Tommy Schneider
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Watchable Depression

Depression is an illness that facilitates little in the way of spectacle. It's core components are isolation, stagnancy, fatigue, and loss of interest. It seems like poor fodder for television, a medium that relies on character growth and action. Depression feels especially counterproductive for television comedy, which often finds jokes through ensemble casts and in light moods. In his *New Yorker* article "'BoJack Horseman' and the Comedy of Despair," Ian Crouch writes:

> Most television comedies confect a generally benevolent world view, in which the characters believe in the central premise of their lives, appear to be the heroes of their more or less happy stories, and accept as basically good the culture in which the live….These shows have sad moments, but the plots arc toward cheerfulness, always returning to a baseline in which life is purposeful and full of promise. (2)

While *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) was both critically and commercially successful, its depressed lead, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), is also a mob boss—action and excitement is guaranteed. Ad-man, lawyer, washed-up actor—the professions of the depressed protagonists of *Mad Men* (2007–2015), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–), and *BoJack Horseman* (2014–) are, on the surface, much less interesting. Another complication with televised depression is that it can depicted—beautifully, even—without the show ever explicitly acknowledging the illness as such. To uncover how depression is made both interesting and identifiable by television, it is best to analyze key works (here: *Mad Men, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and *BoJack Horseman*) semiotically and structurally, uncovering the common components of a TV depression narrative.

Making a character identifiably depressed takes more than shots of them looking sad at bars, over balconies, and in lying beds (though such shots are certainly common; see Figure 1). Because "the heart of television criticism—perhaps all criticism—is the construction of a text out

of some larger, thicker set of events and one's perception of them," we must isolate the components of the works in question, yet common amongst them, that tell the "depression narrative" (Vande Berg et al.) Being of a certain genre, however, is not a requirement for the depression narrative. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is an hour-long musical comedy that follows the story of Rebecca Bunch (Rachel Bloom) after she moves from New York City to West Covina, California, a move prompted by her desire to reconnect with high-school summer-camp fling Josh Chang (Vincent Rodriguez III). While the show is ostensibly a romantic comedy, female friendship is central to the show, as are anxieties about career and family. *BoJack Horseman* (2014–) is a half-hour animated sitcom about the washed-up former sitcom actor BoJack Horseman, who is, like most characters in the show, an anamorphic blend of human and beast. But unlike most of the characters on the show—ghostwriter and friend Diane Nguyen (Allison Brie) withstanding—he struggles to find happiness and to positively affect anyone he interacts with. *Mad Men* (2007–2015), on the other hand, is an hour-long 'prestige' drama that explores the 1960's primarily through the eyes of successful creative Don Draper (John Hamm). These shows come from wildly different genres and were premiered on wildly different networks (the CW, Netflix, and AMC, respectively), but each share depressed characters whose stories share common components.

First, however, it is important to establish that these shows share a depression narrative; this is particularly important as many television shows never make their character's depression explicit. This could be for many reasons: creators might want to avoid diagnosing their characters medically, feeling they don't have such authority; the characters themselves could not realize they're depressed (which is part of the struggle); networks and sponsors could be critical of having their products explicitly associated with depression. Often, characters' depression is

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talked about in coded language—as a "never-ending search for happiness" or as the characters being "broken" in some fundamental way. Take the opening credits of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, wherein an animated sun mocks her, singing "She's so broken insiiiiiiiiide!" Or in *Mad Men*'s fifth season episode "Commissions and Fees," when Don is pitching his services to the potential client Dow Chemicals when he suddenly asks them "But what is happiness? It's a moment before you need more happiness." *BoJack Horseman* is both cavalier and sly about encoding the message that its main characters are depressed. While casually (and constantly) throwing around tiny jokes like "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go take a shower so I can't tell if I'm crying or not" ("Downer Ending"), the show can also be subtle. In the season two's "The Shot," BoJack is concerned that he doesn't have the acting chops for the emotional climax of the movie he's staring in. The director prompts him by saying to his character "this is the moment you realize something inside you is broken, and it can never be fixed." After giving a compelling performance, BoJack asks, "You didn't know I had it in me, did you?" and the director replies, "No. I knew." It becomes clear that, like how BoJack and the director were discussing BoJack's permeant brokenness through the proxy of talking to his character, the show *BoJack Horsemen* is discussing depression via coded language.

In his essay "Encoding/Decoding," Stuart Hall claims that "At a certain point…broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse," i.e., that messages effects are ultimately measured not by their intentions, but by their results. What matters is not whether show creators believe their characters are depressed, but whether audiences do. A cursory glance at critical reactions shows this to be true. The *Vox* article by Caroline Framke titled "TV is Letting Women be Depressed—But Not Letting that Define Them" argues that while some shows, such as FXX's *You're the Worst* (2014–), draw power

from a medical diagnosis of their characters' depression, others such as *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* thrive in ambiguity. *BoJack Horseman*'s creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg has said that he avoids labeling his characters because "Real people often float through life in a state of flux between different levels of acceptance and despair without really labeling themselves, just kind of dealing day to day with the vague sadness that is being alive," the implication being that there could even be potential alienation between the audience and *BoJack*'s characters if they're canonically labeled as depressed (qtd. in Framke). Hell, even the Catholic Church knows Don Draper is depressed: see "'Mad Men' and the Depression of Don Draper" by Bishop Robert Baron. Having established that a depression narrative exists, we can move on to analyzing how its components—isolation and loneliness, strong ties to geography and the past, and failed attempts at self-improvement—are depicted.

