



Sebastian Naumann

THE POLITICS OF SERIAL TELEVISION FICTION

Structural Developments,
Narrative Themes,
and the Nonlinear Turn



[transcript] Series and Television Studies

Sebastian Naumann
The Politics of Serial Television Fiction

Sebastian Naumann is a researcher, cultural manager, and advocate in international cultural and media policy. He holds a joint PhD from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and King's College London. An expert in audiovisual media landscapes, political storytelling, and multilateral cross-cultural cooperation, he currently serves as managing director of the International Confederation of Arthouse Cinemas. He has also worked as a researcher, journalist, and project manager in Berlin, London, Paris, New York, and Amsterdam. His research focuses on the politics of storytelling and contemporary cultural and media economies.

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As a dissertation, at the same time: Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Fakultät and London, King's College London, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, 2023, under the title: The Politics of Serial Television Fiction

The publication of this work was supported by the Open Access Publication Fund of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

The publication of this work was supported by the Chair of Neuere Deutsche Literatur (19.-21. Jhd), Prof. Dr. Claudia Stockinger at Sprach- und literaturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.



Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <https://dnb.dnb.de/>



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First published in 2025 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld

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transcript Verlag | Hermannstraße 26 | D-33602 Bielefeld | live@transcript-verlag.de

Cover layout: Maria Arndt, Bielefeld, based on an idea by Avirukh Roy

Cover illustration: Yevhen / AdobeStock

Printed by: Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683>

Print-ISBN: 978-3-8376-7568-9

PDF-ISBN: 978-3-8394-7568-3

EPUB-ISBN: 978-3-7328-7568-9

ISSN of series: 2703-1578

eISSN of series: 2703-1586

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Prof. Dr Claudia Stockinger and Prof. Dr Sarah Atkinson, for their unwavering support, wise counsel, and patience. Without them, I could never have undertaken this incredible journey.

This endeavour would not have been possible without the financial support and academic opportunities provided by the German Academic Scholarship Foundation [*Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*] throughout my PhD.

For their kind hospitality and their unquestioning commitment to maintaining a border-crossing exchange of ideas even during a pandemic, my sincere appreciation goes to Prof. Dr Bernard Banoun, Prof. Dr Hélène Miard-Delacroix, REIGENN and the Faculté des Lettres at Sorbonne Université, Paris and to the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Dr Frank Nack for his support and many invaluable lessons along the way. Moreover, my gratitude goes to PD Dr Manuel Köppen for years of invaluable academic guidance.

To my fellow PhD students and colleagues in Berlin, London, Paris, Amsterdam and beyond, I want to say thank you for the privilege of your company, numerous inspiring exchanges, and for providing a network of support throughout the good and the challenging times.

Finally, to my incredible network of supportive friends and family everywhere: thank you for being at my side and keeping my spirits high during this process.

List of Abbreviations

BN	Baron Noir (series)
CoA game	<i>Coming-of-Age</i> game
DS 60	Designated Survivor: 60 Days (series)
DS US	Designated Survivor (series)
HoC	House of Cards (series)
M2B game	<i>The Monarch's Two Bodies</i> game
MS	Madam Secretary (series)
P2B game	<i>The President's Two Bodies</i> game
P4P game	<i>Patronage for Pleasure</i> game
RM game	<i>Reverse Macbeth</i> game
SN	Sluha Narodu [<i>Servant of the People</i>] (series)
TA	Transaction Analysis
TA game	<i>Treat Me Like an Adult</i> game
WH game	<i>Making a Play for the White House</i> game

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1. Introduction

In the unsteady second decade of the 21st century, fictional representations of politics have taken a notable, centre-stage role. There are, for one, the many instances in which tropes from fictional television and cinema have migrated into the historical political discourse. Most recently, the case of comedian Volodymyr Zelensky, who went from playing an idealised president in the fictional series *SLUHA NARODU (UKRAINE, 2015–2019)* to winning the historical Ukrainian presidency in May 2019, has become famous the world over following the condemnable Russian invasion of his country in February 2022.

The three-finger salute from the dystopian cinema tetralogy *HUNGER GAMES* (Gary Ross, Francis Lawrence: USA, 2012–2015) has emerged as a highly charged symbol in several Asian pro-democracy movements starting in Thailand and appearing in Hongkong, Myanmar and Cambodia.¹ In Denmark, parliamentary opposition started an initiative to ban prostitution shortly after the issue had appeared in the internationally successful polit-series *BORGEN* (Denmark, 2010–2013, renewed for a sequel in 2022).²

In the US, both then-President Barack Obama and then-Vice President Joe Biden engaged with their respective fictional counterparts Frank Underwood (protagonist of the Netflix series *HOUSE OF CARDS*, USA 2013–2018) and Selina Meyer (from the HBO series *VEEP*, USA 2012–2019). In a video released on April fool's day 2015, Obama imitated Underwood's signature move of breaking the fourth wall and speaking ad spectatores, ironically stating into the camera, "Frank learned it from me".³ In a clip streamed at the

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- 1 AFP, "Crowds gather outside court after Hong Kong dissidents charged", *Bangkok Post*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2076319/crowds-gather-outside-court-after-hong-kong-dissidents-charged>; Caleb Quinley, "Three-finger salute: Hunger Games symbol adopted by Myanmar protesters", *The Guardian*, February 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/three-finger-salute-hunger-games-symbol-adopted-by-myanmars-protesters>.
 - 2 Johannes Bongardt, Rieke Gießelmann, Matthias Jüschke et al., "Spiel der Kräfte. Politik, Medien und Familie in Borgen", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 179.
 - 3 The Obama White House, "Happy 5th birthday, West Wing Week", published April 2, 2015, 04:02", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hG1Nmy4gZIk&t=238s>.

2014 White House Correspondents' Dinner, Biden engaged in a humorous exchange with fictional screen-VP Selina Meyer (alias Julia Louis-Dreyfus).⁴

In France, the seasoned socialist functionary Julien Dray first claimed, then disclaimed, to be the inspiration for the slick protagonist of the hit polit-series *BARON NOIR* (France, 2016–2019).⁵ In the UK, then-Secretary for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Oliver Dowden went on record to demand Netflix provide a 'health warning' to inform viewers of the fictional nature of its royal bio-series *THE CROWN* (UK, 2016–present).⁶ It seems that in the 2010s, as Andreas Dörner remarks elsewhere, fictional series have gained such a significant media presence that politicians and citizens feel the need to respond to them.⁷ Accordingly, in late 2021, with the French presidential election on the horizon and echoing established fears of political 'gamification' and US-American cultural hegemony, the French newspaper *Le Monde* published an opinion piece warning of the "netflixisation" of political life.⁸ What is going on here?

Examining contemporary fictional TV series from various cultural and economic contexts, this thesis seeks to answer three fundamental questions:

- (1) How does contemporary TV fiction present politics?
- (2) Which factors inform and influence this presentation?
- (3) How can scholarly analysis discern these various influences on a serial TV text?

While this thesis' interest and methodological approach are, above all, that of textual analysis, it is essential to consider that, in the 2010s, fictional politics, serial storytelling, and the highly dynamic medium of television itself have, in many ways, appeared as co-evolving phenomena. Following the development of more efficient ways for data compression and dissemination as well as multi-device means of reception, the much-discussed nonlinear 'disruption' of TV arguably accelerated early in the decade.⁹ It resulted

4 CBS, "Vice President Joe Biden meets 'Veep' Selina Meyer", video shown at the 2014 White House Correspondent's Dinner, May 4, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/vice-president-joe-biden-meets-veep-selina-meyer/#x>.

5 "Finalement, Julien Dray dit qu'il n'est pas le 'Baron Noir'", *Le Monde*, March 17, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2016/03/17/finalement-julien-dray-dit-qu-il-n-est-pas-le-baron-noir_5991934_4832693.html.

6 Lanre Bakare, "UK culture secretary to ask Netflix for 'health warning' that *The Crown* is fictional", *The Guardian*, November 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/nov/29/the-crown-netflix-health-warning-fictional-oliver-dowden>.

7 See Andreas Dörner, "Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg", in *Politische Kulturforschung Reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 161. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839447475-008>.

8 Solenn de Royer, "La domination culturelle de Netflix a des incidences sur l'écriture des récits politiques", *Le Monde*, December 21, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/12/21/election-presidentielle-2022-la-domination-culturelle-de-netflix-a-des-incidences-sur-l-ecriture-des-recits-politiques_6106855_3232.html.

9 As remarked by Amanda Lotz who identifies the year 2010 as a turning point: In Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2018), see e.g., 50 and 114; also Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed., *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*,

in an (ongoing) overhaul of TV business models, viewer engagement, and arguably storytelling¹⁰ and has since been regarded to have ushered in a new age of television alternately termed “TV IV”¹¹, “‘post-network’ or ‘neo-network’”,¹² or “the phase that comes after ‘TV’”.¹³ Fictional serial formats, in particular, have historically played (and continue to play) a crucial part in the ascent of new, globally operating on-demand services, most prominently Netflix.

Initially, few series had been more tangibly linked to the recent transformations of contemporary TV than the US production *HOUSE OF CARDS* (HoC). The controversial success of the show about a sinister power politician arguably contributed much to putting politics back on the map for fiction in the 2010s. HoC has long been regarded as a turning point for Netflix¹⁴ and general paradigms in recent TV history,¹⁵ thus creating tangible links between fictional politics and the new TV era. The show is indeed a story of many firsts: it was the first high-profile series produced for the emerging streaming giant Netflix, crucial in aiding the portal’s branding as a source for exclusive ‘quality’ content;¹⁶ it was one of the first of its type produced using big data algorithms;¹⁷ it was one of the first to see a full season release:¹⁸ an initially much-contested format that has since become an industry standard. HoC’s success arguably helped pave the way for major Hollywood celebrities to transition semi-permanently from the big to the small screen. It made its star, Kevin Spacey (who was dismissed from the show in 2017

Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; see also Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 2f.

- 10 As discussed in Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press, 2018); also Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed., *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; also Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 11 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 14. And Mareike Jenner, “Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching”, *New Media & Society*, 18, no. 2, (July 2014): 257–273, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541523>.
- 12 Lotz, “Portals”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 13 Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel, “Introduction”, in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.
- 14 See Christel Taillibert and Bruno Cailler, “Video on demand platforms, editorial strategies, and logics of production: The case of Netflix France”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 105.
- 15 See Sarah Atkinson, *Beyond the Screen: Emerging Cinema and Engaging Audiences*, 1st paperback ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 225f.
- 16 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 176.
- 17 Atkinson, *Beyond the Screen*, 225.
- 18 Atkinson, *Beyond the Screen*, 225.

following numerous allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse), a prolific exegete and efficient marketing tool of the early streaming age and further dismantled notions of a cultural hierarchy between the 'superior' medium of film and the 'inferior' medium of TV. Remarkably, in the course of the 2010s, politics has featured prominently in serial TV productions across the globe and various production and circulation models, with a notable increase in non-English-speaking high-profile productions.¹⁹

As serialized fictional politics has become a leitmotif of the early streaming age, any analysis of contemporary TV's presentations of fictional politics must, therefore, almost inevitably coincide with an examination of popular seriality and the evolving affordances of the medium of TV itself.

