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**REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA AND PTSD IN THE NETFLIX SERIES
*BOJACK HORSEMAN: THE CASE OF GINA CAZADOR***

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Introduction

The importance of talking about difficult events one has gone through might seem to be a crucial part of human experience. However, there are certain events, or even series of events, that are not only nearly impossible to describe in words, but also not fully comprehended by the person who is supposedly the only one capable of remembering them vividly. Such an inability might be oftentimes associated with a traumatized person's experiences. In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth claims that "[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4–5). How, then, could someone trapped in such a situation properly express it, and eventually, escape it? Furthermore, in what way can such an event be presented to a viewer, and still be recognized as one stemming from a traumatic encounter?

Although the discussion on trauma, along with its related symptoms and possible cures, was initiated in the 19th century—the time of modernity and industrialization (Kaplan 24), to this day it remains a relevant element of academic inquiry and finds its way into popular culture. It could be, thus, assumed that despite certain challenges in representing the unrepresentable, there still exists a need for continuing such debate.

This article focuses on the elements of trauma represented in the Netflix animated series, *BoJack Horseman*. The series revolves around the life of BoJack Horseman, introduced as a has-been actor whose career peaked in the 1990s and who is willing to get his life back on track. Although *BoJack Horseman* is an animated series for adults, it touches upon various issues connected to the psyche of the characters, even those who appear merely in a few episodes. The creator of *BoJack Horseman*—Raphael Bob-Waksberg—tried to explain the complexity of characters during a master class entitled *I am Smart and Everyone Else is Wrong*:

[It] always come[s] from: what are our characters experiencing, and can we be truthful and honest about their experience? (...) We do want our characters to be likable, but likable doesn't always mean that they're admirable. I think that what makes characters likable is if they're relatable, and what makes them relatable is if they're vulnerable.¹

Throughout the series the viewer gets to dive deeper into various aspects of BoJack's life, exploring, *inter alia*, how dysfunctional his character is, and what might have been the cause for it. The six-season-long series manages to include numerous characters and explore plot lines that lead to creating an image of the rise and fall of the traumatized main character who traumatizes others.

As in the series trauma constantly recurs in various contexts, for the purpose of this article I will focus on Gina Cazador, a guest character of the fifth and sixth season of the series. I have chosen this character as she is the one who exhibits various symptoms of trauma; some of these symptoms can be traced directly to traumatic events while others seem disconnected and ambiguous. In addition, as trauma is often associated with significant (and difficult) historical events (e.g. the Holocaust or 9/11), and not necessarily with individual experiences, it seems to be an opportunity to, as if, juxtapose the usual expectations with reality, as the series focuses mainly on personal trauma. The case of Gina Cazador is particularly interesting because she is a guest character whose trauma gets represented not only in detail, but also in such a manner that viewers get to see three stages she goes through: before trauma, experiencing the traumatic event and what comes after it.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that discussion on trauma “has been so prominent in a number of contemporary Western discourses (...) that scholars describe the contemporary North American society as ‘wound culture’” (Wald 93). As a result, the fascination with psyche and its malfunction finds its way into popular culture. Thus, by including characters who show symptoms of trauma, it contributes in approachable ways to raising awareness.

The Events Leading up to Traumatization

In order to recognize and analyze the traumatization of the character and the changes she eventually goes through, it is crucial to provide a detailed description of the events that precede the traumatic event. Gina Cazador is a guest character who first appears in the episode entitled “The Light Bulb Scene.” She is a co-star of *Philbert*—a show represented in the series, which, according to the writer of the said show, Flip McVicker, tells the story of the “Detective John Philbert, a man from another time. But now he finds himself in a new time. He finds himself in a time he doesn’t understand. A time in which he is alone. Perhaps, all this time, he’s been alone” (*BoJack* 4.12). Even though the writer vaguely describes the show, he emphasizes that it is about detectives, one of whom is played by Gina. In the represented show, Cazador plays the role of Internal Affairs Director, Sassy Malone, who becomes the main love interest of the titular character—Philbert. What ought to be mentioned is the recurring theme of choking, as Philbert is haunted by the memories of his ex-partner strangling his (Philbert’s) wife.

