

8. Starting “from some kind of scratch”

The Recalibration of HOUSE OF CARDS, Season 6

In the history of contemporary TV series, HOUSE OF CARDS (USA, 2013–2018, HoC) occupies a special place. A US remake of the homonymous 1990s British mini-series (itself an adaptation of a 1989 British thriller-novel), the series was an early original production of the disruptive streaming provider Netflix and, as such, played a crucial role in the portal’s self-branding as a provider of exclusive ‘prestige’ content. With Hollywood celebrity Kevin Spacey as its protagonist, HoC arguably became one of the dawning streaming age’s most prominent high-profile productions. The series initially tells the story of the Machiavellian power politician Frank Underwood, who, together with his wife Claire (Robin Wright), stops at nothing to gain and retain the US presidency. Its global success arguably made HoC a trailblazer for a new generation of fictional presentations of politics and, thus, a part of the genealogy of every series in this thesis.

This study, however, is not interested in HoC because of its rise but because of its fall. After five seasons, its star actor, Kevin Spacey, was dismissed from the series in October 2017 due to mounting allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct. After substantial readjustments, Netflix released a sixth season (HoC 6) in 2018, featuring Frank’s former accomplice Claire as its new Machiavellian protagonist and spanning eight instead of its usual 13 episodes. Apart from significant extratextual time constraints, the series had to contend with the shadow of the internationally reported Spacey scandal as its brand had been closely aligned with the Hollywood star’s public persona throughout most of HoC’s run.

This chapter will examine the various ways in which HoC’s final season accommodates the loss of its star and the looming association with historical sexual abuse. It will show that HoC 6 is an example of rare clarity for what I have called the conflictive *triple logic* of serial TV storytelling, that is, the contradictory tension between extratextual *pragmatic*, compositional *dramatic*, and *intradiegetic* logic (see chapter 3). With the unusually extensive *recalibration* of its narrative (a term I defined as an adjustment of fictional circumstances motivated by *pragmatic* rather than *intradiegetic* logic, see chapter 3), HoC 6’s is an example of rare clarity for the extensive entanglement across ontological planes and between the various actors of a series’ network.

There are arguably few examples in contemporary TV fiction with an equally tangle chain of extratextual cause to narrative effect. The extraordinarily high global profile of HoC, its star, and the scandal that led to his dismissal coincided with a discursive climate that – following the 2017 MeToo movement and a rise in awareness for the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct and abuse of power in the entertainment industry and beyond – showed increasing willingness to expose transgressive behaviour and the structures that enable it.

The rarity of these circumstances is partly due to the fact that high-profile Hollywood actors like Kevin Spacey did not usually star in TV series before the advent of on-demand prestige productions and, indeed, before the successful precedent set by HoC. However, it is also a result of the lamentable fact that transgressions like sexual misconduct and the abuse of power had rarely been the topic of differentiated mainstream discourse until the most recent rise of the MeToo movement. The fact that actor Anthony Rapp had already made his allegations against Spacey in a 2001-interview with the magazine *The Advocate*, which redacted the Hollywood star's name before publication,¹ is only one example of the neglectful way public discourse has often treated potential victims of abuse.

This chapter will start by giving an overview of the diverse body of scholarly inquiry into HoC pre-recalibration. This overview will provide an instructive insight into the narrative template with which HoC 6 had to contend. It is intriguing to note that, having been one of the most researched contemporary television series before Kevin Spacey's dismissal, HoC 6 has received notably little scholarly attention. However, as this chapter will show, in the barely observed obscurity of the series' post-scandal period, HoC 6, attempting to salvage the remains, serves as a uniquely clear example of the contradictory functional logics of contemporary serial recalibration.

In a structural and formal analysis, this chapter will examine the various aspects of HoC 6's recalibration regarding both dramatic requirements and its incorporation of historical events surrounding the dismissal of Kevin Spacey. I will give a short overview of the historical context that led to Robin Wright taking over as HoC's lead star. A structural analysis of the series pre-recalibration will show that HoC 5 ended with a seasonal cliffhanger that abandoned Frank and Claire's previous classic patriarchal *Macbeth* game (him: frontstage, her: backstage) in order to pit them against each other as coequal antagonists in a concession to historical demands for female empowerment in mainstream fiction.

Examining HoC 6, I will then go on to outline the challenges of a *recalibration* under conditions of intense public scrutiny. It required, among other measures, a *dramatic* replacement of the series' protagonist and an adjustment of its various accumulated plot-lines and made it *pragmatically* necessary for HoC 6 to clearly position its new anti-hero away from any association with historical sexual abuse. It will become clear that HoC 6 employs a diverse formal and narrative arsenal to distance itself from its former protagonist. In its *pragmatic* attempt to cast off Kevin Spacey's shadow, the series, at times, evokes notions of a narrative exorcism, including motifs of spiritual cleansing. I will

1 See Daniel Reynolds, "Why did *The Advocate* redact Kevin Spacey's name in 2001?", *The Advocate*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.advocate.com/media/2017/10/31/why-did-advocate-redact-kevin-spaceys-name-2001>.

show that HoC 6 demonstratively erases Spacey’s face and voice and presents Claire as a survivor of sexual abuse. Furthermore, the season’s presentation of Claire’s experience as the first female US president aims to secure favour with the series’ target prestige audiences after the Spacey scandal by clearly reflecting contemporary progressive discourse surrounding the structural discrimination of women.

I will show that to achieve the difficult task of short-notice recalibration, HoC 6 employs various methods to simulate narrative evolution, continuity, and resolution *dramatically*. For example, to endow Claire with a character depth allowing her to carry the narrative, HoC 6 feigns development through superficial allusion and formal means. In diegetic reality, however, Claire, like Frank before her, remains a static character meant to fill the position of the series’ ruthless Machiavellian anti-hero and thus serves to guarantee a modicum of serial continuity.

A formal examination will reveal how HoC 6 recalibrates its most prominent formal feature, the protagonist’s parabasis. In a trope going back to the theatrical tradition of the attic comedy, HoC’s anti-heroes show the much-discussed habit of seemingly ‘breaking the fourth wall’ to speak *ad spectatores*. This chapter will demonstrate that, during HoC’s Frank-period, the parabasis remains a comparatively one-dimensional trope used primarily as a space for Frank to comment on diegetic events. Post-recalibration, Claire’s parabasis becomes a refined formal feature that constitutes a vital part of the series’ narrative flow by connecting dispersed temporal and spatial parts of the diegesis. I will show that the parabasis in HoC 6 serves as an essential tool in the series’ arsenal to simulate character development and narrative resolution.

Examining the series’ conclusive episodes, this chapter will demonstrate that HoC 6 creates an illusion of narrative resolution by (1) purging many of its central characters and (2) condensing its various dispersed plotlines into a single showdown between Claire and one of her adversaries, Doug Stamper. It will become clear that, while this showdown’s *intradiegetic* plausibility is somewhat questionable, HoC 6 nonetheless succeeds in *dramatically* evoking the emotional notion of resolution through formal means.

This chapter contends that recalibrating a series under intense public scrutiny is a highly complex undertaking that severely impedes the retention of narrative continuity. I will show that HoC 6 demonstrates remarkable savvy in utilising the various affordances of serial television and cinematic *mise-en-scène* to simulate serial continuity and implement necessary changes even where their consolidation seems virtually impossible. Therefore, the assessment of HoC 6’s main antagonist, Annette Shepherd, who sees Claire as having to “start from some kind of scratch”,² can well be seen as a not-so-accidental meta-commentary on the myriad challenges the series faced after the dismissal of its former star.

It seems fitting that the final chapter of this thesis would focus on the finale of contemporary polit-fictions arguably most prominent and most controversial series and its vivid – albeit involuntary – illustration of many of the conflicting principles that constitute popular serial storytelling.

2 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 18.57”.

8.1 The 2010s Essential Polit-Series?

As one of the most high-profile productions of the early streaming era, HoC arguably reintroduced fictional politics into the narrative mainstream canon after the topic's previous commercial heyday had ended with *THE WEST WING* (USA, 1999–2006). HoC's much-discussed ability to seemingly mirror the increasing public frustrations with historical politics in a narrative of dystopian verisimilitude has made it one of the most scrutinised TV productions of the 2010s.³ Before examining the series after its sudden fall, it is essential to gain a more detailed overview of the state of research that accompanied its rise. It is vital to note that most scholarship examines HoC *before* its recalibration. Thus, while previous scholarly insights are valuable, none of them can remain unchallenged when thinking about HoC 6. Nevertheless, Frank and the 'old' HoC remain the footsteps in which its final season must follow and the shadow with which it has to contend. Previous scholarly insight into HoC thus serves as an essential and illuminating foil for examining its recalibrated final season.

8.1.1 Politics in HoC

The image of politics throughout HoC is unequivocally dystopian. In his last moments in the Oval Office, President Frank Underwood uses a cigarette to burn a hole into the American flag.⁴ The vice president criticises a press secretary's "inability to lie" as a "liability".⁵ The native language of the inner circle of power is said to be "Doublespeak" and "subterfuge".⁶ In HoC, politics has become so lethal, so corrupt, and merciless that even the stone-cold oligarch Bill Shepherd, diminished by illness, asks, "Did we poison ourselves?".⁷

Nonetheless, in HoC, politics is a comparatively simple affair in line with the requirements of *dramatic* logic and its need for a clear cause-and-effect structure. The series' fictional polity consists of a relatively small number of individuals with clear agendas. In

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- 3 See, e.g., the volumes J. Edward Hackett, ed., *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Anja Besand, ed., *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018), Niko Switek, Niko, ed., *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).
 - 4 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, "Chapter 65", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129,31.40>".
 - 5 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 4, "Chapter 69", directed by Ernest Dickerson, written by Jerome Hairston & Tian Jun Gu, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186423?trackId=200257859,31.30>".
 - 6 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 4, "Chapter 69", directed by Ernest Dickerson, written by Jerome Hairston & Tian Jun Gu, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186423?trackId=200257859,36.21>".
 - 7 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859,20.53>".

fact, the player-set of the game of machtpolitik [*power politics*] is so limited that, in “Chapter 69”, they all fit into the medium-sized fake funeral of former secretary of state Cathy Durant.⁸

Much scholarly attention has been paid to HoC’s presentation of politics and the polity and unanimously described it in dystopian terms. Steven Michels, e.g., points out that, in HoC, questionable ethics are dominant throughout the polity and extend to the non-profit sector.⁹ Brenda Shea states that, in the series, the faulty structural conditions of democracy themselves enable the Underwoods’ rise to power.¹⁰ However, Betty Kaklamanidou notes that while the polity in HoC is well past notions of valorisation, the motif of American exceptionalism remains. She argues that, in HoC, even under evil leadership, the US is still called upon to protect the world against forces of an even greater evil.¹¹

Discussing the series’ presentation of political processes, Niko Switek has claimed that, in HoC, despite its cynical portrayal, “important mechanisms of the polity are being presented in a detailed and realistic way”.¹² However, he stresses the importance of being able to distinguish fiction from reality and cautions against a “Feedback effect between popular culture and politics”, where fictional presentations influence political reality.¹³ Sandrine Sorlin ascribes to HoC a postmodern view of political discourse manifesting in a “co-dependency between politics and the media”¹⁴ and “their common desire to make news.”¹⁵

Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann have claimed that HoC is not a specifically political story at all and that the series’ narrative could retain its structural setup against any other backdrop.¹⁶ However, it has been a common impulse to attribute the

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- 8 See *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 4, “Chapter 69, directed by Ernest Dickerson, written by Jerome Hairston & Tian Jun Gu, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186423?trackId=200257859>.
 - 9 Steven Michels, “Hobbes and Frank on Why Democracy is Overrated”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 136.
 - 10 Brenda Shea: “‘Democracy Is So Overrated’: The Shortcomings of Popular Rule”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 141f.
 - 11 Betty Kaklamanidou, “The Cold war (re-)visited in House of Cards and The Americans”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 105f.
 - 12 Niko Switek, “Es gibt einen Rückkopplungseffekt zwischen Popkultur und Politik”, by Benjamin Reibert, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (July 18, 2018): <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/interview-a-m-morgen-politik-in-fernsehserien-es-gibt-einen-rueckkopplungseffekt-zwischen-popkultur-und-politik-1.4057134>. My translation: “es werden auch wichtige Mechanismen des politischen Betriebs detailliert und realistisch abgebildet”.
 - 13 Switek, “Es gibt einen Rückkopplungseffekt zwischen Popkultur und Politik”, by Benjamin Reibert. My translation: “Rückkopplungseffekt zwischen Popkultur und Politik”.
 - 14 Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 65.
 - 15 Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards*, 25.
 - 16 Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, “Eine interessante Affinität zwischen dem seriellen Erzählen und dem Thema Politik: Von Soap Operas zum Quality TV”, by Jöran Klatt and Katharina Rahlf, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 21, doi. <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666800092.5>.

series' substantial international success to its seemingly 'accurate' reflection of the negative perception contemporary audiences allegedly had (and have) of real-life politics. Myron Moses Jackson accordingly states: "House of Cards appeals to the strongly held belief that politics is dirty and corrupt".¹⁷ Similarly, Solange Landau claims that contemporary polit-series such as HoC strive to portray the reality of the audiences as accurately as possible.¹⁸ Following this assumption, the series becomes, for some, if not an accurate representation of politics itself, so too, a mirror of audiences' attitudes towards politics.¹⁹

With recourse to Ingolfur Blühdorn's concept of "simulative democracy", Uwe Oehm argues²⁰ that the negative image of politics represented in HoC reflects historical political culture in which increasing structural complexity has led to a delegation of sovereignty to professional actants. Here, the growing individualism and an "eman- cipation from the democratic project",²¹ paradoxically, coincides with an increased expectation of immediacy between the electorate and their political representatives.²² This "post-democratic paradox"²³ is responsible for a systemic setup that cannot help but produce a negative perception of politics. Accordingly, for J. Edward Hackett, HoC:

plays off the anxieties of our current realities, portraying a political world that is captivating and wounding at the same time, provoking our worst fears that politics cannot deliver on the promise of justice.²⁴

In his discussion of HoC's 'realism', Jöran Klatt argues that the series' cynical view of politics shows an "internalisation of the rules of neoliberalism par excellence: Game The-

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- 17 Myron Moses Jackson, "Broken Friendships and the Pathology of Corporate Personhood in House of Cards", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 197.
 - 18 Solange Landau, "I'm feeling hungry today': Die Machthungrigen in House of Cards und Borgen". In *Gegenwart in Serie: Abgründige Milieus im aktuellen Qualitätsfernsehen*, ed. Jonas Nesselhauf and Markus Schleich (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2015), 19.
 - 19 See e.g., Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 6.
 - 20 Uwe Oehm, "House of Cards: 'Amerika, ich fange gerade erst an'", *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung*, June 17, 2016, <https://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards-2>.
 - 21 Ingolfur Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie: Neue Politik nach der postdemokratischen Wende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013), 161. My translation: "Emanzipation vom demokratischen Projekt".
 - 22 See Uwe Oehm, "House of Cards: 'Amerika, ich fange gerade erst an'". Originally from Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*, see 158–166.
 - 23 Uwe Oehm, "House of Cards: 'Amerika, ich fange gerade erst an'"; He references a term originating from Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*, 158 and 161. My translation from Blühdorn's original: "das postdemokratische Paradox".
 - 24 J. Edward Hackett, "Introduction: Contemplating a House of Cards", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1.

ory”.²⁵ For Klatt, the *homo politicus*, in HoC, is “above all a *homo oeconomicus*”,²⁶ that is, a reflection of the fictional concept of a market participant who rationally calculates his*her maximum advantage in the *Zero-Sum* games of life and economics alike.