Popular seriality seems to show a particular tendency to connect cultural, economic, aesthetic, and distinct textual affordances.²⁰ For its analysis, this thesis, therefore, acknowledges that TV series, with their double identity as aesthetic objects and cultural commodities, exist in a field of tension between three distinct but interdependent poles that highly increase their systemic and narrative complexity.²¹ (1) the logic of the fictional world itself, (2) aesthetic textual, formal, and serial logic, and (3) historical social, cultural, and economic affordances. Consequently, the comparative analysis of contemporary TV series and fictional politics requires an integrated, structured approach that accounts for these three factors and their interplay.

The contextual analytical approaches of what has been called New Film / Cinema History and historical poetics – the latter term coined by David Bordwell to describe “the study of how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions, and achieve specific effects”²² – provide valuable methodological vantage points here. In his relatively recent study of the poetics of complex linear television, Jason Mittell accordingly refers to historical poetics as a helpful approach to situating TV's “formal developments within specific contexts of production, circulation, and reception”.²³ The approach examines the medium's “formal elements [...] alongside the historical contexts

19 My overview of pertinent series illustrates this.

20 See the research on popular seriality conducted by the “Popular Seriality Research Unit”: DFG group no. 1091: “Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice”, DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, <http://www.popularseriality.de/>. E.g., Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann, Katja Kanzler et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 42f; Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), e.g., 13, 18 and 26–31; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 12–21.

21 For the term and the systemic origins of complexity see, e.g., Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 13.

22 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 266f.

23 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms”,²⁴ regarding a TV series’ formal innovations as “the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities”.²⁵

However, the specific narrative and systemic complexity of the phenomenon of a TV series poses a methodological and practical challenge. While it is possible to describe many of the varied processes that shape a TV series, it is impractical to ascertain all the discrete factors that determine this series as a complex system and impossible to discern the ultimate extent of their influence. What is more, beyond the contributions of individual agents, the “tension between systemic and agentic dynamics”²⁶ is itself an essential factor for understanding complex narratives as products of the “interplay of micro- and macrosystems”.²⁷

This structural complexity makes many historical approaches to textual analysis somewhat unwieldy and, at times, imprecise, which may be one of the reasons why scholarly practice has often avoided integrating contextual perspectives into textual analysis. The degree to which historical factors influence fictional TV series’ presentation of politics and other tropes is, likewise, a controversial issue. It ties in with the contentious question of whether (and to which degree) fictional serial texts can be read as sociocultural “data”,²⁸ thus allowing inferences about the society that shaped them in “symptomatic reading[s]”.²⁹

Given the structural complexity of TV series, I posit that textual analysis and the comprehensive identification of sociocultural influences within any TV series – if that should be a desirable goal at all – first requires a careful distinction between the various factors and dynamics that shape a serial text.

Therefore, this thesis will (1) provide a much-needed methodical approach for comparative textual analysis that integrates sociocultural, sociotechnical, narratological and aesthetic perspectives. It will (2) give a structured sense of where and how the contemporary affordances of (nonlinear) TV impact upon serial storytelling. (3) It will identify current narrative trends and themes in TV polit-fiction and aid in discerning whether (and to which degree) these are contingent on temporal cultural factors, production context, or inherent in the intrinsic structural affordances of popular serial narratives. Is there,

24 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

25 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 5.

26 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 12.

27 Grishakova and Poulaki, “Narrative Complexity”, 13.

28 For a popcultural perspective see Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 204f. For related discussions of polit-fiction see James F. Davidson, “Political Science and Political Fiction”, *The American Political Science Review* 55, no.4 (December 1961): 856 and 860. And Niko Switek, “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative. Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien. Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 12–14.

29 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), XIII.

e.g., an intrinsic structural affinity between politics and serial storytelling, as has been suggested?³⁰

As long as it can be assumed that media and “cultural representations do not simply mirror reality [but] also construct and fabricate it”,³¹ these are crucial insights that, in a globalizing, transnational media landscape, are closely tied to urgent questions of political participation, cultural dominance, hegemony, inclusion and exclusion. This thesis’ integrated approach will, thus, contribute significantly to understanding one of the most popular and influential narrative TV genres of the 2010s and provide further insight into the structural landscape of contemporary serial TV fiction after the recent nonlinear turn.

Considering the structural complexity of TV series, this thesis will take up what has been described as the “methodological challenge” of analysing popular seriality: “to map in dense descriptive detail the concrete actions and carriers of action that come together, however disharmoniously, in a given serial narrative”.³² It will start by providing a structural model that combines various approaches to describing contemporary television, serial narratives, and systemic and narrative complexity into an operational, analytical tool. Drawing on perspectives from historical poetics, narratology, structural semantics, literary-, film-, TV-, and industry studies, systems theory, Actor-Network Theory,³³ mathematical game theory, game studies, and psychology, this model will provide a unified terminology to describe contemporary popular TV series as complex agential networks in a liminal state between fictional, discursive, and ontic reality. It will, furthermore, allow the modelling of fictional characters’ interactions as regular, recurring ‘games’ that form narrative patterns in conjunction with systemic requirements. This combined approach will permit an analytic comparison across series, cultural contexts, and circulation formats.

For its subsequent textual analysis, this thesis takes a heuristic approach, examining a representative corpus of ten core series from various backgrounds through close reading. Popular TV series often extend over dozens, sometimes hundreds of hours of screen time. Such an overwhelming mass of material is impossible to manage comprehensively without the use of computer-based, quantitative macro-analytical methods (which, to

30 Frank Kelleter and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, “Eine interessante Affinität zwischen dem seriellen Erzählen und dem Thema Politik: Von Soap Operas zum Quality TV”, interview by Jöran Klatt and Katharina Rahlf, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 5–22. Doi. <http://doi.org/10.13109/9783666800092.5>.

31 Sean Robinson and Bernice Alston, “Lavender Identity and Representation in the Media: The Portrayal of Gays and Lesbians in Popular Television”, in *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Jefferson, NC: Mc Farland & Co., 2014), 39.

32 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 26.

33 Following contentions building on the work of the “Popular Seriality Research Unit”: Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, 22–26; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 19; Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 242.

date, remain limited in their ability to process audio-visual texts meaningfully). For now, a heuristic approach is, therefore, appropriate. The TV series in my corpus are (by order of release): *The Politician* (USA, 2019-present), 60일, 지정생존자 [*Designated Survivor: 60 Days*] (Republic of Korea, 2019), *House of Cards*, season six (USA, 2018), *Baron Noir* (France, 2016–2020), *The Crown* (UK, 2016-present), *Designated Survivor* (USA, 2016–2019), *Слуга народу* [*Sluha Narodu, Servant of the People*] (Ukraine, 2015–2019), *Eichwald, MdB* (Germany, 2015–2019), *Madam Secretary* (USA, 2014–2019), and *Veep* (USA, 2012–2019). Other relevant fictional texts will feature as context in the analysis.

This thesis takes a synchronic approach, analysing contemporary TV series that aired throughout the second half of the 2010s and thus accompanied the most dynamic period of the early streaming age. I consider series that (1) position their plot in a political setting or the physical “workplaces of politicians”;³⁴ and (2) series in which the political activity of protagonists, that is, the somehow institutionalized process of negotiating the distribution of power,³⁵ serves as the primary source of narrative dynamics. As I will show, this not only applies to fictional elected ‘politicians’ but also to the royal protagonists of *THE CROWN*, who likewise engage in the political business of retaining their positions.

In a tradition probably started by James F. Davidson,³⁶ scholarship has long used the somewhat misleading term ‘political fiction’ to describe texts that essentially feature what Sandra Nuy calls “*basal* presentation of politics”,³⁷ that is, texts which present politics as a “narrative occurrence”.³⁸ However, the term ‘political fiction’ implies that the texts it describes are consciously *political* as a “medium of criticism, agitation and propaganda”.³⁹ Its generalizing emphasis on “fiction” likewise blurs the distinction between serial and non-serial texts in line with the widespread scholarly practice of ignoring seriality’s distinctive narrative characteristics. This thesis, therefore, proposes to appropriate the somewhat vernacular German term *polit-series* [*Politserie*] as a more neutral and precise alternative.

It is crucial here to define what I mean by *TV series*. (1) Defining television in the multi-device, nonlinear post-network era has become somewhat difficult.⁴⁰ As Mareike Jenner notes,

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- 34 Annekatrin Bock, “Machtkampf, Intrigen und Manipulation: Die Negative Wahrnehmung von Politikgeschehen in Aktuellen Politikserien”, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 24. My translation: “Arbeitsplätzen von Politiker_innen”.
- 35 See Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.
- 36 See James F. Davidson, “Political Science and Political Fiction”, *The American Political Science Review* 55, no. 4 (December 1961): 856.
- 37 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 96. My translation: “*basale* Politikdarstellung”. Original emphasis.
- 38 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 45f. My translation: “Narrativen Gegebenheit”.
- 39 Nuy, *Athenes Schild*, 46. My translation: “eines Mediums der Kritik, Agitation und Propaganda”.
- 40 For a more recent discussion see, e.g., Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 4–19.

the term television has been used to describe different technologies, has been invested with varying degrees of cultural significance and 'value', and, thus, has meant different things at different times and in different social contexts.⁴¹

I will follow sociotechnical and discursive approaches to defining television not only by its material and technological shape but as a "medium", which derives "from textual characteristics, industrial practices, audience behaviors, and cultural understanding".⁴² As Roger Silverstone notes regarding (TV) technology, television thus becomes "both a material and a social phenomenon".⁴³ As such, it is defined primarily by discourse, which is why Jenner notes, "By stating that Netflix is television, Netflix can become television".⁴⁴

For the purposes of this study, television shall, therefore, be the diverse sociotechnical practice that surrounds (and includes) the "remote seeing"⁴⁵ and hearing (in any case: reception) of audio-visual signs by way of technical transmission. It can thus, as Ramon Lobato points out, denote both "an online service dispersed across an ecology of websites, portals, and apps, as well as a broadcast and cable/satellite-distributed medium."⁴⁶

(2) For the moment, I understand the term TV *series* to mean a narrative with a common conceptual frame that unfolds over a number of distinct instalments⁴⁷ and is transmitted via audio-visual signs within the medium of television.⁴⁸ Setting aside, for now, more elaborate attempts at differentiating serial forms, I will use the term *series* to denote both narratives that feature self-contained episodic plotlines (often referred to as a 'series') and those that continue an ongoing plot over numerous episodes (called 'serial').⁴⁹ Notably, the core texts in my corpus happen to be serials with varying narrative emphasis on their overarching plotlines. Although it is purely incidental, this suggests that the continuous mode of 'serial' narration is generally more suited to the affordances of the nonlinear TV age than the self-contained episodic mode. Nonlinear TV affords audiences

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- 41 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing), 8.
 - 42 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed., *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. See the broader definition of "medium" by Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 7.
 - 43 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, e-Library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.
 - 44 Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television*, 7.
 - 45 Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, "Introduction: An Owner's Manual for Television", in *How to Watch Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 5.
 - 46 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 7.
 - 47 Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, "Das Gesetz der Serie – Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse", *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 18, <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2008.1.663>. See also: Knut Hickethier, "Serie", in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 397.
 - 48 I will adjust and extend this definition for the purpose of my model in chapter 3.
 - 49 See, e.g., Weber and Junklewitz, "Das Gesetz der Serie", 19. For a discussion of serial forms see also Hickethier, "Serie", 400–402.

greater control over schedules and the ability to rewind, repeat, and skip, thus facilitating engagement with more complex stories. The coming chapters will discuss this further. As the degree of continuity varies significantly between the series (HoC, or BARON NOIR, e.g., feature a prominent, ongoing plotline. EICHWALD, MDB, VEEP, or THE CROWN tend to focus more on episodic events, and SLUHA NARODU transitions from a more episodic to a more seasonal emphasis), the corpus remains sufficiently representative with regards to seriality.

