane intuits, he's not "super jazzed." She replies, "Well, that's the problem with life, right? Either you know what you want and then you don't get what you want. Or you get what you want then you don't know what you want." The conversation pivots when Diane reveals that she will be a character consultant for the film. Despite respective qualms about the path to the future, at least they will walk it together.

Just what a future together means, however, is uncertain. No longer merely love interests, their senses of self-worth are becoming increasingly bound-up with one another. Diane hopes that BoJack doesn't "get sick" of her and, in turn, BoJack needs affirmation from Diane. This rooftop scene marks a significant moment in BoJack's existential *bildungsroman* where Diane serves as his value barometer. He, for the second time, asks her to confirm whether she believes he is a good person "deep down." Her pragmatic response, more good works than divine grace, prescribes no easy path to salvation: "I don't think I believe in deep down. I kind of think that all the things that you are are the things that you do." Each serves as an anchor for the other in a way that gestures more toward supportive friendship than illicit romance.

But beneath the friendship, the specter of romance remains. Diane asks, "is it weird that I took this job [on *Secretariat*]?" BoJack responds as if it were an issue of professional credentials: "Why would it be weird? You literally wrote the book on Secretariat." Only Diane's tone and facial expression betray a subtext: is it weird that I, having just got married, chose a career move that necessitates that we spend much of our time together? Concluding without closure, they take refuge in the knowledge that, in BoJack's words, "There's always later, right?"

"The only thing that makes sense."

> ***D:*** *"BoJack, I can't wait for you to be better. I need you in my life."*
>
> ***B:*** *"Really?"*
>
> ***D:*** *"You're the biggest asshole I know and you're the only thing that makes sense to me."*

Three seasons later, BoJack and Diane lie beside one another in bed.[8] In an unlikely turn of events, a fracking-induced

earthquake has plunged Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter's home — along with the LA socialites attending Mr. Peanutbutter's political campaign fundraiser — into the void below. While, elsewhere, Jessica Biel incites a baying mob to set Zach Braff alight for meat, Diane and BoJack drink themselves into a stupor. Alone together for the first time since BoJack went AWOL, what begins as Diane's cathartic outpouring — "Why can't I be happy? Am I busted?" — soon turns to the unspoken tension surrounding BoJack's 18-month absence. Acknowledging that Diane is hurt that he didn't contact her as soon as he returned, BoJack discloses:

> ***B:*** *"I wanted to be better when you saw me again. And I thought I could be, somehow, but I'm not, and even if I did get better, the best I could ever be is still just some other version of . . . me."*

While BoJack's (albeit reluctant) recognition that all he can ever be is "just some other version" of his flawed self seems to signal at least partial growth, this episode foregrounds Diane's increasing discontent. We watch her unravel to the point of admitting: "I'm the problem." Despite being "the only thing that

makes sense" to her, Diane still "can't wait for [BoJack] to be better." And where "There's always later, right?" sufficed in Season 1, both the seemingly unattainable *not yet* ("Why can't I be happy?") and the wistfully remembered *no longer* ("I'm a pit that good things fall into") now pull with a deeper urgency. For BoJack, there's only one route out. "Just pretend you're happy," he advises, "and eventually you'll forget you're pretending." In a mode which harkens back to her good works mentality implied in their earlier rooftop talk, she agrees: "Maybe you're right. I just need to work harder and stop complaining."

BoJack's admission, coupled with his flicker of a smile that closes the scene, reveals how their dynamic has evolved. BoJack still positions Diane as an arbiter of his value. But here the metric shifts. Rather than straining towards an abstract sense of inherent "goodness" (as in Season 1, and reiterated here in BoJack's desire to be "better" and thus "ready" to reconnect), Diane's acknowledgment that he's the only thing that makes sense to her and that she needs him precisely *because* he's the biggest asshole she knows allows him to conceive his worth as continuously constructed within their relationship. Though the disaster prompts others to pursue libidinal desires, regret they aren't more famous, or agree to burn fellow partygoers alive, Diane and BoJack reveal a depth to their friendship. That they don't hook up but simply discuss the vicissitudes of their emotional connection when drunk, alone in a bedroom, and almost certainly about to be buried alive frustrates any residual "will-they-won't-they" presuppositions, affirming that whatever sustains their togetherness is not the expectation of consummation.