One of the areas affected by trauma is the characters’ attitude to their profession. When the viewer is first introduced to Gina, she is a cynical but focused actress who still awaits her career to properly start. When she is asked by BoJack whether she feels that some changes should be introduced in the script, she simply says, “[l]ook, I do one of these shows every year. And I keep getting hired because I show up, do the work, and keep my head down” (*BoJack* 5.1). It is particularly important to refer to her outlook and general approach

she takes to work, as it changes drastically after her traumatic encounter. What can be, thus, assumed from such a short phrasing is that Gina does not necessarily care much about her roles, but remains focused on what she is told to do, even if it includes sudden changes. It seems as though her character is constructed in such a manner as to clearly show that traumatization leads to significant changes in various aspects of life.

Throughout the 5th season, the relationship between Gina and BoJack grows, to the point that they end up spending time together both on set and outside of it. This bond leads to blurring of the boundary between the private and the professional sphere, and supposedly later on makes it feasible for the traumatic encounter to actually happen. During the official premiere of the first season of the show, Gina finally gets critically acclaimed and becomes recognizable for the press, which was something she aspired to achieve. In the meantime, BoJack is reminded about his past dysfunctional and harmful behaviors, which leads him to dive deeper into his opioid addiction, as he tries to numb his self-hatred. His addiction eventually leads to a drastic traumatization of Gina.

In the episode entitled "The Showstopper," the viewer is faced with two realities intertwining. Particularly worth noticing is the fact that in both of them Gina and Sassy maintain a close relationship with BoJack/Philbert. The episode is constructed in such a way to show BoJack's difficulties with differentiating between what is real and what is fictional (as at this point the filming of the second season of *Philbert* starts). BoJack begins to highly depend on opioids, and thus, is not able to distinguish between what happens in his real life and what happens in the life of the character he portrays. As a result, he becomes paranoid and convinces himself, and everyone around him, that there is someone plotting to end his career. In both realities he gets confronted by Gina/Sassy. When it comes to Gina, she tries to take away his pills; Sassy, in turn, tries to convince him to turn himself in. When both Gina and Sassy refuse to stop their efforts, BoJack/Philbert starts strangling them. As it eventually

turns out, the act of choking is a part of the filmed scene. However, BoJack continues to aggressively strangle Gina, even after the director tells him to stop—he does not seem to fully comprehend his own behavior. The blurred boundary between the professional and personal life leads to fictional events finding their way into real life. Fellow cast members are the ones who eventually pull BoJack away from Gina, whose eyes are filled with tears, as she is almost throttled to death by not only the co-star of the show she is the part of, but also her partner, who was one of the very few people she trusted. Interestingly enough, the episode entitled “BoJack the Feminist” as if foreshadows the aforementioned event: BoJack ends up in the show called *The Squawk* in which he is praised “for taking a stand against [his] co-star” (*BoJack* 5.4) who choked his wife. The irony of this foreshadowing scene is revealed when BoJack, encouraged by the hosts and the audience of the talk-show, says: “how about we don’t choke *any* women?” (*BoJack* 5.4).

The Aftermath of Trauma: Representation of PTSD

In the episode following the one featuring the choking scene, possibly most viewers would expect the character of Gina Cazador to exhibit at least some symptoms of trauma, as she faced a near-death experience. However, trauma, and specifically its aftermath in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), is, according to Cathy Caruth:

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (4)

What is evident in this brief definition of PTSD and specifically applicable to Gina’s situation is the fact that a traumatic experience is not processed automatically and, thus, the response does not have to follow right after it. Gina does not seem to exhibit any symptoms of trauma, which may suggest that the event described above, albeit drastic and terrifying, might have simply not affected her. However, it is important to note that, as it is stated in Caruth’s

definition, someone who encounters a traumatic experience themselves might (un)consciously “numb” the very occurrence of it, which is a form of self-defense against the overwhelming feeling trauma can bring. Gina is well aware of what happened, yet she seems to avoid labeling it as something that is traumatic in its nature.