Interestingly, HoC’s pseudo-realistic, dystopic, and subconsciously neoliberal vision of the US polity has seen considerable success in China. The series even managed to be approved by Chinese censorship. Zhaoxi Lui, mapping online interactions of Chinese HoC-audiences, shows that they made ambiguous connections between the series’ negative portrayals of politics and political conditions in the US and China.²⁷ Felix Flos points out that China, in HoC, appears as a “competent and astute competitor of the USA”,²⁸ a fact which may result from an established, *pragmatically* motivated practice in US fiction to include Chinese themes in order to increase a series’ appeal for the sizeable Chinese market.

However, when it comes to questions of ‘realism’, it is essential to remember that fictional serial texts adhere, first and foremost, to the necessity of creating a suspenseful and reasonably coherent narrative that can engage audiences and thus function as a commercial commodity. As chapter 3 in this study has shown, the highly dynamic network of a fictional serial text is more than the sum of its parts. This network creates its own emergent ideological dynamic following the – at times contradictory – triple set of *intradiegetic*, *dramatic*, and *pragmatic* logics. Thus, while HoC’s ideological positions are shaped by a number of historical actors that include the empirical recipients, production entities and their respective representative *functions* (audiences, showrunners), they are not congruent reflections of any of these actors’ views. When observing a serial text’s presentation of, say, politics, one discerns no more and no less than the ideological attitudes created by the dynamics of the serial text as an actor-network transcending ontological planes. It is a fact that forever separates historical reality and fictional serial narrative.

8.1.2 Frank Underwood

Before Kevin Spacey’s dismissal from the show, his portrayal of the sinister anti-hero Francis “Frank” Underwood has fascinated audiences, critics, and researchers to a remarkable degree. This fascination is especially surprising given that the structural setup of HoC is, as Sorlin notes, a relatively conventional “‘hero’ on a quest to power”-story.²⁹

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- 25 Jöran Klatt, “Ränkespiele zweier Serien (1): House of Cards”, *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung* (blog), May 17, 2016, <https://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards>. My translation: “zeigt sich darin eine Internalisierung der Spielregeln des Neoliberalismus schlechthin: der Spieltheorie”.
- 26 Jöran Klatt, “Ränkespiele zweier Serien (2): Game of Thrones”, *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung* (blog), May 24, 2016, <https://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/game-of-thrones>. My translation: “vor allem ein *homo oeconomicus*”. Original emphasis.
- 27 Zhaoxi (Josie) Liu, “Illusion vs. Disillusion: Chinese Viewers’ Articulation of ‘House of Cards’”, *Journalism and Media* 2 (April 2021): 126, <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-5172/2/2/8>.
- 28 Felix Flos, “‘Eine Katze, die Mäuse fängt, ist eine gute Katze’: Warum House of Cards in China erfolgreich ist”, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.4 (2014): 91. My translation: “die Darstellung des Landes als fähiger und scharfsinniger Konkurrent der USA”.
- 29 Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 33.

As a character, Frank has been psychologised and pathologised, e.g., by Elena Pilipets and Rainer Winter, who ascribe sociopathic tendencies to Frank Underwood with reference to a broader narrative trend within contemporary TV towards “normalizing deviant behavior”.³⁰ Désiré Palmen et al. have examined Frank as an illustrative example of psychopathy in (political) leadership, stating, “The persona of Frank Underwood is an example of what successful psychopathy in politics may look like”.³¹

The character traits that make Frank a prime example of possible fictional psychopathy and such a fascinating anti-hero have similarly been discussed at length and with different insights. Kody W. Cooper states that Frank displays autoerotic egocentric self-love.³² Hackett, accordingly, describes Frank as an “ethical egoist”³³ whose ethics are shaped around his self-interest. James Ketchen and Michael Yeo likewise state that Frank’s comparative ‘weakness’ as a tyrant – especially when measured against his calculating and completely amoral Russian counterpart, Viktor Petrov – is due to his “irrepressibly searching and philosophical” nature.³⁴ Shane D. Courtland claims that “Frank’s *modus operandi* is to befriend, then to betray”.³⁵ Nevertheless, for him, Frank’s, at times, irrational murderous behaviour³⁶ and overestimation of his own abilities³⁷ make him a vainglorious “foole” rather than a coldly calculating political operator.³⁸

To Greg Littmann, “Frank’s rise to power is a beautiful illustration of Machiavellian principles in action”.³⁹ However, he also states that Frank is “too susceptible to taking revenge” to fill the role of the cold political operator in which he sees himself.⁴⁰ On the contrary, Don Fallis, in his comparison of Frank’s actions to Machiavelli’s teachings, argues

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- 30 Elena Pilipets and Rainer Winter, “House of Cards – House of Power: political narratives and the cult of serial sociopaths in narrative politics in American quality dramas in the digital age”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 94.
- 31 Désiré Palmen, Jan Derksen, and Emile Kolthoff, “House of Cards: Psychopathy in Politics”, *Public Integrity* 20, no.5 (2018): 434, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2017.1402736>.
- 32 Kody W. Cooper, “Praying to One’s Self, for One’s Self: Frank’s Ethics and Politics of Autoeroticism”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 209.
- 33 J. Edward Hackett: “Existential Freedom, Self-Interest, and Frank Underwood’s Underhandedness”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 219.
- 34 James Ketchen and Michael Yeo, “Of Sheep, Shepherds, and a Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: The Cynical View of Politics in House of Cards and Plato’s Republic”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 13.
- 35 Shane D. Courtland, “Frank the Foole, Upon a House of Cards”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 118. Original emphasis.
- 36 Courtland, “Frank the Foole, Upon a House of Cards”, 123.
- 37 Shane D. Courtland, “Frank the Foole, Upon a House of Cards”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 119f.
- 38 Courtland, “Frank the Foole, Upon a House of Cards”, 125.
- 39 Greg Littmann, “American Machiavelli”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 81.
- 40 Littmann, “American Machiavelli”, 83.

that "Machiavelli Would Not Be Impressed"⁴¹ by HoC's protagonist. Fallis argues that, unlike Frank, power, for Machiavelli, "is not an end in itself".⁴² Matt Meyer accordingly describes the series' later Frank as a "slave to his own machinations"⁴³ who ultimately destroys his achievements through oversized ambition.⁴⁴

Expanding on this theme, Sorlin argues that the Underwoods, in their seemingly boundless ambition, are not free at all but "subservient to an encompassing ideology".⁴⁵ For her, the Underwood's uncompromising drive for self-improvement and HoC's over-all narrative quest structure results from the US' foundational myth of the American Dream.⁴⁶ This motif has been remarked upon by other scholars, e.g., Sarah J. Palm and Kenneth W. Stickers, who claim that HoC's characters struggle with evolving notions of the American Dream (at times, twisted ones).⁴⁷

Examining audiences' remarkable fascination with HoC's protagonist, Lázsló Kajtár sees a curious "lack of imaginative resistance" in their allegiance with a character as profoundly evil as Underwood.⁴⁸ He argues that Franks' protective relationship with Claire makes him more human and thus more relatable for audiences.⁴⁹ However, Sorlin claims that the series manipulates recipients into taking a "(fake) participant role" through establishing "Para-Social Interaction".⁵⁰ For her, the series achieves this, above all, through the often-cited 'asides' with which Frank frequently 'addresses' the audience, formally evoking obligation, trust, and complicity.⁵¹ Sorlin attributes audiences' continued allegiance with Frank to an implicit wish to remain on the winning team and avoid pleasure-decreasing "cognitive dissonance"⁵², that is, a confrontation of contradictory traits:

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- 41 Don Fallis, "Machiavelli Would Not Be Impressed", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 92.
- 42 Fallis, "Machiavelli Would Not Be Impressed", 98.
- 43 Matt Meyer, "Why Underwood Is Frankly Not an Overman", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 75.
- 44 See Meyer, "Why Underwood Is Frankly Not an Overman", 78.
- 45 Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 39.
- 46 Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards*, 38.
- 47 Sarah J. Palm and Kenneth W. Stickers, "What Will We Leave Behind? Claire Underwood's American Dream", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 50.
- 48 Lázsló Kajtár, "Rooting for the Villain: Frank Underwood and the Lack of Imaginative Resistance", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 230.
- 49 Lázsló Kajtár, "Rooting for the Villain: Frank Underwood and the Lack of Imaginative Resistance", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 231.
- 50 Sandrine Sorlin, "Strategies of involvement and moral detachment in *House of Cards*", *Journal of Literary Semantics* 47, no. 1 (Mai 2018): 22.
- 51 Sandrine Sorlin, "Breaking the Fourth Wall: The Pragmatic Functions of the Second Person Pronoun in *House of Cards*", in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns*, ed. Laure Gardelle and Sandrine Sorlin (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub., 2015), 140f.
- 52 Sandrine Sorlin, "Strategies of involvement and moral detachment in *House of Cards*", *Journal of Literary Semantics* 47, no. 1 (Mai 2018): 28.

To enjoy the show, moral disengagement is necessary.⁵³ Christian Kirchmeier even suggests that part of HoC's critical potential rests in the very fact that audiences cannot resist the dark charms of its evil protagonist.⁵⁴

Notably, even in his absence, Frank remains the template for any protagonist of HoC. To ensure serial continuity, the series' anti-heroic central actant must be a power-hungry and ruthless striver who stops at nothing to reach/stay at the top. Any examination of Frank thus provides an essential insight into the composition of the series' replacement-protagonist Claire.

8.1.3 Frank and Claire

The complicit relationship between Frank and his wife, Claire (pre-recalibration), has likewise attracted some scholarly attention. According to Brenda Shea, Claire and Frank share a single-minded dedication to attain as much power as possible and are bound by mutual dependency.⁵⁵ Sorlin defines Claire as being among Frank's "greatest Helpers [...] who is set on achieving the same goal for her husband and herself".⁵⁶ She states that between the two, "a manifest contract [...] has apparently been established before the first season starts".⁵⁷ However, she does not elaborate on the structure of this contract. Il-Tschung Lim, on the other hand, points out that Claire and Frank share a "transactional relationship for mutual benefit".⁵⁸ Examining the central position of mutuality in the couple's dynamic, Jason Southworth and Ruth Tallman add, "when Frank stops working with her, Claire employs a tit-for-tat strategy, failing to work with him in return".⁵⁹ For them, the Underwoods are an example of a couple that values "intrarelationship equality" in their own dysfunctional way.⁶⁰ More in line with Sorlin's helper theory, Michels notes that Claire serves to keep Frank in line and enable his political ruthlessness.

53 Sorlin, "Strategies of involvement and moral detachment in *House of Cards*", 28.

54 Christian Kirchmeier, "The *President's Address*: Zur politischen Parabase in *House of Cards*", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46 (September 2016): 383, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41244-016-0028-0>.

55 Brenda Shea, "'Democracy Is So Overrated': The Shortcomings of Popular Rule", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 144.

56 Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 37.

57 Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards*, 37.

58 Il-Tschung Lim, "Mal Freund, Mal Feind, Mal Konkurrent: Ein Soziologischer Blick hinter die Kulissen des Politikbetriebs in *House of Cards*", *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.4 (2014): 59. My translation: "Tauschbeziehung zum wechselseitigen Nutzen".

59 Jason Southworth and Ruth Tallman, "Under the Covers with the Underwoods: The Sexual Politics of the Underwood Marriage", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 183.