As this thesis attempts to model the distinctive narrative effects of popular seriality, I will only consider series with *strong seriality*, that is, series whose eventual conclusion remained undetermined at the time of their first release.⁵⁰ Mini-series – a narrative relayed over a pre-determined number of instalments – are, as Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni point out, a “*weak serial form*”⁵¹ and will therefore not be considered in this study. The same goes for anthology series.

This thesis aims to be transversal and thus considers a large variety of series from different cultural and industrial backgrounds an indispensable quality of its corpus. However, while it attempts to take a global perspective and explicitly aims to consider examples from non-English-speaking and non-Western backgrounds, there remains, despite my best efforts, an emphasis on series from the Global North. This bias is partly a result of material limitations of access to series or workable translations. It is partly due to significant pro-Western biases within existing scholarship and criticism, causing a notable imbalance in the prominence of different productions. However, it is also the consequence of personal limitations that stem from my being a researcher from the Global North, who speaks a limited set of European languages and comes with a specific cultural socialisation that inevitably influences my perspective. Despite my best efforts, these factors have inadvertently played a visible role in identifying my text corpus.

There are no pre-existing comprehensive lists of contemporary ‘polit-fiction’. Compiling an overview of relevant series, I have been aware that existing scholarly and personal biases and the constantly increasing number of new releases means that simply referring to older existing overviews or personal viewing preferences would not suffice in creating a list that can make any claim at representativity. I have therefore undertaken extensive additional research in online databases like imdb.com, international media publications (at times using google translate to overcome language barriers), an array of informal websites, wikis, and forums, as well as targeted online searches into particular global areas and extensive surveys among friends and colleagues with different cultural literacies. The result is the most extensive list of contemporary polit-series to date (see section 11). However, it, by no means, claims to be exhaustive. Due to the number of relevant series and this study’s focus on *contemporary* TV, I have ended my overview in the 1990es. Even though this study does not examine them directly, I also include a selection

50 Chapter 3 will elaborate further on this highly relevant distinction.

51 Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, *Che cos'è la televisione: Il piccolo schermo fra cultura e società: i generi, l'industria, il pubblico* (Milan: Garzanti, 2003), 134. Quoted via Weber and Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie”, 21. They write of a “schwache serielle Form”. The original calls for “una forma seriale debole” (original emphasis).

of relevant mini-series. Mini-series constitute an essential part of polit-fiction's transition from individual films to serial TV and remain a popular (albeit decreasing) format for the presentation of fictional politics. Their inclusion in my overview thus provides valuable context and, in addition, a helpful starting point for potential future inquiries.

In the analysis of its corpus' presentation of politics, this thesis will begin by examining the series' narrative and formal strategies using its model for illustration. A particular emphasis here lies on modelling the interplay of guiding narrative principles and the distinct properties of popular seriality that have often been overlooked in previous textual analyses of polit-series. Furthermore, this study will contextualise its findings with relevant insights from political theory, especially concerning the mediated construction of political representation and simulation, political and national imaginaries, and their historically controversial role in contemporary politics. This will further qualify the specific visions of politics evoked in the series.

Using its structural model, this thesis will then extend its perspective to discern various pertinent sociocultural, sociotechnical, and economic contexts of production, circulation, and reception. Where applicable, it will (1) identify the series' incorporation of economic and technical affordances, e.g., linear and nonlinear circulation backgrounds, into their narrative logic. Seeing that ongoing (or "open") serial narratives possess a unique ability to integrate historical factors into their own continuation,⁵² this thesis will (2) examine how its sample series respond to distinct historical developments that occurred throughout their original run.

For its analyses, this thesis considers a variety of perspectives pertaining to the respective series and historical realities at hand. The chapters in this thesis thus provide a wide-ranging, though by no means comprehensive, examination of crucial developments and issues across the diverse landscape of contemporary polit-series as it presents itself at the beginning of the 2020s.

Chapter 2: Contemporary TV, Complexity, Power Struggles, and the Cynical Turn: Pertinent Research Perspectives on Polit-Series

Scholarly enquiry into polit-series can be divided into four disciplinary areas that have, so far, remained largely separate despite each providing valuable and unique perspectives on the same phenomenon. The first is the broader study of structural and narrative complexity. The second is the ongoing (and increasing) interest in transdisciplinary industry research that examines the political processes of production, circulation, and reception in popular culture and TV fiction. The third is the comparatively recent study of popular seriality as a distinct phenomenon. The fourth is the concrete textual analysis of TV series concerned with politics. The chapter reviews the existing literature, highlights major historical developments in (1) popular polit-fiction and (2) pertinent research, and indicates vantage points for combining these various perspectives.

52 See, e.g., Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), e.g., 13f., 18, and 24f.

Chapter 3: Actors, Games, and Players: An Analytical Model for Serial Television Fiction

The complexity of the phenomenon that colloquially carries the name ‘television series’ derives from the unique properties of popular serial texts and their interplay with contemporary TV’s dispersed, interconnected, and constantly evolving affordances. Presenting the theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis, the chapter draws on structural approaches from a variety of disciplines, ranging from narratology to Actor-Network Theory to game studies and psychology, to derive a unique original model as a tool for textual analysis that illustrates the specific principles [*Eigengesetzlichkeit*] of popular serial TV. The model structures the activity of a series’ fictional and ontic actors as repeatable, comprehensible, and interconnected patterns. Moreover, it illustrates the uneasy conjunction of the – at times contradictory – triple logics of (1) the fictional world, (2) dramatic composition, and (3) historical affordances that determine the agential dynamics of a popular serial text.

Chapter 4: Royal Performance and the Queen’s Three Bodies: The Making of the British Monarchy in the Netflix Series THE CROWN

The section provides a textual analysis of the fictional bio-series THE CROWN, which follows Queen Elizabeth II and her family as their struggle with royal life. The series operationalises a well-established narrative trope for the fictionalisation of royalty: the concept of “The King’s two Bodies” (K2B).⁵³ This dramatic device juxtaposes the requirements of the Queen’s personal body natural and her conceptual body politic and serves as a conventional formula for turning the abstract phenomenon of a remote monarch into a relatable fictional character. THE CROWN extends the K2B trope by introducing the postmodern notion of a mediatised third body that unifies the monarch’s body natural and body politic through the co-creative approval of his*her subjects. This turns the fictional Windsor family into decidedly political operators constantly occupied with taming public opinion and securing their position.

Chapter 5: Overcoming Omnishambles: The Changing Face of Polit-Comedy from VEEP and EICHWALD, MDB to THE POLITICIAN

Analysing three series from the beginning, middle, and end of the 2010s (VEEP; EICHWALD, MDB; THE POLITICIAN), the chapter demonstrates the changing ways in which polit-comedies have operationalized politics as a humoristic device. Following the tradition of mockumentary cringe humour of the 2000s, polit-comedy in the early 2010s essentially presents politics as a ruthless, simulative, and uncomfortable affair full of invective (VEEP), social discomfort (EICHWALD), and failure (both). Popular seriality’s economically motivated aim at perpetuity endows these texts with a tangibly absurdist

53 Referencing the famous homonymous concept in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

outlook in which incompetence and depravity endlessly and aimlessly continue to spiral out of control. The emphatically 'woke' humour of *THE POLITICIAN* turns away from its predecessor's emphasis on transgression and absurdity and instead draws its comedy from a satirical inversion of the conventional coming-of-age progression visible, e.g., in *THE CROWN*. The series consequently presents an optimistic vision of realpolitik as a constructive way to meaningful change.

Chapter 6: The Curious Case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko: Idealism and Populism in SLUHA NARODU

The Ukrainian production *SLUHA NARODU* (SN) arguably became the platform that launched Volodymyr Zelensky on his path to becoming his country's real-life president and, as of February 2022, its media-savvy defender against Russian aggression. SN follows the narrative traditions of "the populist telling of the quest"⁵⁴ and the American Monomyth in which an idealised, individualistic messiah-hero saves a potential Eden which had previously been failed by its institutions.⁵⁵ An inevitable consequence of this utopian narrative's dramatic logic is the implicit rejection of pluralism and representative democracy. As a dramatic trope, this populist construction of idealistic politics (and its unintended ideological consequences) reappears almost identically in a variety of cultural contexts (e.g., in the series *MADAM SECRETARY*, *DESIGNATED SURVIVOR*, and *DESIGNATED SURVIVOR: 60 DAYS*).

Chapter 7: Modelling Malfunction and Inverting the Populist Quest: BARON NOIR

On many levels, *BARON NOIR* (BN) is an inversion of the populist quest. The series' plot revolves around the threats facing representative, pluralist democracy through systemic dysfunction, the rise of populist agitators, and the decline of the "front républicain" against right-wing extremism. Centred around the ruthless Socialist Party functionary Philippe Rickwaert, the series presents a teleological vision of realpolitik unusual for a polit-series. In BN, it is the Machiavellian strivers who are charged with saving democracy from destructive idealists and populists alike. The series constructs its fictional polity as an emergent actor-network of rare complexity. Politics, in BN, appears as a multipolar system creating a highly complex narrative with an ambivalent sense of political morality. Moreover, the series demonstrates a remarkable ability to incorporate developments of contemporary French politics into its narrative and authentically model their interaction.