A fundamental part of the television depression narrative is characters facing isolation and loneliness—depicted through montages, long-shots, and, ironically, dialogue. In an article for *IndieWire,* Seth Simons writes about how phones are used on *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* to create a sense of paranoia. Rebecca will be sitting in her room. Cuts show the passage of time, but nothing changes. A phone ding occurs; both the audience and Rebecca check their phones. It's spam. A similar montage-style technique is used in the show's musical numbers such as "I Have Friends" and "Having a Few People Over" to convey the anxiety of waiting for friends to respond to invitations. *Crazy Ex-Girlfrien*d's pilot opens with Rebecca being promoted to partner at her law firm. She is friendly and familiar enough with coworkers for them to be excited on her behalf. But when she begins having a panic attack, she rushes into the street to be alone (Figure 2). Once there, she occupies a tiny corner of the screen, emphasizing how she feels trapped in addition to being alone. A similar framing technique is used in *BoJack Horseman* when BoJack

returns from New Mexico to find his friend Diane has been hiding out at his house for months. They each occupy separate sides of the screen, a large space of apparently nothing keeping them apart (Figure 2). The implication is that even though they feel very similarly in that moment—having recently failed their selves and their friends—they are separated and alone even when together. Finally, *Mad Men* shows that socially fluent characters can feel separated from the world. Don's most natural place is in a business meeting, winning over the hearts and wallets of clients by making passionate pitches about human experiences. And yet, he rarely connects with anybody at a deep level. In the finale, Peggy is consoling a particularly sad Don from afar when she asks him if he is alone. Instead of denying Peggy's claim, he responds, "I'm in a crowd." Isolation can still be felt, and can even be exasperated, by being surrounded by others.

A second component to the television depression narrative is that of characters' self-imposed narratives, those in which they tell themselves that traveling or moving to a particular geographic area will bring them their lives fulfillment. In *Mad Men*, California represents an escape form the bustle and stress of New York, a place of relaxation and happiness. In season five, Pete Campbell (Vincent Kartheiser) says, "Let's go to Los Angeles. I've been there. It's filled with sunshine." *Mad Men*'s California is full of yellow umbrellas and bathing suits; it's a place of pleasure. In season two's California-centered episode "The Jet Set," Don even meets and is a seduced by a young woman named "Joy." Rebecca Bunch's obsession with California is more particular than Don and Pete's: she is moving to West Covina, CA. The pilot episode tracks her move, beginning by establishing her life in New York. The color palate of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s New York is of muted greys and dour blues (Figures 2 and 3). When Rebecca sees her ex, Josh, who is returning home to West Covina, the sole reason Rebecca moves isn't to follow him. Fundamentally, it is because she is unhappy in New York, and has never been

unhappy in California. In "I'm Going to the Beach with Josh and His Friends!" she explains that she moved because "I had to be where the happiness was." Many of the shows musical numbers express this as well. "West Covina" is about the honeymoon period of moving to a new place while "California Christmastime" is about California's lax, accepting nature.

However, California is not for every character. BoJack describes Hollywoo (formerly known as Hollywood) as a "tar pit" (a metaphor he steals from an old friend). It's a place in which he has achieved career success, but at the cost of lost friendships. New Mexico (or Maine—wherever he believes his old friend is residing) is his chance to re-invent himself. In the episode "Escape from L.A.," he moves in with this old friend (who now has a family) and fits in well for a while, until he tries to sleep with his old friend, fails, then tries to sleep with her daughter. She tells him that L.A. isn't the tar pit, "You're the tar pit…and you can't escape you." Diane is also unfulfilled by life in Hollywoo. She "wake[s] up in the morning, and feels like [she] has no purpose" ("After the Party"). When she gets an offer to work in Cordovia, a war-torn fictional nation, writing a memoir about a billionaire philanthropist, she sees this as a chance to "make a difference." Her escape, however, also ends disastrously; traumatized by what she sees, disillusioned by the philanthropist, and angry at herself for not being brave enough, she moves back to Hollywoo without telling her husband, leading to her and BoJack's shared sorrow in Figure 2.