60 Southworth and Tallman, "Under the Covers with the Underwoods", 185.

ness.⁶¹ On the other hand, for Ketchen and Yeo, Claire is “a fellow shepherd” amongst the legions of inferior pawns used and abused by the Underwoods.⁶²

In one of the few studies focussing primarily on Claire, Palm and Stickers see her as a “fascinating foil to Frank’s tightly wrapped enigma”.⁶³ They argue that the couple’s amoral, ambition-fuelled complicity is “a precarious and empty structure that they have built for themselves”.⁶⁴ For Palm and Stickers, the characters’ aggressive outward appearance masks a “spiritual poverty”,⁶⁵ which increasingly affects Claire throughout the series. Accordingly, they see Claire’s commitment to the couple’s “political partnership”⁶⁶ decline once it tips in Frank’s favour.⁶⁷ However, placing the relationship’s tipping point at the end of season 3,⁶⁸ they do not take into account that – regardless of what might be plausible within the series’ *intradiegetic* logic – HoC was, at this time, still a commercially successful series and thus required to preserve its central configuration for a potentially indefinite continuation following the *dramatic* and *pragmatic* logics of popular serial storytelling. Accordingly, Claire’s commitment to Frank, while wavering, ultimately remained safely in place until the pre-recalibration cliffhanger at the end of season five, which I will discuss shortly.⁶⁹

8.1.4 Narrative and Formal Observations: Underwood’s ‘Asides’

It has often been pointed out – somewhat incompletely – that HoC follows a theatrical, Shakespearian tradition.⁷⁰ Solange Landau examines the Underwoods with their – in many senses of the word – barren, self-centred ambition and ruthlessness as the “con-

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- 61 Steven Michels, “Hobbes and Frank on Why Democracy is Overrated”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 132.
- 62 James Ketchen and Michael Yeo, “Of Sheep, Shepherds, and a Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: The Cynical View of Politics in House of Cards and Plato’s Republic”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 7.
- 63 Sarah J. Palm and Kenneth W. Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind? Claire Underwood’s American Dream”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 51.
- 64 Palm and Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind?”, 42.
- 65 Palm and Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind?”, 44.
- 66 Palm and Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind?”, 47.
- 67 Palm and Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind?”, 47f.
- 68 Palm and Stickers, “What Will We Leave Behind?”, 50.
- 69 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, “Chapter 65”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>.
- 70 Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, “Eine interessante Affinität zwischen dem seriellen Erzählen und dem Thema Politik: Von Soap Operas zum Quality TV”, by Jöran Klatt and Katharina Rahlf, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 14, doi. <https://doi.org/10.13109/19783666800092.5>; Hackett, J. Edward. “Introduction: Contemplating a House of Cards”. In *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*. Edited by J. Edward Hackett, 1–2. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1; James R. Keller, “The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 43, no 3. (February 2015): 111.

temporary Macbeths".⁷¹ Keller traces the tradition of the character Francis Underwood from Shakespearean villains such as "Richard III., Iago, Aaron, Edmund, and Macbeth"⁷² back to the stock character of "The Vice" and the "psychomachia intrigue plot"⁷³ of the morality drama of the 15th and 16th centuries, which "dramatized the temptation of humanity by the embodiments of iniquity".⁷⁴ He states that, like Frank in his famous 'asides',

The Vice faces his audience and announces his intention to manipulate, mislead and destroy the embodiment of humanity and then brags about his subsequent success.⁷⁵

Keller, with reference to Bernard Spivack, points out that The Vice serves a creative purpose as the driving force of the narrative action. He*she is "the metaphorical author and director of the action",⁷⁶ or, as Spivack notes, "the playmaker whose histrionic deceits and beguilements create the action of the play as *game* or *sport* for the playgoer".⁷⁷ According to Keller, Frank Underwood shares many such traits with The Vice.⁷⁸

Referencing theatrical tradition, Frank's frequent habit of speaking *ad spectatores* has been the series' most prominent formal motif and arguably remains its most studied formal aspect. As John Scott Gray states, "much of the buzz around the show [...] has been about Underwood's asides."⁷⁹ However, Frank's frequent addresses *ad spectatores* are, in fact, not 'asides' at all. Oliver Jahrhaus notes that they are, in fact, *parabases*, a term initially describing the practice of the choir addressing the audience in ancient Greek comedy. While the *aside* remains within the diegesis, the *parabases*' direction *ad spectatores* "violates the ontological status of their world".⁸⁰ Few researchers have made this critical distinction. In her discussion of HoC's use of the second person address, Sorlin, while retaining the term 'aside', rightly points out that Frank does not actually speak to

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- 71 Solange Landau, "I'm feeling hungry today': Die Machthungrigen in House of Cards und Borgen". In *Gegenwart in Serie: Abgründige Milieus im aktuellen Qualitätsfernsehen*, ed. Jonas Nesselhauf and Markus Schleich (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2015), 23. My translation: "zeitgenössischen Macbeths".
- 72 James R. Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 43, no. 3. (February 2015): 111.
- 73 Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", 114.
- 74 Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", 114.
- 75 Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", 114.
- 76 Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", 115.
- 77 Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to His Major Villains* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 191. Original emphasis. For its "dramaturgic significance" in the creation of narrative intrigue see also page 135.
- 78 See Keller, "The Vice in Vice President: House of Cards and the Morality Tradition", 115f.
- 79 John Scott Gray, "Being versus seeming: Socrates and the Lessons of Francis Underwood's Asides", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 17.
- 80 Oliver Jahrhaus, "An die Adresse des Publikums: Parabase und politische Theologie in House of Cards", *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46, no. 3 (2016): 363. My translation: "den ontologischen Status ihrer Welt verletzen".

‘the audience’ as a concrete entity but as “*dramatis personae* situated at a higher level of abstraction”.⁸¹

To Jahrhaus, Underwood’s parabases serve the purpose of manifesting Frank’s sovereignty in a political world where sovereignty is an exception.⁸² For Gray, the ‘asides’ reveal Frank’s “hidden agenda”,⁸³ and for Zack Stewart, it is a formal tool to manipulate audiences into thinking that Frank is, in fact, the astute machinator he claims to be.⁸⁴ Kirchmeier points out that the parabases achieve something “which is impossible outside of art: to communicate authenticity itself”; in this case, Frank’s authenticity, which he only shares with the audience.⁸⁵ For Sorlin, the parabases serve to turn Frank into “the viewer’s backstage ‘metapragmatic’ commentator explaining, in a teacher-like manner, a political world that few members of the audience have an intimate knowledge of”.⁸⁶ In her study of HoC’s use of the second person address, she states that “[t]heatricality of the second person pronoun, addressing impersonal entities, paradoxically contributes to a de-dramatization of the crimes committed, through their very dramatization”.⁸⁷ For Sorlin, HoC retains its allusions to the theatrical tradition through its use of ‘asides’.⁸⁸ Accordingly, Pilipets and Winter state that the series’ parabases, with their way of breaking the fourth wall and thus seemingly disturbing the dramatic illusion, are reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre.⁸⁹

HoC’s parabases have endowed the show with a notable (and highly marketed) *editorial presence* that disguises the series’ otherwise conventional continuity editing. As a formal reference to theatrical tradition, it has arguably contributed to raising the series’ cul-

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- 81 Sandrine Sorlin, “Breaking the Fourth Wall: The Pragmatic Functions of the Second Person Pronoun in House of Cards”, in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns*, ed. Laure Gardelle and Sandrine Sorlin (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub., 2015), 129. Original emphasis.
- 82 Oliver Jahrhaus, “An die Adresse des Publikums: Parabase und politische Theologie in House of Cards”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46, no. 3 (2016): 362.
- 83 John Scott Gray, “Being versus seeming: Socrates and the Lessons of Francis Underwood’s Asides”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 18.
- 84 Zach Stewart, “House of Cards’s Fourth Wall,” *Medium.com*, February 11, 2013, <https://medium.com/@zseward/house-of-cards-fourth-wall-b54a60143519>; see also Gray, “Being versus seeming: Socrates and the Lessons of Francis Underwood’s Asides”, 18.
- 85 Christian Kirchmeier, “The *President’s Address*: Zur politischen Parabase in House of Cards”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46 (September 2016): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41244-016-0028-0>. My translation: “das leisten, was außerhalb der Kunst unmöglich ist: nämlich Authentizität selbst zu kommunizieren”.
- 86 Sandrine Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 8.
- 87 Sandrine Sorlin, “Breaking the Fourth Wall: The Pragmatic Functions of the Second Person Pronoun in House of Cards”, in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns*, ed. Laure Gardelle and Sandrine Sorlin (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub., 2015), 138.
- 88 See Sorlin, *Language and Manipulation in House of Cards: A Pragma-Stylistic Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9; see also Sorlin, “Breaking the Fourth Wall”, 128.
- 89 Elena Pilipets and Rainer Winter, “House of Cards – House of Power: political narratives and the cult of serial sociopaths in narrative politics in American quality dramas in the digital age”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 97f.

tural capital, thus making it attractive for Netflix's prestige audiences. This chapter will show that, with the series' recalibration in its final season, the central trope of the protagonist's parabasis evolves from a theatrical into a decidedly cinematic motif. It changes from a mainly metapragmatic tool to give a (male) protagonist additional room to express himself to a formal storytelling tool that connects various dispersed temporal and spatial planes within HoC's diegesis.

8.1.5 Race and Gender

Examining racial diversity in Netflix productions, Bianca Gonzales-Sobrino, Emma González-Lesser, and Matthew W. Hughey point out that HoC "paints a homogenous racial picture of the American political world in which only 2 people of colour reside as main characters".⁹⁰ They argue that the series' limited, racially ambiguous, and tokenistic representation of people of colour, which fails to represent the historical and structural experience of people of colour, "maintains and reproduces what previous traditional television political dramas presented: a white-dominated political arena".⁹¹ Gonzales-Sobrino, González-Lesser, and Hughey show that HoC introduces an illusion of diversity through an undifferentiated "add a person of color and stir"-approach⁹² that ultimately undermines the appropriate representation of BIPOC-characters and their experiences. Examining Frank's relationship with the African-American restaurateur Freddy, Stephanie Rivera Berruz similarly argues that HoC presents a commodified and rudimentary version of non-whiteness that is valuable only to the degree to which it benefits dominant white characters and institutions.⁹³

In their analysis of HoC's presentation of female journalists, Chad Painter and Patrick Ferrucci state that the series ultimately portrays them as highly accomplished yet firmly "situated in overarching patriarchal schemes".⁹⁴ As fictional characters, HoC's female journalists find themselves in a narrative position where they are ultimately

90 Bianca Gonzalez-Sobrino, Emma González-Lesser, and Matthew W. Hughey, "On demand Diversity? The Meanings of Racial Diversity in Netflix Productions", in *Challenging the Status Quo: Diversity, Democracy, and Equality in the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Embrick, Sharon M. Collins, Michelle S. Dodson (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 332.

91 Bianca Gonzalez-Sobrino, Emma González-Lesser, and Matthew W. Hughey, "On demand Diversity? The Meanings of Racial Diversity in Netflix Productions", in *Challenging the Status Quo: Diversity, Democracy, and Equality in the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Embrick, Sharon M. Collins, Michelle S. Dodson (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 334.

92 Bianca Gonzalez-Sobrino, Emma González-Lesser, and Matthew W. Hughey, "On demand Diversity? The Meanings of Racial Diversity in Netflix Productions", in *Challenging the Status Quo: Diversity, Democracy, and Equality in the 21st Century*, ed. David G. Embrick, Sharon M. Collins, Michelle S. Dodson (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 333.

93 Stephanie Rivera Berruz, "The Spice of White Life: Freddy and Racist Representations", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 193f.

94 Chad Painter and Patrick Ferrucci, "Gender Games: The Portrayal of Female Journalists on *House of Cards*", *Journalism Practice* 11, no. 4 (2017): 503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1133251>.

rewarded for being unserious, unprofessional, or unethical while being punished for fulfilling the role of the uncompromising fourth estate watchdog.⁹⁵

8.2 How to Recalibrate a Global Success on Short Notice

HoC 6 is essentially the product of an impromptu overhaul of its narrative material. A short, three-month period lay between the series' unforeseen shutdown and the resumption of production of a, by then, massively recalibrated narrative. Therefore, it makes sense to start this section by giving an overview of the historical events leading up to Spacey's dismissal and the narrative state of affairs at the end of season 5.

8.2.1 Historical Context

At the end of October 2017, HoC 6, still involving Spacey, had already commenced production. Subsequently, following the first of what would become many allegations of sexual assault against the Hollywood star (made by actor Anthony Rapp⁹⁶), work on the season was suspended⁹⁷ and Netflix announced the show's cancellation after its upcoming sixth season. Media statements suggested that the unofficial decision to end the series had predated the scandal⁹⁸ (this claim has not been verified). On November 3rd, 2017, Netflix and the production company Media Rights Capital officially removed Spacey from HoC and announced a review of the series' future.⁹⁹ A month later, the portal announced that HoC 6 would resume production of a revised season containing eight instead of the usual 13 episodes and that Robin Wright, in her role as Frank's wife, Claire Underwood, would be taking over as the series' protagonist.¹⁰⁰ HoC 6 resumed filming in January 2018 and wrapped in May 2018. The season's release followed on November 2nd, 2018.

At this point, the damages caused by the pervasive culture of abuse in the entertainment industry oblige this study to some preliminary self-reflection. This chapter does not wish to profit from scandalising the harm inflicted on survivors of sexual abuse. Furthermore, this study realises its inability to afford an appropriate discussion of the

95 Painter and Patrick Ferrucci, “Gender Games”, 505.

96 Adam B. Vary, “Actor Anthony Rapp: Kevin Spacey Made A Sexual Advance Toward Me When I Was 14”, *Buzzfeed News*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adambvary/anthony-rapp-kevin-spacey-made-sexual-advance-when-i-was-14>.