54 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

55 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

Chapter 8: Starting from “some kind of scratch”: The Recalibration of HOUSE OF CARDS, Season 6

The sixth and final season of HoC is an example of rare clarity for the contradictory interplay of intradiegetic, dramatic, and historical dynamics that shape popular TV series. Perhaps this thesis' most (in)famous sample, HoC 6 had to implement far-reaching narrative changes under tight public scrutiny after the highly-publicised dismissal of its star, actor Kevin Spacey, following numerous allegations of sexual abuse. The series faced replacing its world-famous protagonist, accommodating inevitable associations with historical sexual abuse, and creating a reasonably coherent conclusion for an essentially irresolvable serial narrative while maintaining continuity with previous seasons. Essentially squaring the circle, HoC 6 thus draws on a remarkable variety of superficial allusions, compositional shifts, and formal embellishments to simultaneously simulate serial continuity, character development, the normative re-evaluation of its diegetic past and narrative resolution.

Chapter 9: Conclusion: Polit-Series, Politics, and (Progressive) Perspectives

Many of the famous series in this study come with a well-known historical context that often tends to impose a particular perspective on scholarly criticism (e.g., THE CROWN's treatment of its historical role models or SLUHA NARODU's relation to the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election). Aware of this seductive fallacy, this thesis will have provided some much-needed differentiation and clarification concerning a fictional phenomenon that arguably exerted a significant discursive impact on the (political) reality of the 2010s: polit-series. Moreover, this study's structural model contributes a unique methodical approach that allows the examination of popular TV series from various angles, encompassing perspectives from textual composition to industry dynamics. It shows that most series draw on a set of popular narrative formulas arranged in accordance with specific systemic logics. The chapter concludes by pointing out the possibilities and risks of present popular serial networks and the potential pathways for further scholarly inquiry.

2. Contemporary TV, Complexity, Power Struggles and the Cynical Turn

Pertinent Research Perspectives on Polit-Series

This thesis proposes to treat polit-series and contemporary linear and nonlinear TV series in general as highly complex structural phenomena that are simultaneously pop cultural commodities, vast narrative fictional universes, and ongoing discussions of political concepts with contested degrees of connection to historical reality. Due to the expansive nature of the phenomenon at hand, this thesis draws on a breadth of critical approaches from various scholarly disciplines suitable for analysing (polit-)series and their larger textual, economic, sociotechnical and sociocultural ecology. This chapter will review extant literature, highlight the major developments in popular polit-fiction and pertinent research, and indicate ways to combine various scholarly perspectives from narratology and literary studies, media and industry studies, structural semantics, systems theory, game theory and game studies, Actor-Network Theory and psychology.

The research pertaining to this thesis' interests can be divided thematically into four main areas: (1) Pertinent approaches to describing structural and narrative complexity; (2) research concerned with illustrating the relations of various actors within TV, popular culture, and the broader culture industry; (3) scholarship examining popular seriality; (4) the textual analysis of contemporary polit-series themselves.

Accordingly, this chapter will (1) review how scholarship from fields ranging from structural semantics to narratology and game studies have considered *complexity* as a property of narrative phenomena with a distinct aesthetic dimension, which has led Jason Mittell to coin the term “complex TV”¹ for his poetics of contemporary linear television.

This chapter will go on to review various approaches to describing complex networks, particularly concerning what Bruno Latour has termed Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and their application for the narrative analysis of multi-media texts. It will show how their roots in linguistics, semiotics, and structural semantics, which intended to identify a

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

universal grammar of narrative action (or, in the case of archetypal criticism, underlying deep structures of fictional texts), make structural network approaches ideally suited to be developed as an analytic tool for the complex liminal phenomenon of popular serial TV.

Extant approaches to the study of games will prove particularly pertinent to this thesis. This chapter will illustrate how the conceptual universe of games has fascinated scholars from mathematics, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, narratology and ludology in their respective attempts to model complex phenomena. I will show how structuralist narrative scholars in the 1960 and '70s attempted to theorize language – and subsequently literature – as games. Subsequently, I will discuss how, in the 1990s and early 2000s, ludologist in the famous narratology vs ludology debate rejected the conflation of game, play and narrative terminology to advocate for a distinct character of the former. However, I will point out that, particularly with regards to interactivity, the question remains whether ongoing serial narratives do indeed possess systemic similarities to interactive games that singular texts lack.

Discussing the application of game-based models in psychology, this chapter will examine psychoanalytical approaches to textual criticism, such as Jacques Lacan's model of the human subconscious in his famous text on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter". It will furthermore illustrate the use of Transaction Analysis as a model of the interactions between fictional characters.

Discussing the prominence of game terminology in inquiries from political and social studies, I will, furthermore, review approaches to "political aesthetics" and show how scholarship has come to regard "game" and "play" as foundational principles denoting politics' increasing reliance on structures of spectacle and distraction.

This chapter will (2) examine current media industry research pertaining to processes of production, circulation, and reception within popular culture and contemporary TV. I will illustrate how media scholarship has differentiated between the evolving technological affordances of television circulation as channels, portals, and platforms and how it has theorised the impact of this evolution on economic and textual structures alike. It will become clear that the streaming portal Netflix, in particular, has become a focal point for media and industry scholarship describing the ambivalent recent 'disruption' of linear TV.

Being interested in agential relations within popular TV industries, I will examine long-running discussions surrounding power distribution within popular culture. They reach from the Frankfurt School's concept of patriarchal industrial dominance over 'mass culture' to visions of participation and democratization in the light of the emerging web 2.0 to more tempered current approaches that see a conservation of established asymmetrical power structures in a largely professionalized digital entertainment industry. Following this essentially political perspective, I will likewise examine the scholarship surrounding the politics of TV authorship as a depersonalized and discursive phenomenon of devolved influence.

This chapter will (3) examine the comparatively recent research efforts concerning popular seriality as a distinct characteristic of multi-part narratives and cultural commodities that causes the emergence of specific narrative standards, schemes, and cultural and industrial practices. A growing body of research in cultural and media stud-

ies, as well as several studies of national literatures (e.g., German and North American) and notably the homonymous research unit of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG),² have described popular seriality as a unique narrative phenomenon, which produces distinct effects both with regards to storytelling and the networks that determine it.

As I will show, there exists a remarkable asymmetry between the advanced state of research on popular seriality and its rare considerations in textual analyses of TV series in general³ and of polit-series in particular. This thesis follows the assumption that the specific mechanisms and conventions of popular seriality significantly alter the perspectives of textual analyses. It will pursue the conjecture that, from an analytical perspective, popular seriality constitutes a conceptual bridge between aesthetic and industrial affordances.

I will (4) review the rich body of textual criticism and impact research on contemporary polit-series (and pertinent examinations of polit-cinema that predate it). I will point out that, until recently, there has been a notable scholarly bias towards so-called Western productions, with a significant imbalance in favour of anglophone US and UK productions and a lack of comparative analyses.

Furthermore, I will illustrate how textual criticism has struggled with the disputed notion of 'realism' in polit-series and discuss TV scholarship's anxious observation of polit-fiction's ability to alternatively instruct, influence or reveal truths about its audiences.

This section will go on to examine pertinent examples of textual criticism of contemporary polit-fiction. It will show that the narratives' use of simplifications, personifications and moralisation often disturb more literal scholarly notions of realism as historical accuracy and even lead to generalising claims of cultural incompatibility between specific national polities and fictionalisation.

Examining the body of textual criticism concerned with the normative evaluation of fictional politics, I will discuss early notions that regarded polit-series from the UK and the less prolific western European continent as largely pessimistic (with the British monarchy being the only positive part in an otherwise largely dystopian moral wasteland) while perceiving US polit-fiction as more optimistic. In this context, I will review literary

2 DFG group no. 1091, "Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice", DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, <http://www.popularseriality.de/>.

3 For more recent examples to the contrary see: Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie visueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020). Also Claudia Stockinger, Christian Hißnauer, and Stefan Scherer, *Föderalismus in Serie: Die Einheit der ARD-Reihe Tatort im historischen Verlauf* (Leiden, Niederlande: Brill/ Fink, 2019); Christian Hißnauer, Stefan Scherer, and Claudia Stockinger, eds. *Zwischen Serie und Werk: Fernseh- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte im Tatort* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014); Stefan Scherer, Claudia Stockinger, and Christian Hißnauer, "Formen und Verfahren der Serialität in der ARD-Reihe Tatort: Ein Untersuchungsdesign zur Integration von Empirie und Hermeneutik", in *Populäre Serialität. Narration – Evolution – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 143–167; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

and cultural scholarship's examinations of the idealised hero-president that remains a dominant trope in less prestigious US productions to this day.

However, I will demonstrate how textual criticism of more contemporary polit-fiction has suggested a shift in high-profile series' normative evaluation of politics in the late 2000s and early 2010s. It will become clear that there has been a cynical turn in US polit-series with high cultural capital that has moved US productions towards a more pessimistic portrayal of politics and presidents. The frequency of such (implicit) diagnoses indicates a temporary globalization of narrative conventions concerning high-profile polit-series. They show a notable tendency towards cynicism, fatalism, and absurdity as a presumed reaction to the seemingly inevitable ailments of capitalist reality.

Discussing the more recent uptake in research on gender representations in both TV criticism and political and cultural studies, I will go on to show how research has come to regard both traditionally male and female roles within the binary gender spectrum as an uneasy fit with the requirements of politics.

The chapter will conclude by indicating a variety of gaps in extant research. It will point out ways to consolidate the various aspects of popular serial television's complex systems into an analytical approach and discuss its importance for further understanding the ever-accelerating developments of the increasingly complex nonlinear TV era.

2.1 Describing Narrative and Structural Complexity

The relationships between the various industrial, economic, and political actors that shape a TV series and other central commodities within popular culture have, at least since the breakthrough of digital production and circulation technology, been the focus of increased scholarly attention across Media, TV, narrative, literary, cultural and information studies. A promising approach to contend with these numerous material and interactional interdependencies (proposed, e.g., by Mittell⁴) seems to be to regard TV and its series as inherently *complex* systemic phenomena, often implicitly following contentions from ANT or systems theory.⁵

Evoking systems theory's concept of "emergence", Marie-Laure Ryan, examining complex narratives, postulates that complex systems produce "patterns and behaviours that could not be predicted by simply looking at the rules" that govern that system.⁶ In other words, the behaviour of an emergent (narrative) system exceeds the sum of

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

5 As noted, e.g., by Thomas Klein, "Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225. For perspectives on general narrative complexity see Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, eds., *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

6 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative as/and Complex System/s", in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 30.

possible behaviours of its parts. Narrative complexity, according to Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, refers (1) to the “relations between narrative [...] representation and mind”,⁷ that is, the creation of meaning through narrative. This assumption harkens back to reader-response criticism’s idea of active involvement of the interpretative recipient in the actualisation of text.⁸ In what was later to become cognitive poetics, David Bordwell made a similar argument for film,⁹ which Mittell has applied in his examination of how complex linear TV makes meaning.¹⁰

However, according to Grishakova and Poulaki, narrative complexity (2) refers to the “complexity of narrative representation contingent on media and technological affordances”.¹¹ Analysing complexity in linear TV, Mittell likewise argues for a systemic origin of narrative complexity, stating,

in the digital era, a television program is suffused within and constituted by an inter-textual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts.¹²

While the latter perspective still assumes narrative complexity to be rooted in various ways of reception, following Ryan, Grishakova, and Poulaki, narrative complexity appears much more as a product of emergent, multi-agential networks that operate according to a set of common rules but without a central directional impetus.