The central part of the episode revolves around the strangling scene, as cast-members leak the videos of BoJack choking Gina. Interestingly enough, BoJack is not aware of what he did to his partner; he still sobers up after his opioid spree. After agreeing to take part in an interview that is supposed to provide some space to explain the situation, he is shown the video and finally realizes the harm he has done to Gina. His immediate reaction is to make the public aware of what he did, but Gina is the one who talks him out of it. As she explains,

It was assault. You physically overpowered me, and if there was any justice, you would be in jail right now. But my career after so many failed attempts is finally starting to take off. I am getting offers, and fan mail, and magazine columns about what a good actor I am. People know me because of my acting. And all that goes away if I'm just the girl who got choked by BoJack Horseman. (*BoJack* 5.12)

Although Gina seems to remain aware of what happened, as she is able to verbalize her fears of this event being known by the public, this might also be interpreted as an early onset of trauma. According to Julia Golier, Rachel Yahuda and Steven Southwick in “Memory and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” “[i]n order to meet criteria for PTSD, the individual must experience a host of symptoms from the three symptom clusters: re-experiencing, avoidance, and arousal” (226). Gina exhibits symptoms of fear of being stigmatized because of her traumatic experience and, hence, reacts with avoidance. On the one hand, she is aware of the life-threatening event; on the other hand, she insists on it never being discussed in terms of trauma. Consequently, she puts effort into convincing the public that the videos they might have seen are nothing more than an acted scene. It appears that she is simultaneously able to talk about the traumatic event and to avoid attributing any association with trauma to it.

The point of the interview is to debunk the accusations of any form of abuse happening on set. Interestingly enough, the viewers and the host of the interview are still convinced that Gina and BoJack are a couple, and to appear authentic the actors agree to kiss each other. Gina and BoJack confirm the questions concerning the status of their relationship, which leads the TV hostess to jokingly suggest: "I'll bet sometimes, though, you wanna strangle each other, right?" (*BoJack* 5.12). Subsequently Gina stands up and pretends she is choking BoJack so as to try to convince the world that she is not his victim, and that all of it was a joke. It could be assumed that recreating such a traumatic event roughly a few hours after it happened would evoke strong emotions, such as disgust or embarrassment. Although subtle, the facial expression of Gina, after jokingly pretending to choke BoJack, seems to reveal uneasiness, or even shame about the whole situation. In *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Malady or Myth?*, Chris Brewin points to the fact that victims of trauma oftentimes feel shame which

reflects undesired *thoughts, impulses, actions, or characteristics* that are experienced as inferior or unworthy and that must be concealed in order to forestall rejection by others. (...) The trauma is experienced as a personal failure and acts as a prompt that reinstates the undesired self and causes victims to ruminate on other perceived deficiencies. (78)

Gina, precisely, seems to be afraid of suddenly being remembered as "the girl who got choked by BoJack Horseman" (*BoJack* 5.12). She experiences shame of being a victim of trauma and, thus, puts effort into never being recognized as such. In the end, the show *Philbert* gets cancelled and Gina is able to avoid BoJack, possibly for the rest of her life.

As a guest character, Gina does not appear regularly in the sixth, and final, season of the series; however, her appearance in episode eight serves as the basis for further discussion of the development of her PTSD. As it turns out, she never stopped working as an actress and in the episode the viewer gets to see her working on a new film. In the scene she reacts with anger to being given new pages of the script. When the producer of the film visits her in her trailer

and asks her about the problem with new pages, she tries to explain her irritation by saying: “[t]he content of the pages is not the issue (...) Why are you throwing new things at me?” (*BoJack* 6.8). In addition, she points to the fact that the producer entered her trailer unexpectedly, which only added to her frustration. The producer of the film reassures Gina of the safety of the new scenes, involving a stunt, “we are taking every precaution and we are not gonna shoot until you are one hundred percent comfortable” (*BoJack* 6.8). Only after making sure the scene is going to be safe for her, she is able to calm down. Gina’s need for order and irritation resulting from changes in the script are yet another sign of unprocessed trauma. In addition to that, throughout the scene, she, most possibly involuntarily, keeps touching her neck. Touching one’s neck might be a sign of stress or discomfort, but in her case it happens quite automatically when she is faced with changes that disrupt the order she tries to maintain while working in a setting full of potentially triggering objects. Gina links experiences that disrupt the order with her traumatic experience. She unwillingly touches her neck, as if being ready to react the same way she would have if she had known she was about to be choked. Her behavior does not, however, stem from her attitude; she, in fact, exhibits another symptom of PTSD: “hyperarousal” (Golier et al. 226). Hyperarousal can be observed in a situation in which