97 Nellie Andreeva, “‘House Of Cards’: Production On Netflix Series Suspended Indefinitely Following Kevin Spacey Allegations”, *Deadline*, October 31, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/10/house-of-cards-production-shut-down-suspended-indefinitely-following-kevin-spacey-allegation-s-netflix-series-1202198465/>.

98 Dominic Patten, “Netflix Cancels ‘House Of Cards’, Says It’s “Deeply Troubled” Over Kevin Spacey Claims”, *Deadline*, October 30, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/10/house-of-cards-canceled-kevin-spacey-scandal-netflix-season-six-1202197604/>.

99 Matt Webb Mitovich, “House of Cards: Kevin Spacey fired”, *TVLine*, November 3, 2017, <https://tvline.com/2017/11/03/house-of-cards-kevin-spacey-fired/>.

100 Dawn C. Chmielewski, “Abbreviated ‘House Of Cards’ Season 6 Sans Kevin Spacey To Start Production In 2018, Netflix’s Ted Sarandos Says”, *Deadline*, December 4, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/12/ted-sarandos-says-house-of-cards-will-have-sixth-season-1202219529/>.

events (and the victims) the space it deserves. A primary instinct, then, is to follow the example of Netflix, global TV audiences, much of TV criticism and more recent scholarship and move past the series' former star and, indeed, the series itself. However, – considering the series' central role in the history of early streaming – one simply cannot examine politics in contemporary television fiction without mentioning HoC. Furthermore, one simply cannot discuss HoC (6) without considering Spacey and the context of his dismissal. As this chapter will show, Spacey, the events leading to his dismissal and the MeToo movement's discursive influences pervade HoC 6 as a notable extratextual reference.

However, one must not discuss Spacey, and his presence or absence in HoC, without acknowledging the harm and suffering caused by sexual harassment and abuse of power. Therefore, this study will refrain from reviewing the details of the allegations. It will outline the events insofar as they pertain to the season's development and textual recalibration while acknowledging that the weight of the human consequences of the alleged events far exceeds this study's particular focus. This in no way intends to diminish, trivialise, or relativise any suffering but is intended to avoid any such effects caused by an inevitable limitation of scope.

8.2.2 Where They Left Off Pre-Recalibration

HoC 5 had ended on a seasonal cliffhanger showing the seeming dissolution of Frank and Claire Underwood's fabled complicity. According to the series showrunners, Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, the original pre-reconfiguration plan for HoC 6 was to pit Frank against his estranged wife in a showdown for the White House.¹⁰¹ Constructing season 5's cliffhanger, "Chapter 65", therefore, revolves around reminding audiences of the rules of the Underwood's relationship in order to emphasise the subsequent changes in the series' configuration.

In HoC's previous seasons, the Underwood's relationship had generally taken the shape of a *Simple Macbeth* game (see chapter 3). It consists of an open Adult-Adult transactional pattern between two coequal players of highest tenacity who bundle their destructive powers to form a unified outward-facing entity and thus advance a common cause (power). Accordingly, Claire remarks at the beginning of "Chapter 65": "We have one rule, Francis, one rule"¹⁰². The Underwood's "one rule" is absolute loyalty, honesty, and mutuality within the confines of their private game. Following the patriarchal binary notions of the *Macbeth* game, the pursuit of power, until the end of season 5, meant the indirect advancement of Claire (figuring the female backstage actant) through the direct advancement of Frank (the male frontstage actant, see figure 39). While the Underwood's relationship served as a frequent source of conflict throughout the series, its gen-

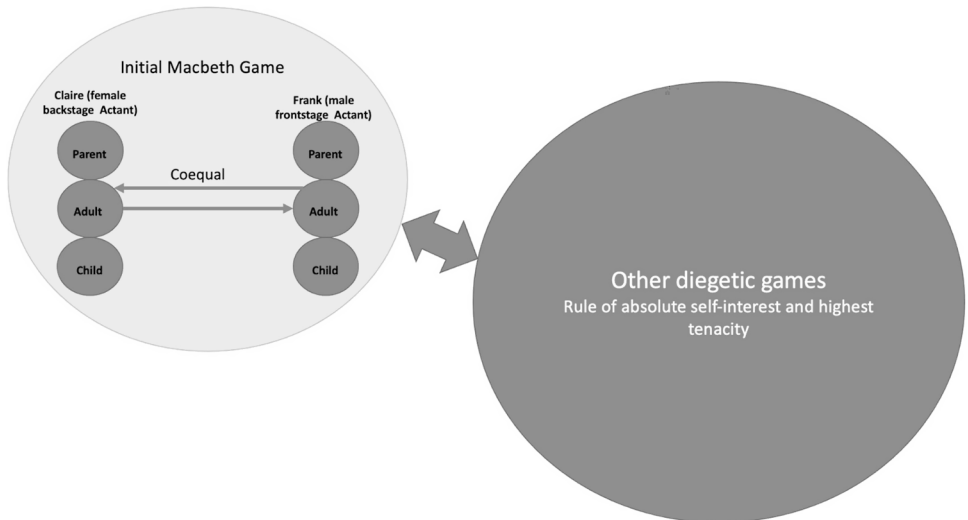
101 Liz Shannon Miller, "House of Cards': What the Final Season Would've Looked Like If Kevin Spacey Hadn't Been Fired", *IndieWire*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/10/house-of-cards-season-6-if-kevin-spacey-hadnt-been-fired-1202015443/>.

102 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, "Chapter 65", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129_03.20".

eral *Macbeth* configuration formed part of the narrative’s basic configuration. As such, it constituted one of the series’ central elements of serial repetition to ensure audiences’ continued allegiance to the show. Despite occasional deviations, the Underwood’s relationship, before season 5, thus usually reverted to its original *Macbeth* configuration.

Structurally, the Underwood’s *Macbeth* game presents an exception to the rest of HoC’s narrative configuration and its dramatic rule of the highest order. It dictates that all prevailing political players must follow *unconditional self-interest* with *absolute tenacity*. Tenacity in the pursuit of personal advantage, in HoC, appears as the decisive factor for political success, even before tactical ability or second-order insight. The level of respect a player will gain from his*her opponents is directly proportional to the degree of his*her tenacity. Accordingly, Frank tells one of his opponents, “I just wanted to thank you for your tenacity”.¹⁰³

Figure 39: *The Underwood’s initial privileged Macbeth game*

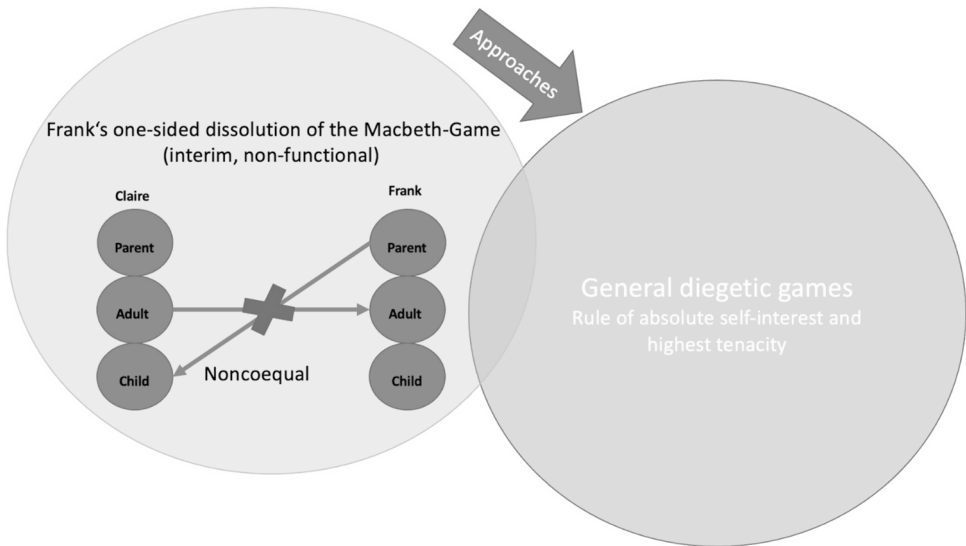


Part of the fascination that the Underwood’s relationship game – and, in fact, many narrative *Macbeth* games across fiction – holds for audiences is that it diverges from the narrative’s basic dramatic rule and thus becomes an irregularity within the series’ general configuration. To a certain degree, the *Macbeth* game emancipates its players from the narrative’s general logic (see figure 39). It is this fact that makes Claire and Frank such a compelling and exceptional duo (and main characters): In an agonal, zero-sum world in which unequivocally tenacious pursuit of self-interest is the rule of the highest order, it is fascinating to see two players look out for one another, especially two players who, like Claire and Frank, otherwise personify boundless, selfish ambition.

103 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, “Chapter 65”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129,00.22>”.

With Frank making plans behind his wife's back at the end of season 5, he betrays the couple's "one rule" of coequal mutuality and thus dissolves their exceptional *Macbeth* game. In doing so, Frank creates a new, temporary game in which the unassuming Claire is a non-coequal player leading to a potential Parent (him)-Child (her) configuration. In this temporary game, Frank decides what is 'best' for them both. As the self-confident Claire is unwilling to adapt to the new game's unequal configuration by adopting the necessary complementary Child-state, the couple's finely balanced *Macbeth* game dissolves into a crossed-transactional structure at the end of season 5 (see figure 40).

Figure 40: *The Underwood's non-complementary, dysfunctional interim game*



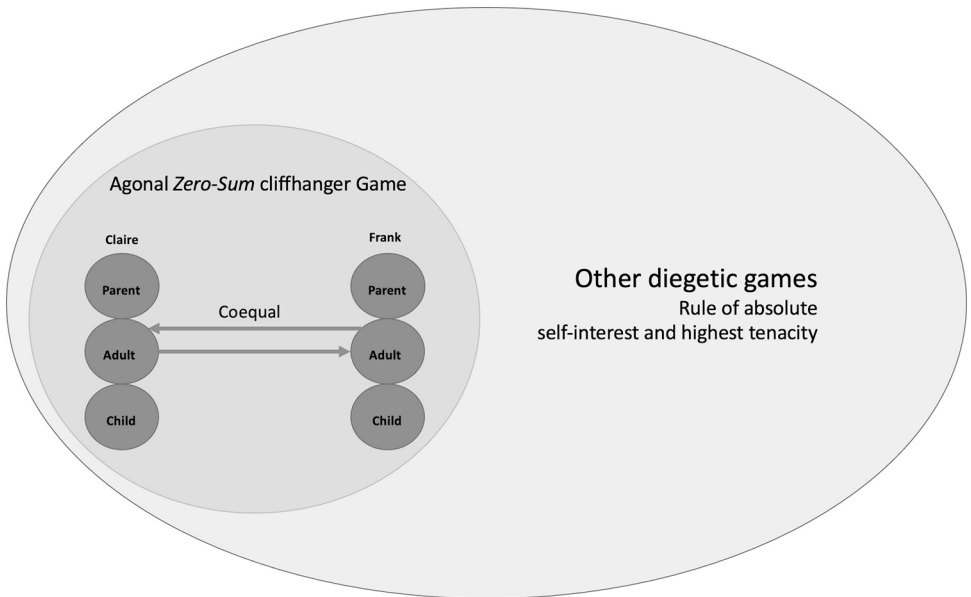
With the couple's structurally privileged game at an end, their unique exemption from the narrative's general rule of absolute self-interest also seizes. Accordingly, Claire and Frank fall back on the narrative's general dramatic rules: In their new agonal cliffhanger game at the end of HoC 5, they re-establish their status as coequal players, this time as enemies on opposite sides of a *Zero-Sum* game of third-degree intensity, that is, a game in which gain and loss (of power, access, status, life) have to be balanced and that has irreversible consequences (see figure 41).

In HoC 5's finale, both Frank and Claire openly acknowledge the dissolution of their *Macbeth* game. In one of his parabases, Frank summarises the changed relationship with his wife, reminding himself and audiences of his recommitment to the general rule of *absolute* tenacious self-interest. Ad spectatores he states:

You know, if you ignore all the pomp and circumstance, the most perverse thing is I actually believe in the presidency, its importance, what it means around the world even symbolically, but I believe in power even more... for its own sake. Gore Vidal once wrote that power is an end to itself, and the instinctive urge to prevail the most

important single human trait. I've always told myself that everything I did was for her [Claire]. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe I love power more.¹⁰⁴

Figure 41: The Underwood's Zero-Sum cliffhanger game following Claire's elevation to coequal antagonist in “Chapter 65” (season 5, episode 13).



It should be noted here that Frank evoking US writer Gore Vidal is no mere accident but serves a tangible *pragmatic* purpose: at the time of season 5's production, the Hollywood actor starred in and co-produced the (ultimately unreleased) Netflix film “Gore” about Vidal's life. The release was subsequently cancelled after Spacey's dismissal from HoC.¹⁰⁵ Frank Underwood evoking Gore Vidal in a seemingly unrelated HoC scene shows clear signs of vertically integrated marketing between the two Netflix productions: HoC uses its diegesis to familiarise audiences with the subject of another upcoming production, thus demonstrating the influence of *pragmatic* considerations on *dramatic* and *intradiegetic* structures.

Back to the Underwood's changing relationship game: Claire makes a similar statement, implicitly describing Frank's attempt to change the configuration of their relationship game. Not yet the protagonist, she cannot transcend onto a higher diegetic plane in

104 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, “Chapter 65”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>, 20.55”.