Accordingly, Stuart Hall, likewise taking a systemic perspective, describes mass communication such as TV not as a closed system but as an open network that draws its meaning “from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part”.¹³ According to him, mass communicational messages are created and framed through their production

7 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in Grishakova/Poulaki, *Narrative Complexity*, 13.

8 See, e.g., Hans Robert Jauss, “Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 126–162; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. by Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 228–252; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Mariland/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Also: Jane P. Tompkins, ed, *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich: dtv, 1998)

9 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning. Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge,: Harvard Press, 1991), 3.

10 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 164ff.

11 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in Grishakova/Poulaki, *Narrative Complexity*, 13.

12 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 7.

13 Stuart Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, in *Culture, Media, Language*, e-Library ed., ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London: Routledge, 2005), 119.

structure which is itself “framed throughout by meanings and ideas”.¹⁴ This contention is reminiscent of what Marsha Kinder, with a more agential focus, has called TV’s “supersystem” that is “a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or figures from pop culture”.¹⁵ These alternatively systemic or agential perspectives on narrative complexity have significant consequences for television series’ aesthetic and narrative composition.

2.1.1 Complexity and TV Aesthetics

Research within film, TV and literary studies has long attempted to define a particularly ‘televisual’ aesthetics, that is, “a complex of formal tendencies that shape television works and their reception”.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, however, TV aesthetics has proven as dynamic as the medium itself. It is questionable if, faced with increasing media permeability (e.g., the growing tendency for films to serialize, select TV series to sport blockbuster budgets and star casts, and a rising similarity in the digital means of circulation and reception), the distinction between specific ‘televisual’ or ‘cinematic’ aesthetic modes is feasible at all.

Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor have remarked that linear, advertising-based TV classically refers back to the established practices of Hollywood aesthetics to structure the medium’s segmented flow.¹⁷ Jeremy Butler describes the conventions of classic linear TV aesthetics as “continuity editing” or “invisible editing”.¹⁸ It aims to “create a continuity of space and time”¹⁹ and arranges the individual audio-visual fragments of a scene into a continuous order that “supports the progression of the story”.²⁰ The result is the impression of a “continuous flow”²¹ that hides the image’s fragmented nature and the audio-visual narrative’s technical composition. Standard formal conventions might, e.g., be the shot/reverse-shot technique to present a seemingly natural flow of images that follows the progression of the characters’ conversation.

As Butler points out, the “continuity system” and its associated conventions have been a pervasive influence on TV aesthetics.²² Classic linear television has long been associated with (albeit problematic) notions of ‘realism’ due to its, as Hickethier notes,

14 Hall, “Encoding/decoding”, 118.

15 Marsha Kinder, *Playing With power in movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley/L.A./London: University of California Press, 1991), 122.

16 Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor, “Locating the Televisual in Golden Age Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 64. For an attempt see also e.g., Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).

17 Caren J. Deming and Deborah V. Tudor, “Locating the Televisual in Golden Age Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 66.

18 Jeremy C. Butler, *Television. Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (Routledge: New York, 2018), 348.

19 Butler, *Television*, 348.

20 Butler, *Television*, 348.

21 Butler, *Television*, 374.

22 Butler, *Television*, 374.

“strongly conventionalised cinematic forms of representations”.²³ This formal composition works to hide the artificial nature of TV storytelling, thus causing a “transparency of the medium”, seemingly drawing in audiences and creating an “appearance of reality”.²⁴

However, more structurally complex systems and their resulting ‘complex’ narrative and formal aesthetics, particularly in nonlinear subscription-based services, show what Jane Shattuck, with recourse to Richard Dyer, calls a more “novelistic approach” that breaks with both formal and narrative “common TV and media traditions”²⁵ of continuity.²⁶ With obvious recourse to Butler and Hickethier, Joan Bleicher has described TV narrative as shaped by either “invisible dramaturgy” or “constructed dramaturgy”.²⁷ In the latter, a series’ artificial nature is emphasised – instead of hidden – through visible (often novel) formal and dramatic means.

With the realisation of the multi-agential interplay that constitutes popular TV series, the term *complexity* has gained an aesthetic dimension. As Mittell, following his reception-centred approach, argues, narratively complex TV is no longer a “producer’s medium”²⁸ but instead a self-aware “operational aesthetic”²⁹ that demands “intensified viewer engagements”, “formal awareness”,³⁰ and a “procedural literacy”³¹ in audiences. This assumption evokes notions of the Brechtian idea of a self-aware and aesthetically distant “epic theatre” that fulfils its cathartic function through its second-order observability.³²

The emergent second-order aesthetic of complex TV has decisively changed how television presents conflict and characters. It has, for example, become arguably more ac-

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- 23 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402. My translation: “stark konventionalisierter filmischer Darstellungsformen”.
 - 24 Hickethier, “Serie”, 402. My translation: “Transparenz des Mediums” and “Realitätsschein”.
 - 25 Jane Shattuck, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 157.
 - 26 Noted similarly, e.g., by Thomas Klein, “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225.
 - 27 Joan Bleicher, “‘Wer Vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen’. Das Wechselspiel der Emotionen. Spezifika der Fernseh-dramaturgie”, in *Der Dramaturgische Blick. Potenziale und Modelle von Dramaturgie im Medienwandel*, ed. Christa Hasche, Eleonore Kalisch, and Thomas Weber (Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2014), S.172. My translation: “Unsichtbare” and “Konstruierte Dramaturgie”.
 - 28 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 32.
 - 29 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 43. See also Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Hermann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 45 and 48f. Both draw on a concept by Neil Harris in *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*, paperback edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 59ff. See especially p.79.
 - 30 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 53.
 - 31 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 53f.
 - 32 Karl Juhnke, “Episches Theater”, *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe*, March 6, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/e:epischestheater-7652>.

ceptable for TV series to focus on villains and anti-heroes. Audiences of complex TV (often prestige audiences in possession of cultural capital) no longer expect the medium to portray relatable characters but instead, as Mittell argues, enter into an “operational allegiance”³³ with characters. In this mode, the audience’s interest is not secured solely by the character him*herself but by his*her formal construction and narrative presentation.

These observations on TV series’ intertwined systemic, agential, and aesthetic complexity have rarely been applied in concrete textual analyses.³⁴ However, as a TV series’ aesthetic and narrative properties directly result from the complexity of its overall systemic structure, this thesis proposes to integrate operationalisations of systemic and narrative complexity into a tool for textual analysis. It will draw on methodologies from various approaches designed to describe structural complexity, which I will outline in the coming sections.

2.1.2 Describing Complex Networks

Critical theory, ANT, and systems theory are primary approaches to describing and analysing complex, multi-agential media phenomena. As Doug Kellner remarks, critics of the Frankfurt School were among the first to address “media culture as a complex multidimensional phenomenon”.³⁵ Moreover, they were among the first to approach the joint analysis of popular artefacts and the systemic affordances that shape them in a way “that articulates the dimensions of production and political economy, text analysis, and audience/reception research”.³⁶ However, their judgements (e.g., about popular artefacts’ low quality³⁷ and commodified formulaic similarity³⁸) have famously been tainted by ultimately subjective, elitist notions of ‘quality’ and ‘high and ‘low (that is, mass-) culture’.

This study seeks to depart from what Umberto Eco calls the “aristocratic” notions³⁹ of cultural hierarchies and instead examine TV series within their own systems of reference. The spectrum of ‘complexity’ will prove to be a much more useful term for describing TV series than normative categories such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This is particularly the case

33 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 163.

34 Although Mittell does so throughout *Complex TV*.

35 Doug Kellner, “Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to the Politics of Representation”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 22.

36 Kellner, “Critical Perspectives”, 19.

37 See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1969), 129.

38 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 128. See also J.M. Bernstein’s introduction to Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), 10. And Adorno’s essay on “The Schema of mass culture”, in Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), 61–97. For TV see also Theodor W. Adorno, “Fernsehen als Ideologie”, in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*, 81–98. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963).

39 Umberto Eco, *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur*, transl. Max Looser (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992), 15.

because narrative complexity originates as much in systemic as in aesthetic structures. As this thesis will illustrate, their entanglement is a pervasive characteristic of popular TV series.

In classical ANT, an actor-network is the “successful alignment of an array of heterogeneous elements”⁴⁰ that more or less voluntarily function together according to the designs of a “primary actor”.⁴¹ Several ANT thinkers, including Latour himself,⁴² have reflected on replacing the term ‘actor network’ with Félix Guattari and Giles Deleuze’s term “rhizome” as a metaphor for the non-hierarchic and decentralised multitude of connections between entities in a network organised along multi-agential “principles of connection and heterogeneity”.⁴³

In the same vein, ANT has been equated with “material semiotics”, which denotes a concept “like ANT, but with a wider range of tools”.⁴⁴ No matter the name, the central idea of any network-centric theory is to “focus on relations – how these are produced and reproduced, ordered and disordered.”⁴⁵ As Mike Michael notes, “Such relations are not simply social but heterogeneous – they necessarily entail the role of nonhumans as well as humans.”⁴⁶

Acknowledging, e.g., the varying complexity of popular film and TV storytelling, literary and media scholarship has become increasingly concerned with ways to model and examine highly complex structures of popular culture such as TV series.⁴⁷ Drawing on ANT, Kaspar Maase has proposed to regard popular culture as a “network of interactions of human and non-human actors”.⁴⁸

Realizing the usefulness of ANT to approach the systemic and narrative complexity of popular artefacts, Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank has applied ANT to the analysis of teen film, proposing to regard movies as

as complex, hybrid actor-networks by analyzing them and their actants and agencies thoroughly and slowly, and on the other hand, also to treat films as actants in a larger network.⁴⁹

40 Mike Michael, *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations* (London: Sage, 2017), 154.

41 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 154.

42 As pointed out in Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 63.

43 Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 11th ed., transl. Brian Massumi (London/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 7.

44 Mike Michael, *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations* (London: Sage, 2017), 51.

45 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 5.

46 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 5.

47 Implicit, e.g., in Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 241f. See also Thomas Klein, “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 225–240.

48 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung. Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 63. Original emphasis. My translation: “Als Netz der Interaktionen menschlicher und nichtmenschlicher Akteure”.

49 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies. Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 20.