[t]he individual chronically appears to be living with a “memory” of threat or danger that persists often outside of the individual’s conscious awareness. The mind and body seem to respond as if a threat or danger is still present even years after having survived. (Golier et al. 229–230)

It is clearly visible in Gina’s behavior that she is constantly haunted by the traumatic experience. Her need for certain order to be kept and her irritation, or even fear of sudden action, is precisely what could be associated with hyperarousal, as she recognizes the possible dangers that might await her in a particular setting.

The final scene featuring Gina is possibly the one that represents her trauma most vividly. The viewer gets to see her on set, about to film a rehearsed dance

scene. While filming the scene, her co-star decides not to follow the script, and so he dips her and holds her by her neck. She freezes for a second but then suddenly tries to release herself from his hands. Her reaction is sudden and unexpected if one considers the perspective of a random viewer, but it seems appropriate if one is aware of her traumatic experience. It seems that emotionally she is not able to distinguish between BoJack's almost choking her to death and an innocent neck holding by another actor. It could also be assumed that the context in which it happened might have caused such an instantaneous reaction. Yet again her behavior could be characterized as exhibiting symptoms of PTSD, specifically that of re-experiencing trauma:

[T]he clarity and certainty that accompany reliving experiences [are] qualities which contribute to their being perceived as current reality. Visual images often predominate in flashbacks, but smells, sounds, and tastes can be incorporated as well. An array of emotions present during the initial traumatization may accompany the images, including fear, rage, excitement, or helplessness. During a flashback a patient may not only feel but also act as if the event were recurring. He or she may duck for cover or act violently in perceived self-defense. (Golier et al. 227)

Gina goes through a range of emotions, from obvious fear to anger caused by the disruption of order. When she tries to express the impact the sudden change had on her, she is told to cool down, to which she responds: "Do not tell me to cool down like I'm the crazy person here. I'm just trying to have a safe workplace environment" (*BoJack* 6.8). After experiencing an intense trauma symptom, Gina decides to quit the movie. Nevertheless, the viewer is able to see a poster of her new movie in the series finale, which might hint that she continued to work as an actress. The question whether she dealt with her PTSD, however, remains unanswered.

Conclusions

Throughout *BoJack Horseman*, the viewer is presented with various realizations of trauma, even when it comes to background and guest characters. Trauma is often associated with its inherent unrepresentability, and thus demands to be approached in different ways, as noted in *Violence and the Cultural Politics of*

Trauma by Jane Kilby:

it remains permanently outside the power of language. Or perhaps more accurately, trauma resists the grasp of language—and with it the grasp of the subject—not because it remains in some space or indeed time outside of discourse but because it has no meaning to offer language.
(122)

It could be, then, concluded that representing trauma via image, rather than language, might make the experience more approachable and graspable.² As Anne Whitehead notices in *Memory*, “[t]he ‘memory’ of trauma is thus not subject to the usual narrative or verbal mechanisms of recall, but is instead organized as bodily sensations, behavioural reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks” (115). Therefore, the audio-visual narrative, rather than merely verbal and language-based, enables such behavior to be effectively represented on screen and to be recognized as directly stemming from trauma. Trauma is closely related to pain, and historically, wounding, and this characteristic oftentimes contributes to one’s inability to translate the pain into words, as it introduces disorder and illogical turns that are difficult to express in a verbal narrative.

In the case of the character discussed in this article, the viewer gets to observe almost the entire story and progression of trauma: from the traumatic event to experiencing symptoms of PTSD. The way in which the creators of the series decided not only to include the event itself, but also to present the aftermath of it, may lead to thinking that it is, indeed, possible to represent the unrepresentable. Although certain elements of the initial traumatic response (such as the demand for order, or hypervigilance) can go unnoticed by a passive viewer who does not know enough about symptoms of trauma, the creators of the series made sure to include more visual aspects that are immediately recognized as the symptoms of PTSD, e.g. the scene in which the co-star Gina works with unexpectedly dips her and holds her by her neck, which, as if automatically, makes her relive the traumatic experience.