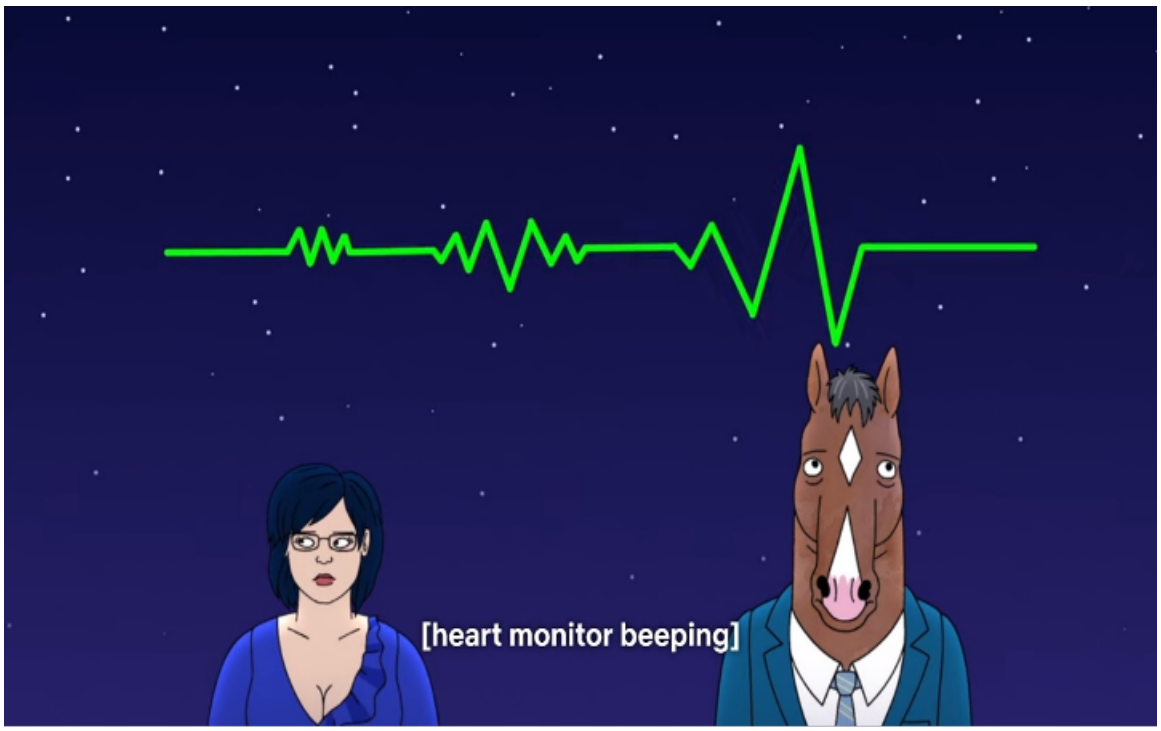
Having safely and unceremoniously resurfaced, Diane pulls Mr. Peanutbutter aside to say, "You are the best thing that ever happened to me, I don't tell you that enough." Sincere or not, this reconciliation for Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter, so soon after a display of her connection with BoJack, reaffirms our sense of the latter pair's friendship and further undercuts any romantic

hopes we or they may still hold.

"Thank you"

> ***B:*** *Life's a bitch and then you die, right?*
>
> ***D:*** *Sometimes. Sometimes life's a bitch and then you keep on living.*

The final episode opens as it ends: BoJack and Diane staring awkwardly at the sky.[9] The first time we see this shot, its connotation is unclear. Backed only by stars, they could be anywhere or nowhere. Is this a continuation of the previous episode's Bardo? Is BoJack dead? No. Death would be too easy — suicide merely another *deus ex machina* the show dangles in front of us but swiftly takes away. The tragedy, as this episode explores, isn't that things end but that they keep on going — even after they end.



It's only when BoJack leaves Princess Carolyn's wedding party to find Diane out on the roof that we realize the opening shot of this final episode was a call-back to the future; time is, as ever, out of joint The pair sit poised at the end of the show's world.

Lost futures haunt this final scene: their own, interpersonal wreckage, past possibilities clearly exhausted. Diane anxiously dotes on BoJack's approval no more: it is he, rather than she, who "never know[s] what to do with [his] hands at parties." The power has shifted and BoJack knows it. This nod to their final conversation in Season 1 [10] attempts to invoke past closeness, but Diane does not acknowledge the phrase's significance. She is no longer compelled to extend emotional labor to "help [him] work through what [he is] trying to work through."Back in Season 4, BoJack's assholery made sense to Diane — not least as a reassuring counterpoint to her own malaise and malcontent. This final season, however, Diane is faced with both BoJack's admission about what really happened with Penny in New Mexico [11] and the Biscuit Braxby exposé which laid bare his destructive relationship with Sarah Lynn and his misogynistic tendencies. [12] Where once BoJack's irreverence could be rationalized in the abstract, as an often-performative character flaw, these subsequent all-too-real revelations render his chaotic behaviors inexcusable and potentially insurmountable.