105 See Matt Webb Mitovich, “*House of Cards*: Kevin Spacey fired”, TVLine, November 3, 2017, <http://tvline.com/2017/11/03/house-of-cards-kevin-spacey-fired/>; Dominic Patten, “Netflix Cancels ‘House Of Cards’, Says It’s ‘Deeply Troubled’ Over Kevin Spacey Claims”, *Deadline*, October 30, 2017, <https://deadline.com/2017/10/house-of-cards-canceled-kevin-spacey-scandal-netflix-season-six-1202197604/>.

season 5's finale. Instead, she makes her address to the diegetic American people in her first speech as president. Addressing an upcoming war with Syria, she states:

A leader that would sacrifice the physical and emotional wellbeing of his citizens, that would treat his people as pawns just to stay in power well, that leader needs to be stopped.¹⁰⁶

The formal structure of the scene makes it perfectly clear to whom this declaration of war is addressed: Claire's mention of the word "leader" triggers a cut to Frank watching his wife speak on TV. Frank, still the protagonist and thus capable of transcending diegetic planes, reacts to his wife's challenge with a parabasis, stating ad spectatores: "If she doesn't pardon me, I'll kill her".¹⁰⁷ He thus reasserts both the rule of absolute tenacity and reminds audiences that the narrative's general dramatic rules and the accompanying stakes of a game of third-degree intensity now apply to the relationship between himself and his former ally as well.

Formally, the series finishes with an intriguing play on its signature protagonist's parabasis that emphasises the coequal configuration of the Underwood's newly established game. In a final scene, Claire, having expelled her husband from the White House, turns ad spectatores in her first-ever parabasis stating, "My turn".¹⁰⁸ With her newfound power to enter a diegetic plane of higher order, she is thus formally positioned as her husband's coequal opponent.

8.2.3 Recalibration in Full View

The fact that the removal of Frank Underwood as its protagonist has had substantial consequences for HoC 6' structural setup seems almost too obvious to state. However, describing the various challenges and consequences of a recalibration of this magnitude is anything but trivial. Given the prominence of both Kevin Spacey and the reasons for his dismissal, HoC 6 faced the additional challenge of constructing a coherent narrative that combines enough repetition of material from previous seasons to engage the show's audiences with sufficient (limited) innovation to notably distance the series from its former star.

At the start of HoC 6, the series' previously constructed central *Zero-Sum* cliffhanger game between Claire and Frank was void, having lost one of its players. With Frank's disappearance from the character ensemble, several central plotlines likewise remained

106 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, "Chapter 65", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>, 49.24".

107 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, "Chapter 65", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>, 49.39".

108 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, "Chapter 65", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>, 53.19".

without purpose (revolving around a character who no longer existed). HoC 6 thus faced the overwhelming task of establishing a compelling narrative reason for Frank’s absence.

In chapter 3 of this study, discussing the various forms of serial evolution, I distinguished between diegetically motivated *development* and *dramatically* or *pragmatically* motivated *recalibration* of fictional circumstances. In cases like HoC’s recalibration, where the extratextual causes for the diegetic changes are established public knowledge, the disruption of narrative coherence for audiences is almost inevitable.

As I pointed out, there are two ways to approach a recalibration. The first is a *hard recalibration*, that is, an open act of pure extratextual sovereignty by the production entities in which the character is either removed from the narrative without diegetic explanation or retained but impersonated by another actor without diegetic acknowledgement of his*her changed appearance. Besides risking to irritate faithful audiences through such an open act of one-sided sovereignty on the part of the production entities, the success of an uncommented replacement of the global celebrity Kevin Spacey who had, up to this point, been the uncontested face of HoC, would have been highly doubtful.

HoC thus opted for a *soft recalibration* by providing a diegetic explanation for the obvious and *pragmatically* motivated changes. It informed audiences that Frank Underwood had died and – quite skilfully – turned the mystery of the former protagonist’s death into one of the season’s overarching plotlines. While ultimately still a sovereign act of the production entities, a *soft recalibration* appears as a concession to narrative coherence and is, thus, usually understood as a concession to the recipients’ position within the intra-network power struggle.

HoC 6’s recalibration was somewhat simplified by the fact that season five had already positioned Claire as the new US president in its seasonal cliffhanger.¹⁰⁹ With the protagonist’s access to the presidency being a key feature in the series’ later configuration, HoC 6 thus avoided the additional burden of explaining how the new anti-hero Claire Underwood had ended up in the Oval Office.

However, the narrative adjustments necessary in a soft recalibration are not limited to coming up with a compelling diegetic reason for replacing a protagonist. As an anti-hero with global star power, Frank Underwood had been the narrative centre of the series for five seasons. As the protagonist, all plotlines and the essential games within the diegesis directly or indirectly centred around Frank. The same cannot be said of Claire. While the former deuteragonist had played an essential role in many of the narrative’s plotlines, few featured her as a structural element in her own right. To remove Frank as a player from the narrative thus meant to leave many plotlines and characters without a centre to gravitate towards or struggle against. To replace a protagonist during a recalibration thus also entails the re-examination of central plotlines, both regarding the feasibility of their readjustment to the new protagonist and their structural usefulness to the changed plot.

With its function as a dedicated *final* season, the recalibrated HoC 6 had to provide reasonably authentic resolutions for the numerous ongoing plotlines which the series

109 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, “Chapter 65”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129, 20.40>”.

had accumulated throughout its five-year run. A proper, coherent conclusion is challenging for any long-running series, even with an intact character ensemble.¹¹⁰ Attempting it while undergoing a major recalibration is only possible with significant concessions regarding narrative coherence. The coming sections will discuss this further.

HoC 6 centres around two interwoven seasonal arcs: the first is a thriller plot built on the question, 'how did Frank die?' In the series' final episode, Claire reveals that Doug Stamper, Frank's former confidant, murdered his idol out of a false sense of loyalty to save Underwood's legacy from his increasingly erratic behaviour.¹¹¹ However, much more than a source for creating suspenseful narrative action, this whodunnit-arc serves to give the absence of the former protagonist a tangible dramatic function. Few central plotlines and games throughout the season actually revolve around the resolution of this mystery. Thus, the overarching whodunnit plot ultimately appears as a meta-commentary, indicating the serial network's awareness of Frank Underwood's tangible absence to audiences.

The second and more crucial overarching plotline is the thriller plot revolving around the struggle for political dominance between President Claire Underwood (later Hale) and the wealthy and influential Shepherd family. Therefore, the series' central agonal *Zero-Sum* game revolves around the struggle of dirty money vs corrupt politics.

8.2.3.1 'Exorcizing' Underwood, Casting off Spacey

It is intriguing how HoC 6 approaches the delicate task of replacing its protagonist while simultaneously attempting to maintain serial continuity. The departure of an actor is a frequent occurrence in serial TV. However, replacing a high-profile star like Kevin Spacey is complicated not only by the actor's global celebrity but also by the distressing circumstances of his departure resulting from a well-known scandal involving allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct. Anticipating the highly aware climate of the immediate post-Me Too-era, HoC 6 thus accompanies Frank Underwood's removal with a palpable normative meta-commentary. In its recalibration, HoC 6 not only removes Frank but embarks to dismantle the fascination he had held for audiences and their narrative encouragement to morally disengage from the former protagonist's despicable diegetic actions in order to 'enjoy the show'.¹¹² Post-mortem, Frank turns from a fascinating anti-hero to a depraved antagonist.

110 See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 319–322.

111 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 8, "Chapter 73", directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186427?trackId=255824129>, 48.28".

112 See Sandrine Sorlin, "Strategies of involvement and moral detachment in *House of Cards*", *Journal of Literary Semantics* 47, no. 1 (Mai 2018): 28.

The newly minted protagonist Claire openly calls her deceased husband and former accomplice her “biggest regret”.¹¹³ She takes up her maiden name, Hale,¹¹⁴ and grows to be physically and emotionally repulsed by the memory of her former accomplice. Listening to Frank’s audio diary, she recoils in disgust and anger and subsequently removes her wedding ring.¹¹⁵ However, it is vital to note that this appalled renunciation of Frank by his former ally, Claire, follows *pragmatic* rather than *intradiegetic* logic. Claire’s hatred of Frank is much more a meta-commentary on the historical actions of Kevin Spacey than a diegetically plausible re-evaluation of the moral disposition of Frank Underwood. Frank, for five seasons, had committed every imaginable crime and atrocity in the book without triggering Claire’s disgust in the slightest. Accordingly, HoC 6 gives little insight into just what made Claire despise her husband so much after all their years of murderous complicity. Anticipating audiences’ awareness of the extratextual reasons for Frank’s notable diegetic absence, the series *pragmatically* positions itself by equipping Claire with a *diegetic* disgust of her deceased former ally. Frank’s new narrative re-evaluation thus mimics the extratextual public reaction to Spacey’s conduct rather than any coherent diegetic development.

8.2.3.2 Establishing the New Normal

“Chapter 66”, HoC 6’s first episode, is mainly occupied with reworking and re-establishing a functioning diegetic situation post-Spacey. In the opening scene, Claire replies to a summary of her first 100 days in office (she is hated): “I thought everybody loves a widow”.¹¹⁶ Audiences learn: Frank is dead, he may have died in his sleep, he may have been murdered. This opening establishes both the reason for Frank’s absence and the season’s principal struggle for Claire: her presidency is in peril. The episode frequently reiterates the finality of Frank’s death (not a given in serial television), for example, when Claire reviews her husband’s official funeral pictures. They show her mourning, bent over a coffin, leaving the face of the deceased notably invisible.¹¹⁷

It is essential to mention here the tangibility of Frank’s absence. The former protagonist, while frequently mentioned, is neither seen nor heard in any way throughout the series.

113 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, “Chapter 70”, directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859,07.38>.”

114 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859,11.30>.”

115 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 8, “Chapter 73”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186427?trackId=255824129,41.11>.”

116 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859,02.00>.”

117 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859,06.17>.”

This demonstrative exclusion of any trace of Frank that would require the visible or audible involvement of actor Kevin Spacey – i.e., his face or voice – is notable throughout the series. Even when listening to Frank’s audio diary, the former protagonist’s voice is left consciously inaudible. Characters frequently listen to the recording with headphones, leaving audiences behind in a notable silence. When knowledge of an extensive diary passage is necessary to provide context, Doug Stamper, Frank’s former confidant, recites what he hears in a trance-like state.¹¹⁸

Given that Frank is a constant presence throughout the episode, both in dismissive dialogues about him and in storylines surrounding his death, the notable absence of audible and visible traces of the former protagonist is more than the result of an inability to have Spacey act in these scenes. HoC 6 deliberately creates situations that would, under normal circumstances, require the physical cooperation of the actor, for example, by introducing his funeral picture and *audio* diary. However, the series subsequently omits to show Frank’s face or play his voice, thus formally emphasising the distance it aims to put between itself and the actor. Likewise, on an extratextual plane, Spacey had been erased from all promotional materials. Even Netflix’s automated previews no longer include the actor even though the series remains available in full on the streaming service.

8.2.3.3 Saving the Bird – The ‘Exorcism’ of Frank Underwood

In its continuous attempt to provide both a coherent and tangible *dramatic* and *pragmatic* distance from Spacey, the recalibration of HoC 6 consciously evokes notions of a haunted White House and subsequent spiritual cleansing, making Frank’s removal resemble an exorcism. In the second scene of “Chapter 66”, HoC 6’s first episode, Claire, alone in the White House, complains about mysterious sounds coming from her husband’s former bedroom.¹¹⁹ The notion of a ghostly presence is evoked as staff remain unable to explain the phenomenon. After a moment of intense solitary confrontation with the seemingly supernatural presence, Claire discovers a bird trapped in the drywall and violently grabs it. After a cut, she appears in a long shot walking through the mansion’s corridors with an expressionless face and the motionless, seemingly dead bird in her hand.¹²⁰ The scene echoes HoC’s very first scene. In “Chapter 1”, then-protagonist Frank kills a wounded dog without flinching.¹²¹ Referencing this initial scene of the series and Frank’s very first parabasis, Claire turns ad spectatores for the first time in season 6, stating:

118 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, “Chapter 72”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859, 01.20>.”

119 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859, 06.34>.”

120 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859, 08.41>.”

121 *House of Cards*, season 1, episode 1, “Chapter 1”, directed by David Fincher, written by Beau Willimon, aired February 1, 2013, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/70248289?trackId=200257859, 00.50>.”

It's not true what he told you all those years ago. That there are two kinds: useful and useless. There is only one kind. Pain is pain.¹²²

After this statement, she glances down at the bird in her hand – audiences only now realise it is still alive – with an unreadable expression of violence and pity. After a moment of uncertainty in which audiences are left to fear for the bird's life, Claire states, “Francis, I'm done with you”,¹²³ before releasing the animal. Then she adds softly ad spectatores, “There, no more pain”.¹²⁴

As part of the newly recalibrated HoC 6's exposition, this scene is remarkable. Evoking tropes of haunting spirits, exorcism, and the bird-symbolism of peace and liberation, it showcases the finality of Frank's removal and of Claire's (and the series') renunciation of the former protagonist (and the actor that played him).

The bird scene, with its reference to HoC's first episode, in which Frank kills a dog, furthermore, serves as a tool for establishing the new protagonist as different from her predecessor. In his discussion of popular screenplay practices, Blake Snyder states that an exposition should contain a “Save the Cat”-moment,¹²⁵ an initial example of a character's behaviour that demonstrates to audiences just what kind of person they are facing. A film's hero might, e.g., save a cat in order to showcase his*her heroic attributes. In a conscious reversal of this famous dictum, Frank, in HoC's initial exposition, did not only fail to save the cat but instead killed a dog. Breaking a standard convention of popular entertainment that animals, particularly dogs, must never come to harm, this reverse-“Save the Cat”-scene clearly established Frank as a ruthless, irreverent villain at the series' outset.

On the other hand, HoC 6's new protagonist Claire, after a moment's hesitation (and several moments of uncertainty for audiences), *saves the bird* with express reference to her predecessor's diverging decision. As a central moment of HoC 6's exposition, this scene not only evokes the renunciation of all things Frank Underwood but suggests that, with the new protagonist, a less violent, more humane style will rule the series. Following the need for serial repetition, however, this impression proves to be misleading.