An effective representation of trauma may contribute to further reflection on it, making it a more graspable subject for someone who is not yet familiar

with the mechanisms of trauma. One could, however, pose a question: what is the point of representing horrifying events on screen? Does it merely add dramatism to the series, or could it serve some other purpose? I propose that a well-executed representation may serve to spread awareness about trauma and its symptoms. It could also prove beneficial for the people who share similar experiences to be represented in mainstream programs and shown that trauma should not be something one has to be ashamed of. Carl Plantinga in *Moving Viewers* comments on the possible reason why the viewers can be drawn to works which represent dramatic and/or traumatic events:

When spectators empathize with a character, they may or may not feel something similar to what she or he feels, but it is rarely the same affect, and it is always tempered by the implicit awareness of the institutions of fiction and the viewing situation. (Plantinga 33)

Undoubtedly, it is possible for a viewer to hold a connection to a character in a fictional work and show compassion towards their situation and feelings, despite being aware of their inherent fictionality. In that manner, a well-executed representation could be, as if, a point of reference for those who might recognize similarities to their own situation. Moreover, as “[e]motions are intimately tied to our cognition, inferences, evaluation, and all of the other mental activities that accompany the viewing experience” (Plantinga 6), it could be, thus, concluded that a properly represented trauma could possibly contribute to the viewer’s understanding of the (lack of) logic in a traumatic encounter and its aftermath.

By representing problematic or difficult aspects of life, the series gives space for those people who do not necessarily know how to talk about what happened to them. The creator of *BoJack Horseman* managed to precisely describe the effect the series has had on the audience during his masterclass:

It’s really very powerful to me to see how emotionally touched fans are, and specifically the way that it’s helped them (...) like people saying ‘oh, you gave me a language to talk to my therapist’, or even the inspiration to go to a therapist (...) I can explain to my parents, or my spouse, or my partner how I feel about things.³

If one takes into consideration the fact that a traumatized person is often simply not ready, or even unable to talk about their trauma, the series might serve as a starting point for such a discussion, and the responses from the fans seem to prove that.⁴

Endnotes

1. Raphael Bob-Waksberg, master class *I am Smart and Everyone Else is Wrong*, organized by the Gershman Philadelphia Jewish Film Festival. It was part of the Fall Fest 2020. The master class took place on November 15th, 2020 via Zoom.
2. The visual, rather than solely language-based representation of trauma and the process of working it through has been discussed in various works, e.g. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, in which Marianne Hirsch presents examples of the Holocaust survivors' children approaching their inherited trauma(s) by using the means of visual arts.
3. Raphael Bob-Waksberg, master class *I am Smart and Everyone Else is Wrong*.
4. The fans of *BoJack Horseman* gather in various groups on social media not only to discuss their favorite characters or episodes, but also to share their personal struggles and the ways in which the series has helped them to deal with those problems. Noticeably, in groups such as BoJack Horseman Sadposting (Facebook) *BoJack* fans try to bring each other comfort and give each other advice, oftentimes using the show as their point of reference.

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TV series

BoJack Horseman. 2014–2020. Created by R. Bob-Waksberg:

4.12: What Time Is It Right Now

5.1: The Light Bulb Scene

5.4: BoJack the Feminist

5.9: Ancient History

5.11: The Showstopper

5.12: The Stopped Show

6.8: A Quick One While He's Away

Abstract

The aim of this article is to conduct an analysis of trauma and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) as represented by Gina Cazador, a character in the Netflix animated series *BoJack Horseman*. In the article, I try to analyze not only how a traumatic experience is shown on screen, but also the events leading to it, and the aftermath of it. By referring to the theory of trauma, I try to prove that after encountering a life-threatening situation the character goes through many changes, majority of which are reflected in her behavior, and that these changes stem from unprocessed trauma.