Depressed characters don't shy away from self-improvement; it is, however, always short-lived. *Mad Men*'s "The Summer Man" traces Don journey to turn himself into a new "brighter" man. He swims, marks his alcohol intake, and even writes in a diary. It's also one of the only times a voice-over is used on the show, encouraging the audience to deeply identify with Don in that moment. He records his ambitions, such as climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, and

gaining "modicum of control over the way I feel." Most of these new habits he has given up on by the end of the season. A running gag in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is that Rebecca is always about to start therapy, when she is interrupted by reciprocated signs of affection from Josh. *BoJack Horseman*'s season two premier "Brand New Couch" parodies the search for self-improvement while also allowing BoJack to earnestly partake in it. "My couch was a metaphor for my old attitude. My audiobook told me I had to get rid of the burdens of my life sofa," BoJack says, "Oh, you know what? Maybe it was 'my life so far.'" By the end of the episode, BoJack is scrunched up in a ball, in the corner of the frame listening to his audiobook in the dark. His mom calls to insult and berate him, eventually telling him that "you come by it honestly, the ugliness inside you. You were born broken, that's your birthright" and that "nothing will make you whole." Not a sentence after the phone call ends, BoJack gives up on his audiobook, and by extension his confidence that he can change for the better. In the last scene of the second season, a jogger runs past an exhausted, collapsed BoJack, telling him, "It gets easier. Every day it gets easier…but you gotta do it every day, that's the hard part." But BoJack is fundamentally incapable of doing it every day.

The final component of the depression narrative we'll analyze is that of the persistent, haunting nature of characters' pasts. The past haunts us in many ways. In one sense, it's just an extension of the hyper-continuous world these characters live in—worlds where BoJack can steal a "D" from the "Hollywood" sign in season one and have every character refer to the location as "Hollywoo" from then on—worlds where quick gags about Rebecca's overspending or her friend Greg's drinking show up episodes later as major plot points—Don's world, which is lauded for realistically and naturally depicting what living through a decade fees like. But the characters' pasts also follow them in more explicit ways. Don has literally assumed the identity of a dead

soldier, which fuels the show dramatically and narratively for the first season. He also sees ghosts of his dead brother, friend, boss, and romantic interest throughout the show's run. Moreover, each of these shows examines its characters' relationships with their parents, for whom physical and/or emotional abuse is the norm. Rebecca's mom enters Rebecca's new West Covina house, shouting irrationally and critically in the song "Where's the Bathroom?" Based on the show's flashbacks, she's always been more critical than supportive. BoJack's parents are shown in flashbacks. His father is distant, seen mostly as a shadow. His mom blames him for their family's problems, and enjoys (as much as she's capable of enjoying anything) her own cruelty. Childhood trauma affecting adult lives is a staple point of conflict in these shows.

Television shows collectively establish a common depression narrative by depicting isolation, intense ties to location, and (often parentally-driven) past that haunts its protagonist. The question remains: Why are such narratives so compelling? Perhaps it's *Mad Men*'s finale, "Person to Person," that explains this best. In one of the final scenes, Don is at his lowest. He has run away from work, and is moving around California in an alcohol-drenched haze. He's most recently been ditched by the niece of a longtime friend, and is hiding out at a hippie camp in what appears to be a group therapy session. A man named Leonard is telling the group about how uninteresting he is, how nobody turns their heads when he walks by, not even his own wife and kids: "They should love me. I mean, maybe they do, but I don't even know what it is. You spend your whole life thinking you're not getting it, people aren't giving it to you. Then you realize, they're trying, and you don't even know what 'it' is." The man begins crying, Don hugs him and begins crying as well. Perhaps the reason these shows with depression narratives can be so well-received is because of the connection they foster with their audience. Or perhaps

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BoJack's mom's advice from the cold-open of "Brand New Couch" says it better: "Enjoy your dumb little TV show."

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Appendix

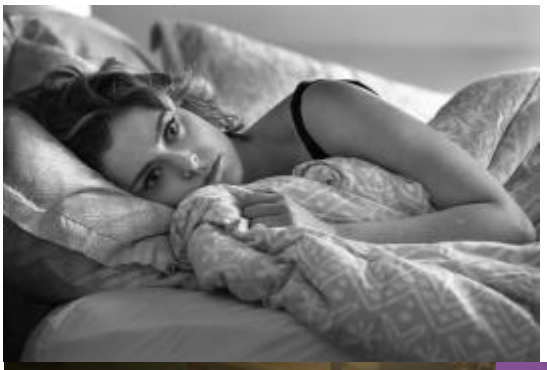

Figure 1. Rebecca is in a "Sexy French Depression," Don is sad-drinking, and BoJack is unfulfilled by the party and his friends who are attending it.

Figure 2. (Right) Diane and BoJack are together in their loneliness. Rebecca is simply alone.

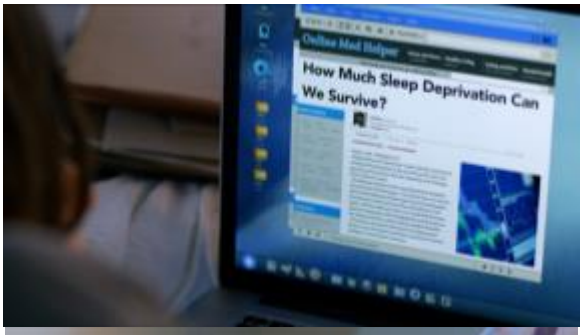

Figure 3. (Left) Rebecca closes some windows as well as her life in New York.

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