Contrary to her claim, neither Claire nor the narrative of HoC 6 are ‘done’ with Frank Underwood. With dozens of plotlines to recalibrate and new Claire-centred conflicts to establish, the former protagonist's removal dominates “Chapter 66” and, indeed, much of the season. In a conversation that can only be called a conscious meta-commentary,

122 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859_09.10.”

123 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859_09.35.”

124 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859_09.44.”

125 See Blake Snyder, “Rette die Katze!: Das ultimative Buch übers Drehbuchschreiben”, 3rd ed., transl. Kerstin Winter (Berlin: Autorenhaus, 2020), 14f.

Claire and her former friend and future adversary Annette Shepherd have the following exchange:

Claire: Whatever Frank promised or did is buried with him.

Annette: No, I know. We all need to let him go, start from some kind of scratch.¹²⁶

The phrase “start from some kind of scratch” can easily be seen as HoC 6’s unofficial motto.

“Chapter 66” concludes with another protagonist’s parabasis establishing the series’ whodunnit-arc. Ad spectatores, Claire states: “I know you want to know what really happened to him. Because a man like Francis doesn’t just die. That would be – what’s the word? – convenient”.¹²⁷ Accompanied by the sinister HoC-musical theme, she takes Frank’s heavy college ring, puts it over her middle finger and shows it, with a side glance to the audience, in a typical gesture of contempt. The scene is of vital importance because it concludes the expositional episode by finalising the renunciation of Frank Underwood and enthroning Claire as the new protagonist. It also serves to correct the previous impression of a softened Claire, which the episode had consciously evoked in the earlier “save the bird”-moment.

8.2.3.4 Projecting Emotions

Part of Claire’s enthronisation as HoC 6’s new protagonist is an increased focus on her backstory, most notably, frequent flashbacks (a new formal device for the series) to her surviving a sexual assault as a young girl. A flashback in “Chapter 66” first introduces this new information about the character.¹²⁸ However, throughout the season, the frequent flashbacks to Claire’s surviving the assault have no notable influence on her actions. The series likewise fails to explore how the event affected her character’s earlier development. Thus, Claire’s backstory serves the essentially *pragmatic* purpose of aligning her with the extratextual discourse surrounding the MeToo movement. It positions Claire opposite all perpetrators of sexual assault, a move which implicitly includes Kevin Spacey and, by extension, Frank Underwood. While Frank is not a part of Claire’s traumatic memories, the series creates a tangible yet undefined emotional link between Claire’s traumatic childhood memories and the newly found dislike for her dead husband, whose physical and moral deconstruction had – at the point of the first flashback scene – been the episode’s primary focus.

For contemporary audiences, Frank’s strong association with the historical actor that played him for five seasons quickly summons notions of patriarchal dominance and sex-

126 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 18.57”.

127 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 49.10”.

128 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 25.54”.

ual misconduct. Introducing the theme of sexual assault into its narrative, HoC 6 creates a link between the actions of its former star and his fictional role that is, however, not supported by diegetic events themselves. Thus Kevin Spacey’s actions become an implicit part of HoC’s diegesis. Frank’s moral dismissal ultimately does not derive from the despicable crimes he perpetrated throughout seasons 1–5, crimes of which Claire had been an integral part. It results, instead, from an emotional connection of Frank with historical sexual violence. It is only through this extratextual detour that the series can perform the conjuring trick of consolidating the opposing requirements of allowing its new protagonist Claire to morally dismiss Frank Underwood (and by extension, Kevin Spacey) without having to question the diegetic depravity the Underwoods had indulged in for five previous seasons and thus endanger the series continuity.

8.2.3.5 Claire, The ‘MeToo-President’?

A demonstrative emphasis on presenting a woman’s experience of power accompanies Claire’s ascent to the role of protagonist and the fictional US presidency. This is partly a reflection of changing historical sensibilities in the immediate post-MeToo-era and partly a further means to noticeably distance her from associations with white male privilege and structural abuse. Claire appears as a female protagonist who constantly struggles with and reflects on her position as a woman in the White House. Even before its recalibration, HoC’s later seasons had made some concessions to the changing climate in mainstream discourse (or at least among Netflix’s progressive-leaning prestige audiences). Following the MeToo movement, the series’ original, dominant *Macbeth* structure, in which Frank represented HoC’s uncontested protagonist and Claire served as the Macbethian archetype of a strong woman *behind* a powerful man, had already seen some adjustments in HoC 5’s finale. As I have pointed out, in season five, Claire had undergone a structural development to take a coequal position as Frank’s antagonist.

Claire’s promotion to protagonist came as the result of an extratextual process involving the very thing progressive activism had been struggling for: holding powerful white men (in this case, Kevin Spacey) accountable for abuses of their unjust dominance (here, sexual misconduct). Therefore, the *pragmatic* aim to demonstratively incorporate anti-patriarchal contemporary discourse into HoC 6 is no surprise. Whether this adjustment happened because of the moral conviction of the series’ historical production actors or in order to assure the season’s continued commercial appeal to progressive target audiences is not for this study to discern. However, it should be noted that the recalibrations in HoC took place as a *reaction* to contemporary developments. One should be very clear here: HoC incorporated progressive discourse as a result and by-product of the unavoidable recalibration following Kevin Spacey’s dismissal. This inclusion is *part* of the recalibration, not the *reason* for recalibration. This fact makes HoC 6 a prime example of the reactive nature of popular seriality. Popular serial narratives can quickly incorporate discursive and sociocultural developments once they have reached a critical mass among target audiences. However, whether they can spearhead or even advance societal change is another much-contested matter that is not for this study to discern.

Superficially, HoC 6 introduces Claire’s journey as a developmental arc from Macbethian behind-the-scenes machinator to emancipated frontstage power player. Anette Shepherd, accordingly, states about Claire: “She can’t decide if she’s Lady Macbeth or

Macbeth”,¹²⁹ referencing the series’ earlier allusions to Shakespearian tradition and, indeed, the former configuration of Frank and Claire’s relationship game. However, as I will discuss in the coming section, this alleged development is not actually supported by diegetic fact as the static character Claire Underwood had been ready for her position as central power player from the series’ outset.

Claire is a highly self-confident president, keenly aware of her ability as well as the discriminatory structural prejudice surrounding her as a ‘woman president’. Nevertheless, she is, from the start, unafraid to confront prejudice. To a soldier who asks her if she has a plan for an ensuing war, Claire responds, “Would you have asked me that if I were a man?”.¹³⁰ To a supreme court judge of colour, she states: “The reign of the middle-aged white man is over”,¹³¹ in explicit reference not only to contemporary women’s rights movements but also to the Black Lives Matter movement that had finally reached the more progressive parts of mainstream discourse at the time of the season’s recalibration in 2018.

In “Chapter 70”, Claire stages a nervous breakdown as part of a tactical misdirection. In a parabasis, she explains how her seemingly overwhelming emotionality mirrors “America’s worst fear when it comes to a female in the Oval Office”.¹³² The move demonstrates how the idea of burdensome ‘womanly emotions’ is still a functioning prejudice in her world. In another scene, a story about a former abortion of Claire’s at 16 weeks “while married” is being used as a weapon against her.¹³³ This, again, mirrors the progressive historical discourse that criticises the pervasive structural discrimination against women and their right to physical self-determination and its lamentable vitality in the US and beyond.

By actively engaging with structural prejudice, HoC 6 attempts the narrative exploration of a decidedly female experience of the presidency. Following this narrative path, Claire turns out pregnant.¹³⁴ From “Chapter 72” onwards, her pregnancy is visible and – contrary to sexist lore – impedes neither her ability as president nor her ruthlessness as a

129 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 2, “Chapter 67” directed by Ami Canaan Mann, written by by Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, aired November 2, 2018 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186421?trackId=200257859>, 19.18”.

130 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 24.05”.

131 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 2, “Chapter 67”, directed by Ami Canaan Mann, written by by Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, aired November 2, 2018 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186421?trackId=200257859>, 38.00”.

132 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, “Chapter 70”, directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859>, 07.25”.

133 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, “Chapter 70”, directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859>, 53.50”

134 Revealed in *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 53.16”.

political machinator and hands-on murderer. Refuting all stereotypes about female leadership, Claire states about her presidency: “I will be father, mother, leader and friend”.¹³⁵

The formal changes in the protagonist’s parabasis mirror the series’ more differentiated reflection on structural dominance. While Frank used the parabasis mainly as a tool for elaborations and extensive self-expression, Claire’s parabases are much more formally refined, as I will show in the coming sections. Other than Frank, she rarely uses them for elaborate lectures or to reassert her discursive dominance. Instead, Claire’s parabases are short, often embedded as an integral part of a larger narrative flow and, thus, retain an almost dialogical quality. One might see this as a representation of the unfounded and somewhat sexist notion that women wield power differently than men (a notion that, at least in Claire’s case of serially repetitive murder and mayhem, remains entirely unfounded). In any case, it is undoubtedly a formal renunciation of Frank’s decidedly patriarchal style as a diegetic leader, narrative protagonist, and meta-commentator.

8.2.3.5.1 The Patronage for Pleasure Game

Claire’s reflections on and refutation of structural discrimination and gender bias are essential principles in HoC 6 that extend to other characters. Claire’s advisor Jane Davis, for example, is not only experienced, ambitious, and ruthless but shown to engage in a transactional sexual affair with a younger man.¹³⁶ This is notable because, until recently, mainstream entertainment had reserved the presentation of relationships between people of different ages, genders, material standing and traditional physical attractiveness for the *older man-younger woman* configuration of what I have previously called the *Patronage for Pleasure* game (P4P game, see chapter 7).

The P4P configuration is one of the most prevalent motifs of patriarchal storytelling and is omnipresent in pre-MeToo-fiction. For example, in HoC’s season 1, Frank Underwood engages in a sexual affair with the ambitious young journalist Zoe Barnes. The relationship ultimately rests on the powerful Underwood providing Barnes with insider information while she acts as his secret press mouthpiece. However, Barnes is sexualized (and uses her sexuality as a tool to convince Underwood) from the very beginning of their relationship.¹³⁷

The older male, younger female P4P relationship usually entails a Parent (him)-Child (her) transactional setup akin to a sexualised *Mentor Student* game. Accordingly, for the duration of their P4P game, the much younger Barnes not only looks up to Underwood – remaining at his beck and call at all times – but frequently receives accompanying lectures together with the insider intelligence he provides.

135 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, “Chapter 72”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859_06.49”.

136 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, “Chapter 70”, directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859_36.50”.

137 See *House of Cards*, season 1, episode 1, “Chapter 1”, directed by David Fincher, written by Beau Willimon, aired February 1, 2013, https://www.netflix.com/watch/70248289?trackId=200257859_31.42”.

The P4P game works under the patriarchal assumption that a man's attractiveness stems from his intellectual qualities and material dominance, while a woman's attractiveness stems from her physical desirability (often determined by highly reductive and ultimately racist standards). In TV storytelling, the P4P game usually comes with a gratuitous sexualisation of female bodies that had, until recently, been considered an integral part of the "cultural logic of gentrification"¹³⁸ governing the subscription-based so-called 'Quality TV' aimed at prestige audiences.

In the conventional patriarchal reading of the P4P game, sexual agency and sexual desire remain exclusively male traits. A women's sexuality appears, at best, as a tool for calculated self-advancement rather than a natural urge (see Zoe Barnes). Thus, HoC 6-character Jane Davis' affair with a young male prostitute must be considered a conscious inversion of the established patriarchal P4P game. Jane possesses power, money and an attractiveness that is measured by more than purely physical attributes. What is more, she possesses both sexual agency and sexual desire.

The inversion of the P4P game is an essential trope in recent post-MeToo-fiction. Among the examples in this study, it appears almost identically in *DESIGNATED SURVIVOR* (US). Here, President Kirkman's advisor Lorraine Zimmer, herself a confident, experienced, ruthless and powerful political operator as well as an older woman, unapologetically engages in sexual relations with a young male prostitute.¹³⁹

To use the objectification of physically attractive youth and sexually exploitative power imbalances as a fictional trope to emphasise a character's dominance remains a questionable practice, whether it regards male, female, or non-binary people. However, an in-depth discussion of this highly complex issue requires more differentiation than can be achieved here.

8.2.3.5.2 Shifting Power

As a narrative, HoC 6 shows a general shift of power from weakening men to increasingly powerful women. In "Chapter 70", Claire dismisses her disloyal and indecisive cabinet of nondescript (and largely unnamed) old white men to reinstate a cabinet entirely made up of women.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, the habitually overwhelmed VP, Mark Usher, is increasingly getting outmanoeuvred by powerful women on both sides of the central Money vs Politics struggle represented by Claire and her adversary Annette Shepherd. In a highly symbolic

138 As mentioned previously. For mention of term with regards to TV see Dan Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: The Politics of World-Building and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification", in *The Politics of Adaption: Media Convergence and Ideology*, ed. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14.

139 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 1, "#TheSystemIsBroken", directed by Chris Chrismer, written by Adam Stein, aired June 7, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015334?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C56258e2c-79a8-4307-b3a2-f91fab1fe5af-54519506_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C56258e2c-79a8-4307-b3a2-f91fab1fe5af-54519506_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknwn%2C%2C56258e2c-79a8-4307-b3a2-f91fab1fe5af-54519506%7C1%2C%2C, 44.46".