Referencing ANT, he argues that

every entity, unity, system, society must be understood as a potentially indefinitely complex network which is made, re-made, and performed by the dynamic relations that arise from the actions and interactions of human and non-human actors.⁵⁰

However, so far, few attempts have been made to apply network-based approaches to the concrete analysis of fictional serial TV texts as part of a liminal network of textual and historical agents. This thesis will change that. Particularly within the scholarly traditions of structuralism, there are highly instructive approaches to modelling textual phenomena.

2.1.3 Structural Semantics and Archetypal Criticism

Proposing an agential network approach to building a tool for narrative analysis is, in some ways, closing a circle leading back to structuralism. ANT itself has arguably been inspired to no small degree by structural semantics, more precisely by Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model⁵¹ that aims to describe a universal grammar of narrative action in fictional storytelling. It follows earlier attempts to create inventories of fundamental narrative structures, e.g., by Vladimir Propp, who distinguishes seven basic "dramatis personae" in his morphology of simple narrative structures in Russian folklore,⁵² and Étienne Souriau's concept of six recurring narrative types or "dramatic functions".⁵³ Greimas' structuralist approach distinguishes between actors as individual characters within a story and six recurring actants, "which are classifications of actors"⁵⁴ determined by their position within the "narrative syntax".⁵⁵ They are *Sender*, *Subject*, *Object*, *Receiver*, *Helper*, *Opponent*.⁵⁶ Accordingly, Latour, for ANT, states that "any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant".⁵⁷

50 Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies*, 16.

51 See Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Actants, Actors, and Figures", in *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, transl. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 106–120. And Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, transl. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 197ff. And Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology*, revised ed. (Lincoln/London, University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 2.

52 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 20th ed., transl. Laurence Scott, ed. Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 79f.

53 Étienne Souriau, *Les Deux Cent Mille Situations Dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1950), 83–112.

54 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, transl. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 202.

55 Algirdas Julien Greimas, "Actants, Actors, and Figures", in *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, transl. Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 106.

56 Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 207f.

57 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

Archetypal criticism, likewise, has long attempted to determine universal narrative deep structures and master plots.⁵⁸ In the late 19th century, George Polti, building on work by Carlo Gozzi and commentaries by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, identified 36 dramatic situations that form the basis for all fictional narratives.⁵⁹ In 1949, Joseph Campbell famously described the “Monomyth” as “the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story” that underlies all others.⁶⁰ For him, the foundational narrative archetype is a hero’s journey in which the rite of passage presents itself as a process of separation, initiation, and return.⁶¹ Christopher Vogler, influenced by Campbell, has identified similar basic monomythical patterns in popular US cinema.⁶² In another similar attempt, Christopher Booker identifies seven master plots underlying the structure of fictional narratives.⁶³

Greimas’ actantial model influences this thesis’ own model in its focus on interdependent action as they share the aim to describe narrative patterns. However, the contingent patterns this thesis seeks to identify do not make archetypal criticism’s claim of universality, nor do they share its desire to unearth universal narrative deep structures and their socio-psychological connotations. Instead, this thesis’ model trades universality for functionality in its purpose as a tool for narrative analysis. As the coming section will show, one field which – following influences of semiotics and structuralism – has a particularly well-established relationship with practical approaches to modelling various forms of systemic complexity is the universe of *games*.

2.1.4 Complexity, Structuralism, and Games

When it comes to modelling complex systems and phenomena, arguably few terminologies have had quite as much impact as those surrounding the universe(s) of play and games.⁶⁴ The seductive quality of games as a conceptual model for – in the broadest sense – structuralism-inspired analytical approaches is partly due to them being widely

58 See Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: Heinle&Heinle, 1999), 12–14.

59 George Polti, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, transl. Lucile Ray (Franklin, Ohio: James Knapp Reeve, 1924).

60 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, commemorative ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

61 Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, 28.

62 Christopher Vogler, *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, 2nd ed. (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998).

63 Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

64 Noted, e.g., by Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), 155. Also Thomas Klein, who proposes its application to approach narrative complexity in “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.* Edited by Frank Kelleter, 225–240. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012, 235f.

understood to denote rule-based,⁶⁵ regular, and repeatable⁶⁶ phenomena that are distinct but not independent from material reality.⁶⁷ In his ground-breaking study on the “Homo Ludens”, Johan Huizinga states that the game “creates order, yes, it is order”.⁶⁸ Michel Holquist, likewise, notes that within a game, “what was rough is made smooth, what was chaotic is made orderly”.⁶⁹ Consequently, this thesis draws from various game-based approaches across disciplines in its attempt to structure the complex universe of popular polit-series into a rule-based analytical model.

It is essential to distinguish, as Serjoscha Wiemer notes, the “culturalist”,⁷⁰ “anthropocentric” conception of games from a “formalist” understanding of games.⁷¹ The former expresses itself, e.g., in the perspectives of Friedrich Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Roger Caillois or Huizinga, who regard games as distinct from work or serious purpose,⁷² purposeful or purposeless, and constitutive for human character⁷³ or culture.⁷⁴ The latter, focussing on formal characteristics, has turned games into a powerful metaphor for

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- 65 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Aber, 1957), 30f.
- 66 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Gesammelte Werke 1), 6th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 116.
- 67 See Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 89. And Gregory Bateson, “Eine Theorie des Spiels und der Phantasie”, in *Ökologie des Geistes: Anthropologische, psychologische, biologische und epistemologische Perspektiven*, transl. Hans Günter Holl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 251. And F.J.J. Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels: Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstribe* (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1933), 159. And Angelika Corbineau-Hoffmann, “Spiel”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co AG, 1995), S.1388. Also Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 64ff.
- 68 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd ed., transl. H. Nachod (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 19. My Translation: “Es schafft Ordnung, ja es ist Ordnung”. See also Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes&Seitz, 2017), 12.
- 69 Michael Holquist, “How to Play Utopia: Some brief notes on the distinctiveness of utopian fiction”, *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929668>, 110.
- 70 Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Göring (Turia+Kant, Wien 2017), 156. My translation: “kulturalistisch”.
- 71 Serjoscha Wiemer, “Niemandes Spiel? Zur Aufteilung des Spielbegriffs oder: Die Schwierigkeit, die spielende Maschine zu denken”, in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Göring (Turia+Kant, Wien 2017), 157. My Translation: “den anthropozentrischen Zug”, “formalistisch”.
- 72 See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd edition, transl. H. Nachod. (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 17. See also Viktor Turner, *Vom Ritual zum Theater: Der Ernst des menschlichen Spiels*, transl. Sylvia Schomburg-Scherff (Frankfurt a.M./ New York: Campus, 1989), 59. The special status of games is questioned, e.g., by Jean Piaget, “Nachahmung, Spiel und Traum: Die Entwicklung der Symbolfunktion beim Kinde”, in *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke 5. Studienausgabe*, transl. Leo Montada (Stuttgart: Klett, 1975), 189.
- 73 See Friedrich Schiller, “15. Brief”, in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, ed. Klaus L. Berg-hahn (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 62f.
- 74 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* 7.

various approaches concerned with modelling complex systems. Vilém Flusser, e.g., attempting to create a universal formalist model based on games, defines them as systems “consisting of elements which combine in a regular manner”.⁷⁵ Léon Hanssen, regarding cultural game studies, likewise states, “A game consists of a matrix of combinations and is constituted by a certain number of rules”.⁷⁶

Few disciplines illustrate the interactional model-building qualities of game terminology better than mathematical game theory as the “general theory of rational decision-making under conditions of strategic interdependency of actors”.⁷⁷ In a study on game theory and public policy, Roger McCain accordingly states, “When we conceive interactive decisions as games, we have a powerful aid to understanding them”.⁷⁸ Influential since World War II, mathematics’ uniquely formalist approach arguably helped inspire a variety of other disciplines, especially in the structuralist 1960es and 1970ies, as I will discuss in the following sections.

However, while games have often served as a structural model for various phenomena (including language, literature, politics, economics, and the human psyche; see below), they have not been applied consistently as a tool for textual analysis of popular serial TV fiction. Nonetheless, in the study of fictional texts, the field of games occupies a particularly contested place, as the next section will demonstrate.

2.1.4.1 Games, Play, and Narrative and ‘Ludology vs Narratology’

Notions of games and play have played a significant role in literary and narrative studies, beginning in the structuralist 1960s and 1970s, which claimed a game-like structural nature for language and texts. Following this contention, Albrecht Koschorke e.g., posits that stories are “in a certain sense *narrative games*”⁷⁹ in that they are rule-based, reductive,⁸⁰ and selective activities.⁸¹ Bruce Morissette argues, with recourse to structuralist approaches by Louis Hjelmslev, who describes language as being structured like a game,⁸² that fiction as a product of language must by “analogous extension be said to be put together like a game” as well, “with each specific story or novel constituting merely

75 Vilém Flusser, “Spiele”, in *Ist das Leben ein Spiel?: Aspekte einer Philosophie des Spiels und eines Denkens ohne Fundamente*, ed. Florian Rötzer (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 4. My translation: “‘Spiel’ sei jedes aus Elementen bestehende System, worin sich die Elemente regelmäßig verbinden”.

76 Léon Hanssen, “Games of Late Modernity: Discussing Huizinga’s Legacy”, in *Contemporary Homo Ludens*, ed. Halina Mielicka-Pawłowska (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), p.30.

77 Rainer Hegselmann, “Spieltheorie”, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe & Co AG, 1995), S.1392. My translation: “Allgemeine Theorie des rationalen Entscheidens unter Bedingungen strategischer Interdependenz der Akteure”.

78 Roger A. McCain, *Game Theory and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing Inc., 2015), p.3.

79 Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 12. Original emphasis. My translation: “in gewissem Sinne *Erzählspiele*”.

80 Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, 27f.

81 Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, 29.