Despite this, Diane makes it clear that he still holds "a power over [her]." Relating her experience of BoJack's attempted suicide, Diane implies that the voicemail he left — a desperate plea for her to save him — curtailed her developing relationship with Guy: her "boyfriend at the time." It seems BoJack has once again thwarted someone through his oblivious selfishness. In disclosing her apparent singleness, Diane's narrative invites speculation. Combined with the show's impending end, a close call with death and BoJack's newfound maturity, we wonder if, with the stars aligned, their persistent connection might spell a return to their status as love interests. But only for a moment. Seconds later, we (and perhaps BoJack) feel silly for even entertaining such a generic "boy-gets-girl" conclusion. The no-longer boyfriend is now husband. Like BoJack, we fixate on the repeated phrase "boyfriend at the time." But the refrain merely playfully invokes the specter of romance one last time,

providing a final reminder that this future is not only lost but ridiculous to expect.

With this too facile conclusion set aside, though, what we are left with is altogether more fitting. Diane confesses: "I was terrified, coming back here for the wedding . . . that I would spin out, start questioning everything, blow everything up."

But this does not happen. Instead, Diane's lackluster response when BoJack asks if she's happier — "I wear fewer jackets now. I smile more," coupled with her acknowledgment that she had kind of hoped she would "spin out" — suggests that she has finally resigned herself to the advice BoJack gave back in Season 4. Being in his presence serves as a reminder that she hasn't quite yet forgotten that she's pretending. For what their friendship seems to provide — whether explicitly stated or otherwise — is precisely this: a space in which to *not* pretend; a space in which to navigate without closure the ambiguities of their own minds, each other, and the world they find themselves in. Perhaps most poignant, then, is not the idea that their friendship has run its course, but rather a sense that its intensity and messiness cannot endure within the limits necessarily imposed by adult life. The lost futures that haunt this final scene most urgently, therefore, are those in which BoJack and Diane allowed themselves to imagine a future *not* reinscribed within these structures — heteronormative or otherwise.

And so, finally, there's the possibility of nothing.[13] BoJack intuits, in noticeable panic, this future rushing toward them as he attempts to play off the possibility with a joke. Forthright, Diane moves to leave. Saying "thank you" for their time together, she consigns their relationship to the past.

Conclusion: "This is Nice"

> ***B**: Can I just tell you a funny story?*

Nothing, like death, would also be too easy for BoJack and Diane. As BoJack attempts to stave off the inevitable — perhaps for the last time — he manages to once more invoke what binds them just as it seems to be slipping away. In telling a not-so-funny story, he and Diane recover, fleetingly, the same easy rapport that bonded them together in the first place. All they know is that whatever this is that persists between them:

"*this* is nice." This is where the show finishes. The camera tilts up, the credits roll, and their end is eternally forestalled.Writing together, we reminisced over how, in the past, BoJack and Diane regularly played out a shared feeling, dramatizing it in such a way as to render what holds us together sensible. Often, the inscrutable niceness of their "this" not only spoke to us, but also spoke us to us. Now, with the show finished, this essay at a close, and the responsibilities of adulthood looming ever larger, it's unclear whether we will continue to connect. "Wouldn't it be funny if this . . . was the last time we ever talked to each other?" Once more, BoJack and Diane's indeterminate future gives us a little faith.

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References

1. Correspondence between the authors. All references in this section refer to a text exchange on 10th Feb 2020. [↥]
2. Mark Fisher, "**What Is Hauntology?**" *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012), 16-24. 16. For more on the Derridean origins of the term "hauntology," see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994); Martin Hagglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008). [↥]
3. "What is Hauntology?", 19. [↥]
4. Originally pitched at the specter of communism, it is easy to overlook

how hauntology in Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* at times hinges on intensely private experiences and memories: falling asleep listening to "the other world" evoked by your older brother's records, dreaming of the illegal warehouse raves you never did attend. Mark Fisher, "Downcast Angel: Interview with Burial," in *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 101-108, 107. [↑]

5. *BoJack Horseman*, "Later." Directed by Martin Cendreda. Written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Netflix, August 22, 2014. [↑]
6. *BoJack Horseman*, "BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One." Directed by Joel Moser. Written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Netflix, August 22, 2014. [↑]
7. *BoJack Horseman*, "Later." Subsequent references in this section refer to this episode. [↑]
8. *BoJack Horseman*, "Underground." Directed by Aaron Long. Written by Kelly Galuska. Netflix, September 8, 2017. Subsequent references in this section refer to this episode. [↑]
9. *BoJack Horseman*, "Nice While it Lasted." Directed by Aaron Long. Written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Netflix, January 31, 2020. Unless otherwise stated, subsequent references to the show within this section refer to this episode. [↑]
10. *BoJack Horseman*, "Later." [↑]
11. *BoJack Horseman*, "Sunk Cost and All That." Directed by Amy Winfrey. Written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Jonny Sun. Netflix, January 31, 2020. [↑]
12. *BoJack Horseman*, "Xerox of a Xerox". Directed by Aaron Long. Written by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and Nick Adams. Netflix, January 31, 2020. [↑]
13. Preceded by Princess Carolyn's empowering dismissal of the BoJack burden only a few minutes earlier, Diane certainly wouldn't be the first to cut BoJack out of her life. [↑]