140 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, "Chapter 70", directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859>, 54.56".

presentation of the decline of the patriarchy, the ruthless billionaire Bill Shepherd slowly succumbs to a terminal illness leaving his sister, Annette, to take over as the equally cold-blooded matriarch of the family.¹⁴¹ The diegetic evolution of the Shepherd-siblings structurally mirrors and narratively re-enacts the Underwoods’ own extratextually motivated and much more abrupt transfer of power from a male to a female character.

8.2.3.6 Feigning Development

Claire’s repositioning as HoC’s new protagonist creates a paradox typical for major serial recalibration: an incongruity between the *dramatic logics* of serial repetition and narrative continuity, intradiegetic plausibility, and changed pragmatic requirements. In HoC 6, there is tangible tension between the requirements of retaining the series’ theme of ruthless power politics, the structural need to equip Claire’s character with additional depth that allows her to carry the narrative, and the *pragmatic* extratextual necessity to create a noticeable distance between her and her tainted predecessor, Frank. To introduce credible character development into HoC is made more difficult by the fact that the series had, until its sixth season, been a primarily action-based narrative featuring largely static characters, and its main conflicts had, almost without exception, been external ones.

In order to achieve this problematic consolidation, HoC 6 applies a strategy of simulating a development of Claire’s character that is, in fact, not taking place. In a first step, the series’ exposition endows the new protagonist with additional facets in the shape of a traumatising past and a troublingly complex present in which she seemingly reassesses her previous alliances. However, the exposition simultaneously assures audiences of the continuity of the series’ basic configuration, which requires a stone-cold machinator to navigate the agonal third-degree *Zero-Sum* games of power. The first scene of HoC 6’s second episode, “Chapter 67”, makes this clear. After exerting pressure by insinuating that a newly elected governor of Ohio might have committed election fraud, Claire turns ad spectatores and states: “I promised myself I wouldn’t be like him. That was textbook Francis, wasn’t it?”¹⁴² The scene insinuates a change in Claire’s moral calibration while simultaneously reassuring audiences that, while Claire is a different protagonist, neither her political ambition nor her amoral methods will change.

Claire, stating that her “textbook Francis”-actions defied her personal code of conduct, seems a strange claim for somebody who had, for five previous seasons, been an instrumental part of her husband’s machinations. In season 5, for example, Claire had opposed her husband, not because of moral objections but because her status as a co-equal player had no longer been guaranteed within their original relationship configuration. Accordingly, Claire’s frequent dismissal of Frank’s methods indicates a character development that is, in fact, not taking place. Consequently, no moral reckoning follows

141 The power transfer is largely complete by *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, “Chapter 72”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859>.

142 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 2, “Chapter 67” directed by Ami Canaan Mann, written by by Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, aired November 2, 2018 https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186421?trackId=200257859, 01_30”.

her initial disavowals. Insinuations of inner conflict – e.g., through frequent flashbacks to Claire’s traumatic past – remain vague and serve to evoke an emotional response in audiences while remaining without tangible narrative consequences.

While an adjustment of Claire’s character would be possible during a major recalibration, HoC 6 foregoes this chance to guarantee the serial continuity of its basic configuration: The narrative’s fundamental rule of absolute tenacity in the pursuit of self-interest. As a static character, Claire does not need to grow into the harsh realities of the diegetic presidency, a game for which she is ideally suited as an uncompromisingly tenacious and self-interested player. Her Machiavellian ruthlessness and lust for power are (and remain) diegetic fact in HoC 6. The moral descent that makes Claire a suitable protagonist within HoC’s anti-heroic configuration had, like that of Francis, been completed long before the series’ narrative began. The season’s frequent allusion to character depth and development thus ultimately does not serve to create a narrative foundation for character-based action but, once again, to superficially distance the newly minted protagonist Claire from the extratextual shadow of Kevin Spacey.

8.2.3.7 Narrative Stalemate

Claire Underwood’s faux character development hints toward a general problem within the serial narrative structure of HoC: the protagonists’ developmental arcs have nowhere to go. The Macbethian protagonists Frank and Claire reach their final state of moral decay more or less by season one (he has committed murder, she has enabled him). Shakespeare’s Macbeths ultimately struggle and suffer the consequences of their machinations (her: madness, him: military defeat, both: death). However, serialities’ aim at perpetuity prevents the Underwoods from entering similar developmental arcs. Likewise, HoC’s fundamental rule – absolute tenacity in unconditionally ruthless power games – precludes the Underwoods from entering an alternative redemptive arc. The series’ very own configuration thus has its protagonist trapped in a static state of bottomless moral decay and unconditional strife, where personal development cannot occur.

Accordingly, HoC, almost from the start, depends on external events for its plot. The Underwoods’ character development – until season 6 – was essentially simulated by constantly adjusting and re-adjusting their relationship to external diegetic events. However, following the dramatic requirements of perpetual serial continuity, they ultimately always reset their relationship to the initial *Macbeth* game at the end of an arc. After Frank’s removal from the narrative and without the couple’s *Macbeth* game, HoC 6 faces significant structural challenges in simulating Claire’s character development. As a result, she ultimately remains a somewhat stale character.

At the outset of HoC, Frank was motivated not only by ambition but by a thirst for revenge that moved him – together with Claire as a *Macbethian* actant-unit – much closer to the creative function of *The Vice* and other classic fictional villains and tricksters who serve to offset and, thus, enliven the ruling order.¹⁴³ However, with the attainment of the

143 A famous example of this is Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s mischievous Mephistopheles whose involuntarily creative purpose is to prevent humanity from seeking “unqualified repose”, as the play’s fictional Deity elaborates: J.W. Goethe, *Faust: Der Tragödie erster Teil* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986), 12. Translation from: “die unbedingte Ruh”.

US presidency, in season 2’s finale, “Chapter 26”, Frank becomes a largely reactive character, a devious but preserving spirit. At the start of HoC 6, the newly minted protagonist Claire inherits Frank’s static structural position within the narrative. She starts her reign as the series’ protagonist, already occupying the presidency and thus in a position where she has attained everything for which she could hope. She now is the ruling order. Her primary role within the narrative structure is no longer to offset, enliven, and – through the threat of destruction – stir the creative energies of her world, which usually makes anti-heroes and villains such compelling characters. Claire is, by no means, a creative spirit within her universe. She is a reactive force, attempting to preserve her position and put out the many fires she and her husband had lit on their way to the top. The compositional problem of HoC’s later seasons thus becomes this: with the devious characters at the top of the ruling order for six seasons, the energising narrative function of evil gets lost. When everyone is viscous, The Vice itself becomes order.

It is important to note, too, that the ambition of the Underwoods, while monstrous, remains ultimately limited. While the trickster and The Vice aim to see the world descend into chaos, Frank and Claire ultimately strive for the US presidency and to shroud their dominance in a veil of legal legitimacy. Neither Claire nor Frank try, at any moment, to overthrow the systemic structures that surround the positions of power they crave. They break laws and circumvent checks and balances, but all their actions serve the ultimate purpose of attaining an existing political office. Within the logic of absolute power politics, the Underwoods’ ambition remains limited not for reasons of moral restraint but a lack of destructive imagination.

8.2.3.8 Recalibrating the Protagonist’s Parabasis: The Cinematic Metalepsis

As discussed previously, the frequent address *ad spectatores* of HoC’s protagonists have often been cited as the series’ most famous and most fascinating formal feature. In HoC 6, this ability transitions from the dismissed protagonist Frank to his predecessor Claire undergoing significant formal adjustments in the process.

As I mentioned earlier, Jahrhaus has discussed Frank’s breaking of the fourth wall as a parabasis.¹⁴⁴ The term originates in the dramatic tradition of the attic comedy, where it denotes a standard scene in which the choir, having put down their masks, addresses the audience directly.¹⁴⁵ As a formal feature, the parabasis, as Jahrhaus notes, “violates the ontological status of their world”.¹⁴⁶ It constitutes a “rigorous form of breaking fiction” in film¹⁴⁷ and thus carries powerful notions of creating authenticity and seemingly revealing ‘truth’. However, within a TV series’ network, the characters’ parabases address not

144 Oliver Jahrhaus, “An die Adresse des Publikums: Parabase und politische Theologie in House of Cards”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46, no. 3 (2016): 349–368.

145 Martin Huber and Elisabeth Böhm, “Parabase”, LiGo, September 9, 2009, <http://www.li-go.de/%0Bdefinitionsansicht/drama/parabase.html>.

146 Oliver Jahrhaus, “An die Adresse des Publikums: Parabase und politische Theologie in House of Cards”, *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 46, no. 3 (2016): 363. My translation: “den ontologischen Status ihrer Welt verletzen”.

147 Ansgar Schlichter, “Parabase”, March 12, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/p:parabase-4662>. My translation: “rigorose Form der Fiktionsbrechung”.

the empirical recipients but the “*dramatis personae*”¹⁴⁸ of a fictional audience situated at a higher ontological plane within the diegesis. In the attic tradition of the theatrical parabasis, there tended to be a high level of overlap (albeit not total congruence) between the *dramatis personae* of the diegetic audience addressed by the choir and the physically present spectators. The temporal and spatial dispersion of cinematic/televsual production and reception, on the other hand, emphasise the difference between both entities – diegetic audiences and empirical recipients – more clearly.

The breaking of the fourth wall, in HoC, ultimately is a form of what Dorrit Cohn has called ‘interior metalepsis’, that is, a changing of narrative planes “that occurs between two levels of the same story”.¹⁴⁹ While Frank and Claire’s parabases transcend the level of the characters’ common diegesis, they do not transcend narrative levels. Other than in the classic metalepsis, which Gérard Genette defines as a narrative device utilising the “intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator” into the diegesis or of diegetic characters changing onto a metadiegetic plane,¹⁵⁰ in HoC, no character ever gains a clear meta-perspective on the discursive character of his*her world that would set him*her on par with the extradiegetic narrator. Instead, Frank and Claire’s transcending the common diegesis simply takes them to a diegetic plane of a higher order. Despite their ability to seemingly break the fourth wall, the fictional world they inhabit and the fictional audience they address are equally real for both characters. Likewise, their metalepses do not open up a secondary story but serve as a contextual addition (Frank) and a formal bracket for spatially and temporally diverse events and people within the diegesis (Claire).

In HoC, the parabasis is a formal marker of the series’ protagonist. Claire, e.g., gains the ability to break the fourth wall at the very end of HoC 5’s cliffhanger finale, formally emphasising her elevation to a coequal position in the narrative.¹⁵¹ As HoC 6’s new protagonist, she makes abundant use of her newfound access to the higher diegetic plane; however, it is decidedly different from her predecessor.

During HoC’s Frank-period, the parabasis mainly served as a means for the protagonist to elaborate on his complicated machinations and the systemic affordances around him. With Frank’s address ad spectatores, the notion of patriarchal discursive dominance (colloquially named “mansplaining”) was never far away. Beyond giving its protagonist additional space to express himself, HoC 1–5 made little use of the formal possibilities that come with a character transcending the ontological boundaries of his*her world.

With Claire taking over as protagonist in HoC 6, the series expands the relatively common theatrical motif of a character explaining him*herself to the *dramatis personae* of a diegetic audience. Her parabases vary between addressing the *dramatis personae*

148 Following observations by Sandrine Sorlin, “Breaking the Fourth Wall: The Pragmatic Functions of the Second Person Pronoun in House of Cards”, in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns*, ed. Laure Gardelle and Sandrine Sorlin (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub., 2015), 129.

149 Dorrit Cohn, transl Lewis S. Gleich, “Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme”, *Narrative* 20, no. 1 (January 2012): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2012.0003>.

150 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 244.

151 *House of Cards*, season 5, episode 13, “Chapter 65”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired May 30, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80104197?trackId=255824129>, 53:19”.

of the audience and her principal antagonist, Doug Stamper, across diegetic space and time. Combined with significant formal refinement, they become a decisively cinematic feature that serves to connect different spatial and temporal planes within the diegesis.

For example, during a speech to an assembly of soldiers, Claire suddenly turns ad spectatores, asking, “Are you still there?”.¹⁵² Apart from her direct glance into the camera, an audible change in sound further indicates that Claire has just broken onto a higher ontological plane no longer shared by the other inhabitants of her world. Her voice is now played from the same soundtrack as the series’ extradiegetic music and therefore gains an audible immediacy (a new formal refinement of the protagonist’s parabasis). Throughout her speech, Claire continuously breaks in and out of this higher ontological plane (and the associated soundtrack), alternating between speaking to the troops and *ad spectatores*. “Do you miss Francis?” she asks the ‘audience’ and states, “Whatever Francis told you the last five years, don’t believe a word of it”.¹⁵³ Furthermore, she promises, “It’s going to be different for you and me. I’m going to tell you the truth”.¹⁵⁴ During another speech, Claire states, to her intradiegetic public, “no one should ever feel unsafe”, then ad spectatores, “In her own home”.¹⁵⁵ Again, a change of the soundtrack and a direct glance into the camera indicate the higher diegetic plane on which this remark takes place.

These scenes mix two ontological planes, the world inhabited by all characters and the plane ‘beyond the fourth wall’, where only Claire can go. Moving Claire’s voice from the soundtrack shared by all characters to that reserved for extradiegetic additions like music further highlights her transcendent abilities. However, while Claire becomes a second-order observer of diegetic events, none of her comments throughout the series betray any extradiegetic insight into her world’s ultimately discursive fictional nature.

With their significant editorial refinement, the parabases in HoC 6 serve a decidedly cinematic function and become part of the narrative’s formal flow itself. They are frequently used to link temporal planes – e.g., Claire’s flashbacks and the diegetic present. For example, in one flashback that shows the aftermath of Claire being assaulted as a child, her unsupportive mother asks, “Why can’t you just do as your told?”. After a hard cut, audiences find themselves back in the diegetic present with an adult Claire who remarks in a parabasis, “Why indeed?”.¹⁵⁶

152 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 21.04”.