82 Bruce Morissette, “Games and Game Structures in Robbe-Grillet,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): 160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929672>.

one of the possible *parties* or individual playings of the game of fictional composition".⁸³ Following a similar line of thought, Michel Beaujour has argued that "poetry is a game, or like a game".⁸⁴

Akin to the interactive notions associated with the term 'play' (as opposed to the structural 'game'), reader-response criticism has emphasised the participatory role of the 'reader' in creating texts. William Stephenson, in his "Seven Rhetorics of Play", accordingly claims a "play theory of news reading", arguing that "newspaper reading, subjectively regarded, has all the earmarks of play".⁸⁵ He derives this contention from regarding the communicative situation as an interactive instead of a passive one, "in which the individual plays with communication"⁸⁶ in a state of "apperception", that is, a "readiness to perceive this or that in relation to prior systems or interests".⁸⁷ For TV, Brian Sutton-Smith has likewise claimed that the interactive engagement of audiences with the medium of TV itself bears many hallmarks of play.⁸⁸

The legitimacy of this extensive use of play and game terminology in literary and media theory – both with regards to structural 'games' and participatory notions of 'play' – has been highly contested, not least in the famous 'ludology vs narratology' debate of the 1990s and early 2000s, in which ludologists denied the legitimacy/ feasibility of claiming structural similarity between games, play, and linear narratives. At its height, Gonzalo Frasca denied any meaningful (inter)active role of the narrative recipient in fictional texts. Citing recipients' limited influence on the progression of a linear story, he states

No matter how badly literary theorists remind us of the active role of the reader, that train will hit Anna Karenina, and Oedipus will kill his father and sleep with his mother.⁸⁹

Ludology has long felt the need to establish unique properties of games as distinct from those of narrative.⁹⁰ Accordingly, they claim that the unique ludic character of games is that of dynamic "simulation", which Frasca defines as the process of modelling a "(source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system".⁹¹ Its juxtaposition is the distinct character of narrative as static "representation".⁹² With the increasing prevalence of digital games in the 1990s and 2000s, expectations surrounding technological abilities to increase interactivity and

83 Morrisette, "Games and Game Structures", 160.

84 Beaujour, Michel. "The Game of Poetics." *Yale French Studies*, no. 41, *Game, Play, Literature* (1968): 58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929665>.

85 William Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), 150.

86 Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, 151.

87 Stephenson, *The Play Theory of Mass Communication*, 149.

88 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

89 Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 227.

90 Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative", 221.

91 Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative", 223.

92 See, e.g., Espen Aarseth, "A narrative theory of games", In *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG '12)*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2012,

scholarly investment rose. Anticipating seismic changes in interactive, ludic narrative forms, Janet Murray, in her famous study “Hamlet on the Holodeck”, e.g. argues for a new poetics of the “cyberdrama”.⁹³

Considering the notion of interactive play, Marie-Laure Ryan has theorised several levels of user interactivity in digital narrative texts. They range from relatively limited “peripheral interactivity”,⁹⁴ in which user interaction is limited to the interface, to “ontological participation”⁹⁵ and “real-time story generation”,⁹⁶ in which users actively participate in the unfolding of the plot as part of the story world (albeit to varying degrees). Questions of interactivity are relevant, too, in the discussion of current complex, multi-agential TV systems. However, it is crucial to note that the interactivity of narrative structures is limited by more than ‘just’ the current technological or economic boundaries of the medium. The concept of a fictional narrative that shows real, direct, and full interactivity faces what Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart have famously called the “narrative paradox”.⁹⁷ It describes the fundamental juxtaposition of, on the one hand, creating a well-composed coherent narrative and, on the other hand, granting absolute freedom to an audience, excluding one another. This contention, however, is hardly new. Friedrich Schiller already noted the inherent need for a fictional narrative to maintain a certain level of static structural control to retain its aesthetic and dramatic qualities. He states:

For his own sake, the poet must follow this road, for his realm ends with our freedom. [...] We are only *his* as long as we gaze beside ourselves. He has lost us once we reach into our own bosom.⁹⁸

However, if interactivity is defined, as Ryan proposes, as systems’ “ability to modify themselves dynamically”,⁹⁹ it should be examined more closely whether ongoing serial narratives, with their quality of evolving both recursively and forward-facing (more on this shortly), show some degree of systemic interactivity and indeed a ludic quality that ‘closed’ narratives lack. Ludology has claimed that the structural characteristic of

New York, NY, USA: 130. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2282338.2282365>. And Frasca, “Simulation versus Narrative”, Introduction to Ludology (2003), 224.

93 Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 251ff.

94 Marie-Laure Ryan, “The Interactive Onion: Layers of User Participation in Digital Narrative Texts”, *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, ed. Ruth Page and Thomas Brownen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 37.

95 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 45.

96 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 48.

97 Ryan, “The interactive Onion”, 48. With reference to Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart, “The Emergent Narrative: Theoretical Investigation”, *Proceedings of the Narrative and Learning Environments Conference NILEO4* Edinburgh, Scotland (2004): 25–33.

98 Friedrich Schiller, “Ueber das Pathetische”, in *Schillers Werke: Philosophische Schriften: Erster Teil, vol.20, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlau, 1962), 217. My translation: “Um seiner selbst willen muß der Dichter diesen Weg einschlagen, denn mit unserer Freyheit ist sein Reich zu Ende. Nur so lange wir außer uns anschauen, sind wir *sein*; er hat uns verloren, sobald wir in unsern eigenen Busen greifen.” Original emphasis.

99 Ryan, “The Interactive Onion”, 35.

simulation turns games into future-facing phenomena as their fundamental structure anticipates a player's interaction.¹⁰⁰ This study's model follows research on popular seriality that assumes the particular characteristics of serial TV to enable audiences and other secondary actors to – sometimes unwittingly – influence their continuation (more on this shortly). Like games, ongoing serial narratives thus arguably possess indirect, systemic interactivity that grants them an inherently playful quality, which arguably forms a significant part of their appeal to more engaged audiences.

Questions of interactivity and storytelling are bound to take a central role in contemporary storytelling as portals and platforms set out to explore the hitherto largely untapped narrative and interactive potential afforded by the technological possibilities of digital, nonlinear transmission. Understanding the systemic structure of popular polit-series will, thus, contribute to equipping literary and media scholarship to contend with future industrial developments.

Following up on the agential component of games, psychological research has likewise used game-based terminology to model complex interactional and subconscious processes, as the subsequent section will show.

2.1.4.2 Games and Psychology

Particularly in the (structuralist-inspired) 1960es, and partly in conjunction with structural semiotics and archetypal studies, psychology has used the terminology and properties of 'games' to non-mathematically model human behaviour. Following a formalist approach, psychological Transactional Analysis (TA), e.g., uses the term 'game' to describe a subset of complex, regular interaction patterns with a "well-defined, predictable outcome".¹⁰¹

In his famous exegesis of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter", psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan evokes the fictional guessing game Even or Odd and the example of coin tosses to illustrate how inherent structural principles determine the interaction of signifiers.¹⁰² His analysis of "The Purloined Letter" (and a subsequent exchange of letters with philosopher Jacques Derrida), which Lacan uses to illustrate his model of the symbolic order of partially self-governing signifiers constituting the human subconscious, is a famous example of the pervasive influence of psychology on literary studies.

Psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte, in her psychoanalytical reading of Poe's oeuvre,¹⁰³ and Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, in their analysis of Edward Albee's play "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?",¹⁰⁴ have likewise demonstrated the illustrative usefulness of psychological approaches to analysing the dynamics of fictional char-

100 Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology", in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 233.

101 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 48.

102 See Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", in *Écrits*, transl. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), e.g., 7 and 35ff.

103 Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, Transl. John Rodker (London: Imago Publishing, 1949).

104 Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson, "Kommunikationsstrukturen im Theaterstück 'Wer hat Angst vor Virginia Woolf'", in *Menschliche Kommunikation: Formen, Störungen, Parado-*

acters. However, these approaches are often less focused on literary exegesis and, at least in the latter case, more intent on demonstrating a psychological method.

While it is not for this study to discern their value for psychological practice, psychological approaches continue to provide exciting perspectives for the structural modelling of character interactions. Particularly TA constitutes an advanced methodology that will serve this thesis – with some modification – to model the dynamics of fictional characters and illustrate narrative patterns in polit-series. Expanding its perspective from subjective and interpersonal processes, this chapter's next section will demonstrate the role of game-based terminology in describing political and societal processes.

2.1.4.3 Games, Politics, Political Imaginaries and Political Aesthetics

In political studies and sociology, the terminology surrounding 'games' has played a significant role in describing postmodern social and political processes, e.g., with the terms "gamification" and – as Joost Raessens has called it – "ludification" [of culture].¹⁰⁵ They denote – as Felix Raczkowski notes with regards to 'gamification' – "the transfer of game elements to contexts outside of games".¹⁰⁶ This use of game terminology rests on a fundamentally vernacular understanding of games that indicates the phenomenon's separation from 'seriousness' or 'reality' following pervasive anthropocentric views of games as purpose-free 'as if'-simulations, variations, and abstractions of real circumstances.¹⁰⁷

Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, and Joost Raessens, with recourse to Joost Raessens, have described a "global 'ludification of culture'" in the first decade of the 21st century,¹⁰⁸ arguing that postmodern "western culture has witnessed a remarkable revival of the 'ludic worldview'".¹⁰⁹ Due to its conceptual origins, gamification is often criticised as unduly simplifying and distorting 'serious' processes. Mirroring neo-Marxist criticisms of earlier mass industrial products, Leopoldina Fortu-

xien, ed. Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson (Bern/Stuttgart: Hans Huber, 1969), 138–170.

105 Joost Raessens, "Playful identities, or the Ludification of Culture", *Games and Culture* 1, no.1 (January 2006): 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412005281779>. See also Felix Raczkowski, "Spielgrenzen und ihre Denkweisen", in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia+Kant, 2017), 119f.

106 Raczkowski, "Spielgrenzen und ihre Denkweisen", 119. My translation: "die Übertragung von Spielelementen auf außerspielerische Kontexte".

107 See Gregory Bateson, "Eine Theorie des Spiels und der Phantasie", in *Ökologie des Geistes: Anthropologische, psychologische, biologische und epistemologische Perspektiven*, transl. Hans Günter Holl (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1985), 245; also Karl Groos' famous concept of game as "experimenting" and "Practice" [Einübung] in Karl Groos, *Die Spiele der Tiere*, 3rd ed. (Jena: G. Fischer, 1930), 27, 49ff.; and Julia Bee, "Die Welt spielt: Spiel, Animation und Wahrnehmung", in *Denkweisen des Spiels: Medienphilosophische Annäherungen*, ed. Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky and Reinhold Görling (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2017), 190.

108 Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, Joost Raessens, "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity", in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen, Sybille Lammes, Michiel de Lange, Jos de Mul, Joost Raessens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 9. And Raessens, "Playful identities", 52–57.