153 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 22.34”.

154 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 1, “Chapter 66”, directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186420?trackId=200257859>, 22.57”.

155 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 2, “Chapter 67” directed by Ami Canaan Mann, written by by Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, aired November 2, 2018 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186421?trackId=200257859>, 04.50”.

156 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 2, “Chapter 67” directed by Ami Canaan Mann, written by by Frank Pugliese and Melissa James Gibson, aired November 2, 2018 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186421?trackId=200257859>, 10.49”.

HoC 6's use of cinematic parabasis grows more and more formally intricate as the season progresses. Towards its finale, "Chapter 73", the protagonist Claire is no longer the only one to break the fourth wall. Her, at this point, principal antagonist, Doug Stamper (Frank's former Chief of Staff), begins to do the same. The parabasis here becomes a means to formally link the two adversaries, Doug and Claire, via a higher diegetic plane and emphasise the former's elevation to coequal antagonist.

At the beginning of "Chapter 72", Doug finishes quoting Frank's diary, then turns and looks defiantly directly into the camera, non-verbally breaking the fourth wall for the first time.¹⁵⁷ After a hard cut, we see Claire waking from her sleep, breaking the fourth wall with her gaze as well. While a significant physical distance separates both opponents, this shared non-verbal parabasis creates a clear connection between the two characters through a formally implied interaction on a higher ontological plane within the diegesis. Situated at the pre-finale's beginning, it serves as a formal foreshadowing of the coming showdown.

"Chapter 72" ends with a similar 'face-off' between the two opponents. During a TV interview, Claire turns directly to the diegetic TV camera, once again breaking away from the general diegetic plane. A cut shows Doug watching her on his TV at home. It becomes clear that Claire is neither speaking to her diegetic audience nor ad spectatores. Instead, she uses the parabasis as an interior metalepsis to issue a challenge to her final adversary, Doug, on yet another diegetic plane inhabited only by the two opponents. She states, "I know you saw it too. He [Frank] was impossible to know, like all comen. He played us all. Come and get me, Doug".¹⁵⁸ Subsequently, Doug himself turns directly to the camera and a parabasis and states, this time ad spectatores, "She leaves me no choice".¹⁵⁹ A further cut shows Claire in a rocking chair, singing to her unborn baby while slowly turning to glance directly into the camera, again ad spectatores.¹⁶⁰ The connecting parabases of Doug and Claire serve as a formal bracket for the episode. It begins and ends with the two adversaries' interaction on a shared diegetic plane of higher order.

The mixing of temporal, spatial, and ontological planes and the two adversaries' connection through shared parabasis formally support and emotionally intensify the series' otherwise incongruous showdown. In the setup of the series' finale, Doug's participation in the protagonist's parabasis formally elevates him to the status of coequal player in his 3rd-degree intensity *Zero-Sum* game with Claire. The formal elevation of Doug to coequal

157 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859, 02.52>.

158 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859, 52.11>.

159 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859, 53.11>.

160 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859, 53.56>.

player with parabasis privileges formally supports the narrative’s relatively abrupt reduction of its numerous conflicts to a simple two-player game. The narrative itself largely fails to provide an intradiegetically plausible justification for why the conflict between Doug and Claire, of all things, should constitute HoC 6’s final showdown. However, as the coming section will show, the shared parabasis bestows an emotionally evocative and dominant formal continuity on the two adversaries’ endgame that makes audiences *feel* like they are watching the final resolution of the series’ many conflicts.

8.2.3.9 Simulating Resolution

Conclusions are scarce in serial television as series often end abruptly when they are no longer feasible as entertainment commodities.¹⁶¹ HoC 6 is a rare enough example for a TV season that is aware of its own task to resolve, as far as possible, the many plotlines accumulated during its previous run and to present conclusive fates for the series’ most prominent characters. As *pragmatic* logic compels a series to aim for potential perpetuity, conclusions of any kind are a difficult enough task for any series, even without the additional burden of a major recalibration. HoC 6 accordingly applies some notable shortcuts to resolve its central plotlines, mainly in the guise of reductive interventions and simulating resolution through formal composition.

HoC 6 chooses a relatively simple way to conclude many of its loose narrative threads: a diegetic ‘purge’, following the motto “out with the old”, pronounced by Claire in a sinister double-entendre foreshadowing.¹⁶² “Chapter 71” features the orchestrated death or disposal of several long-running characters: the veteran journalist Tom Hammer-schmidt,¹⁶³ the comparatively idealistic ex-foreign secretary Cathy Durant,¹⁶⁴ and her Machiavellian advisor Jane Davis¹⁶⁵ are killed on Claire’s orders. The corrupt VP Mark Usher is prosecuted for alleged illegal Russian contacts¹⁶⁶ and subsequently “gutted”, as

161 See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 319.

162 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 18.40”

163 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 49.46”.

164 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 49.51”.

165 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, “Chapter 71”, directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 39.20”.

166 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 5, “Chapter 70”, directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Jason Horwitch and Charlotte Stoudt, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186424?trackId=200257859>, 49.11”.

he himself puts it, throughout the season's purge episode.¹⁶⁷ The comparatively abrupt termination of several of the series' more central characters serves to radically simplify the season's plot structure, which, over six seasons, had accumulated significant narrative baggage.

The series' *dramatic* attempt to conclude, condense, and consolidate leads to several of Claire's main adversaries, most notably the Shepherd Family and Doug Stamper, joining forces on their quest to kill the president. The sinister matriarch Annett Shepherd accordingly states, "Doug, my goal and yours have become the same".¹⁶⁸ With all major narrative threads either dropped, resolved through the prompt neutralisation of members of its core ensemble, or combined into one consolidated murderous effort, the season's showdown ultimately concentrates on the conflict between Doug and Claire as its conclusive and decisive struggle. As Claire notes in a previous encounter between the two adversaries, "Doug, Tom Hammerschmidt is dead... Cathy, Jane; Bill Shepherd is going to prison, Mark has no one to turn to. It's just you and me".¹⁶⁹

However, the series ignores the intradiegetic reality that many of the existing plot-lines, for example, the season's various latent political scandals and machinations, a struggle involving Syria and the Russian president Petrov, or the Shepherd's grievances with Claire, are by no means conclusively tied to Doug Stamper's murderous undertaking. Therefore, like so much in HoC 6, the season's finale largely relies on formal tools to simulate an otherwise elusive coherent resolution.

Following *intradiegetic* logic, Doug's ultimate death does little to resolve the dominant conflicts of HoC 6. politics. After Doug's passing, the sinister Shepherds remain just as wealthy, influential, and antagonistic as before, Russia stays a potent adversary, and various damaging secrets about the Underwood's sinister past keep floating dangerously close to the revelatory surface. However, the season creates the *illusion* of conclusiveness through various formal and compositional means. It (1) declares "Chapter 73" its finale, thus priming audiences to expect and look for resolution. It (2) builds up Doug as Claire's main adversary through formal *mise-en-scène* (above all the aforementioned shared protagonist's parabasis). The season (3) repositions the resolution of its overarching but ultimately secondary whodunnit-arc as the finale's central conflict. While the question of who killed Frank played a relatively minor role in many of the season's central conflicts, the revelation of Doug as the murderer and the resulting resolution of the whodunnit-arc gives the series' finale a partly conclusive appeal.

Doug Stamper's position as a prominent member of the series' character ensemble and his increased formal prominence ensure that his subsequent death *feels* like the satisfying conclusion to the consolidated narrative thread. He, by this time, compositionally

167 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, "Chapter 71", directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 21.50".

168 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 7, "Chapter 72", directed by Alik Sakharov, written by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186426?trackId=200257859>, 44.51".

169 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 6, "Chapter 71", directed by Louise Freidberg, written by Jason Horwitch and Jerome Hairston, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186425?trackId=200257859>, 50.54".

represents the series' remaining antagonists. The dramatic circumstances of his death (Claire stabs him, then suffocates him in the Oval Office) and their formal *mise-en-scène* further establish the dominant conclusive impression of the series' final scene. Audiences leave Claire with her fiercest adversary, the envoy of both her deceased husband and her political foes, dead in her arms. While loosening her grip on Doug's now lifeless mouth, she states in a soothing voice, “There, no more pain,” before glaring, once more, into the camera in a final non-verbal parabasis.¹⁷⁰ Claire's last words create a powerful formal bracket to the series' beginning, referencing both Frank's and her own remarks from their respective expositional Kill-the-dog/ Save-the-bird-moments at the beginning of their respective runs as protagonists in seasons 1 and 6. This bracket and the sinister, soothing finality of Claire's “No more pain”-remark, together with audiences' knowledge that they are, in fact, watching the final moments of a series' finale, create a compelling emotional *impression* of coherent conclusion, however unfounded in intradiegetic reality it may be.

8.3 Conclusion: An Ending Exemplifying the Serial Triple Logic

As a uniquely tangible example of the conflictive *triple logic* of popular serial narrative, this chapter examined the complex structural and formal adjustments that accompanied the recalibration of the sixth and final season of the US series HoC following the dismissal of its star, Kevin Spacey, due to multiple allegations of sexual assault.

The chapter argued that, in its recalibration, HoC 6 faced the task of creating an *intradiegetically* plausible and *dramatically* coherent reason for *pragmatically* replacing its former protagonist, Frank Underwood, with deuteragonist Claire Underwood. The series had to endow Claire with sufficient character depth to enable her to sustain the narrative. Having to contend with the internationally known shadow of the Spacey scandal, it, furthermore, had to position its new protagonist in a way that would notably distance her and the series from association with HoC's tainted former star. As a TV series with a narrative past, HoC 6 simultaneously faced the task of maintaining enough narrative continuity to make its audiences accept the changes as part of the series' evolution.

Examining the various formal and narrative developments that distinguish HoC 6 from its prior seasons, I demonstrated that, in many instances, the series accomplishes this complex undertaking by simultaneously simulating change, continuity or resolution through formal allusion rather than narrative events.

This chapter showed that HoC 6' expositional episode, in many ways, constituted a conscious commentary on Kevin Spacey's dismissal and its own recalibration. The episode's frequent use of tropes alluding to spiritual cleansing and emotional liberation, e.g., through the motif of Claire saving a trapped bird, make the replacement of Frank appear almost like an exorcism of the former protagonist. In the same vein, I argued

170 *House of Cards*, season 6, episode 8, “Chapter 73”, directed by Robin Wright, written by by Melissa James Gibson and Frank Pugliese, aired November 2, 2018, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80186427?trackId=255824129, 51.57>”.

that the series' recalibration of Claire as a survivor of sexual abuse served more to extratextually position her (and the series) on the opposite side of any association with sexual misconduct than to provide the new protagonist with a backstory of notably *intradiegetic* or *dramatic* influence. This chapter likewise contended that to win favour with progressive prestige audiences, HoC 6 established Claire as a demonstratively independent and confident president and her presidency as a decidedly female experience of politics and power, introducing various tropes from the contemporary discourse surrounding women's rights.

It became clear that HoC 6 faced the challenge of evolving Claire from Frank's accomplice, a role she had taken for five seasons, to an independent protagonist who could – in an allusion to historical events – display believable disgust with her former partner in crime while simultaneously retaining the show's signature Machiavellian ruthlessness necessary to maintain serial continuity. I argued that HoC 6 achieves this remarkable feat by essentially feigning character development. The series frequently alludes to Claire's changed relationship with her deceased husband and their difference in political style while, at the same time, having her act exactly as her predecessor did before her.

Examining the series' most prominent formal feature, the protagonist's parabasis, I postulated that Frank's breaking of the fourth wall served mainly as a means to express himself and did little to advance the narrative itself. In HoC 6, on the other hand, the protagonist's parabasis takes on a highly complex narrative function, formally linking different spatial and temporal planes within the diegesis. I contended that, in the series' task to create the illusion of narrative resolution in an ultimately unresolvable accumulation of plotlines typical for long-running series, Claire's refined parabasis serves an invaluable role. The protagonist's parabasis is a crucial formal feature in creating a conclusive illusion for the series' showdown between Claire and her adversary, Doug Stamper, which emerged as the result of a condensation of many of the series' plotlines without, in fact, resolving most of them.

The extent of HoC 6's recalibration is remarkable. The series attempts – and in many ways succeeds – the moral dismissal of an anti-hero (Frank Underwood) whose depravity it had previously spent five years training audiences to overlook and enjoy. HoC 6 likewise succeeds in incorporating contemporary discourses surrounding female empowerment and the exposure of discriminatory and exploitative structures into a narrative that had previously hinged on – and indulged in – showing a privileged white man exploit and manipulate the political system for his own benefit (and brag about it in extensive monologues). However, it became clear that HoC 6, faced with the almost impossible task of achieving an extensive narrative overhaul while retaining serial and narrative continuity under the watchful eyes of a global public, relies heavily on creating emotionally charged illusions of character development and plot resolution that veil its ultimately static configuration.

There lies a pleasing symmetry in the fact that this study's final object of inquiry, the recalibrated finale of one of contemporary polit-fiction's most prominent series, presents such a uniquely marked illustration of the emergent complexity of popular serial television. HoC 6's struggle to adapt to historical circumstances, incorporate extratextual discourse, re-evaluate its own diegetic past, retain its appeal as an entertainment commodity and, through it all, remain a somewhat coherent narrative, is an extreme example

of the varying influences that constitute a TV series’ actor-network and, thus, shape its narrative. As this chapter has shown, the unusual magnitude of HoC 6’s recalibration thus demonstrates the extensive entanglement across ontological planes and between the various diegetic and historical actors of a series’ emergent network, and its, at times, contradictory *triple logic* for which this thesis has argued throughout its chapters.