109 Frissen et al., "Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, media, and identity", 21.

nati, e.g., examining the ludification of media cultures, argues that “games can currently be understood as a new ‘opium’ for the people”.¹¹⁰

With its connotations of media spectacle and self-presentation, *political* gamification has likewise been a long-standing topic of scholarly enquiry of modern and postmodern politics: In his famous 1938/39 study on games, Johan Huizinga already argues that US politics takes “entirely the form of grand national games”.¹¹¹ Dörner has famously referred to this phenomenon as “Politainment”.¹¹² In a similar vein, Liesbet van Zoonen has shown the pervasiveness of the trope of politics as “soap opera”.¹¹³ Examining the intersections of popular culture and politics, she describes “Personalization” and “dramatization” as necessary – albeit ambiguous – key processes in creating political engagement¹¹⁴ in what, at times, has been disparagingly called the “drama democracy”.¹¹⁵

As a critical terminology used to describe postmodern political communication, “gamification” discourse follows a long-running debate about the role of political representation, “political aesthetics”,¹¹⁶ and the political ‘imaginary’¹¹⁷ that goes back to Plato (who dismissed it as a distortive influence).¹¹⁸ As Robin Celikates and Simon

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- 110 Leopoldina Fortunati, “New Media, Play, and Social Identities”, in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015), 293.
- 111 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Vom Ursprung der Kultur im Spiel*, 23rd ed., transl. H. Nachod (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013), 225. My translation: “vollkommen die Form großer nationaler Spiele”.
- 112 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001).
- 113 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen. When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 19ff.
- 114 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 145.
- 115 See Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 7. She criticises the categorical dismissal of politics’ need to communicate and engage citizens. For the critical term ‘drama democracy’ she references a homonymous book by Mark Elchardus, *De Dramademocratie* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2002).
- 116 See Thomas Meyer, “Politische Ästhetik”, in *Was ist Politik?*, by Thomas Meyer (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000), 167–175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-322-95150-2>; Oliver Kohns, ed., *Perspektiven der politischen Ästhetik* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); also Thomas Ernst, Patricia Gozalbez Cantó, Sebastian Richter, Nadja Sennwald, Julia Tieke, eds., *SUBversionen: Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik in der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008).
- 117 See, e.g., Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, “Ausser-Sich-Sein: Die Imaginäre Dimension der Politik: Einleitung”, in *Die imaginäre Dimension der Politik*, ed. Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns (Paderborn: Fink, 2014), 7.
- 118 See Plato, “Gorgias”, in *Plato Gorgias and Aristotle Rhetoric*, transl. Joe Sachs (Newsbury port, MA: Focus Publishing, 2009), 29–120; Felix Trautmann, “Das politische Imaginäre: Zur Einleitung”, in *Das politische Imaginäre*, ed. Felix Trautmann (Köln: August Verlag, 2017); Clemens Pornschlegel, “Die Grimasse der Macht: Zur Theatralität des Politischen”, in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein, Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015), 262–276; Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch, eds., *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium* (Munich: Fink, 2007); Rebekka A. Klein, Dominik Finkelde, eds., *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären* (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015); Albrecht Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat: Konstruktionen des politischen Körpers in der Geschichte Europas* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2007); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, eds., *Die Imaginäre Dimension der Politik* (Paderborn: Fink, 2014); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns, eds., *Figurationen des Politischen: (Vol.1): Die Phänomenalität der Politik in der Gegenwart* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); Martin Doll and Oliver Kohns,

Rothöhler critically note, “The relationship of politics and aesthetics is thought of [...] as an antithesis”, with politics being expected to be “purified of unpleasant aesthetic side effects”.¹¹⁹

However, studying more recent scholarship surrounding the political imaginary¹²⁰ has shown that representation of constructed ‘realities’ is an essential part of creating politics in the first place. Representation does not imply undue simplification but consolidates otherwise insoluble societal complexity by manifesting unifying collective imaginaries that come to life only in their tangible presentation. Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann and Ethel Matala de Mazza, e.g. have examined the interdependency of politics and fiction in their analysis of the narrative trope of the “king’s new clothes”.¹²¹ Discussing the “imaginary of political dominance” [*das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft*], they argue that the ruler as a “collective singular” creates a surface for the projections of individuals to imagine the abstract social and political whole to which they belong.¹²²

However, related discourses, namely those surrounding “post-democracy” or “simulative democracy”, criticise that, in postmodernity, political institutions and their public appearances serve to simulate a political representation and democratic sovereignty that has, in truth, been largely eroded by individualism, capitalist consumerism, and relegating decision making to non-transparent technocratic bodies.¹²³

Despite its academic prominence, the role of political imaginaries is often overlooked in the analysis of contemporary polit-series. This study will show that contending with politics’ inherent dependency on gamified fiction and spectacle constitutes a central trope in most polit-series. Indeed, as this study will argue, the political imaginary – in various normative frameworks and narrative guises – is the constitutive leitmotif of fictional politics in general.

The coming section will concern itself with research on a different set of highly political structures: the scholarship pertaining to the contested networks responsible for creating and maintaining TV series and popular culture.

eds., *Figurationen des Politischen: (Vol.2): Die zwei Körper der Nation* (Paderborn: Fink, 2016); Ethel Matala de Mazza, “Body Politics”, in *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. Harun Maye (Munich: Fink, 2011), 167–187; Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988); Louis Marin, “Der glorreiche Körper des Königs und sein Porträt”, in *Das politische Imaginäre*, ed. Felix Trautmann, transl. Till Bardoux (Köln: August Verlag, 2017), 31–69.

119 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, “Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing”, in Diehl/Koch, *Inszenierungen der Politik*, (Munich: Fink, 2007), 57. My translation: “das Verhältnis von Politik und Ästhetik wird [...] als ein gegenläufiges gedacht”; “von unerfreulichen ästhetischen Begleiterscheinungen gereinigt sein”.

120 See above

121 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002).

122 Frank et al., *Des Kaisers neue Kleider*, 80. My translation: “Kollektivsingulars”.

123 See Ingolfur Blühdorn, “Billig will Ich: Post-demokratische Wende und simulative Demokratie”, *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 19, no. 4 (2006): 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2006-0409>. And Colin Crouch, *Coping with Post-Democracy* (London: Fabian Society, 2000).

2.2 TV and Industry Research – Production, Circulation, and Reception

Various branches of media and creative industry research, as well as information studies, have paid significant attention to the technological, economic, and social changes that ushered in television's transition into the era of "TV VI",¹²⁴ "post-network", or 'neo-network'.¹²⁵ Particularly the technological and structural affordances of the new television age have become a central issue for scholarship. Catherine Johnson, for example, in her (primarily UK-based) study of what she calls "Online TV", argues that "the internet era represents a distinct phase in the development of television that differs from the earlier broadcast, cable/satellite and digital eras of television".¹²⁶

The undoubtedly seismic changes in media landscapes, not least in TV in the 2010s, have caused what David Hesmondhalgh calls the "infrastructural turn",¹²⁷ inspiring media industry scholars to embrace sociotechnical approaches and often replacing earlier sociocultural perspectives in the study of media and creative industries and the analysis of popular media texts (particularly in film studies). Especially when it comes to textual analysis, media scholars now face the question of how to consolidate the various infrastructural, technical, sociological, cultural, and textual approaches.

Mittell, in his extensive study of the poetics of complex TV, has adapted Bordwell's approaches from historical poetics to the study of film in order to show "how television storytelling has changed and what cultural practices within television technology, industry, and viewership have enabled and encouraged these transformations."¹²⁸ Acknowledging that "questions about form are not restricted to the realm of the text but deeply connected to contexts,"¹²⁹ Mittell draws an extensive picture of how evolving industrial and technical affordances shape serial TV storytelling as a complex phenomenon and how series, in their interplay with audiences, create meaning. However, dating back to 2015, this approach naturally focuses on TV storytelling as a primarily linear phenomenon and does not yet consider the consequences of the substantial developments in the digital age of nonlinear OTT services.¹³⁰

124 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-invention of Television* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 14. And Mareike Jenner, "'Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching", *New Media & Society*, 18, no. 2, (July 2014): 260. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541523>.

125 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. Also Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

126 Catherine Johnson, *Online TV* (London: Routledge, 2019), 2.

127 David Hesmondhalgh, "The infrastructural turn in media and internet research", in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 132.

128 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2.

129 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 5.

130 Abbreviation for 'Over The Top': An industry term referring to the 'direct' provision of digital content.

It should be noted that many of these approaches ultimately echo developments in film scholarship, often called “New Film History” (NFH). Since its inception in the mid-1980s, the term has come to denote a somewhat loosely defined set of approaches aimed at evolving the limited perspectives of ‘old’ film history, which, as James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper note, regarded film either as an aesthetic phenomenon focussing mainly on auteur-cinema with high degrees of cultural capital or as evidence of sociocultural currents.¹³¹ NFH approaches, on the other hand, view film as a “combination of historical processes [...] and individual agency”¹³² (although there has traditionally been a clear emphasis on the sociocultural perspective), thus considering a variety of filmic and non-filmic primary sources for their analyses.¹³³ NFH assumes the medium to show a “constructed version of history” contingent on its makers and audiences¹³⁴ and regards film as a distinct audio-visual form rather than ‘just’ narrative texts.¹³⁵ More recently, Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally have used some approaches (e.g., interviews with production personnel) with reference to NFH in their analyses of polit-TV in the 2010s.¹³⁶ However, for TV (even more so than for film), consolidating the various aesthetic and historical perspectives on complex series remains an uneasy task. The medium’s increasing sociotechnical complexity has done nothing to change this.

Given the widespread emergence of nonlinear OTT services in contemporary TV, few contextual media phenomena have received more attention than the ‘platformization’ or ‘portalization’ of content into nonlinear digital formats. Analysing the distribution of news, Thomas Poell and David B. Nieborg (not yet making the distinction between channels, platforms, and portals proposed by Amanda Lotz¹³⁷) have described “platformization” as the migration of “*economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems*”,¹³⁸ resulting in what they call a widespread “platform dependence”.¹³⁹

131 James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper, “Introduction”, in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, softcover reprint, ed. James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.

132 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 6.

133 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 7.

134 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 7.

135 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, “Introduction”, 8.

136 Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally. “The political TV shows of the 2010s: showrunners, reality and gender”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 17.

137 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

138 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity”, *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4276. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>. Original emphasis.

139 Nieborg/Poell, Platformization, 4276.

2.2.1 The Evolution of Portals and Platforms

Most recent cross-disciplinary research concerned with contemporary TV's economic and technological affordances is, implicitly or explicitly, tied to examinations of 'portals' and 'platforms'. To Amanda Lotz, media and industry scholarship owes the impetus for the distinction between channels, platforms, and portals.¹⁴⁰ As Lotz has shown, portals and platforms, on the one hand, and channels, on the other hand, differ significantly in their generation and distribution of content.

While channels present digitally or non-digitally transmitted linear schedules of professionally generated content, portals and platforms exist exclusively online and are "nonlinear", meaning they can personalise the "delivery of content independent of a schedule".¹⁴¹ They follow what Christel Taillibert and Bruni Cailler call the "ATAWAD concept" of delivery ["Any Time, Any Where, Any Device"].¹⁴² Regarding TV storytelling, this marks, as Lotz points out, a decisive shift from content "that originates from the structuring requirement of a schedule".¹⁴³

Platforms are "commonly defined as large-scale online systems premised on user interaction and user-generated content",¹⁴⁴ in what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig have called "Communitainment".¹⁴⁵ They note that "Platforms provide for media to be circulated, communities to socialize, and users to generate various forms of value."¹⁴⁶ Portals, on the other hand, are "the crucial intermediary services that collect, curate, and distribute television programming via internet distribution"¹⁴⁷ and denote online services that provide "professionalized entertainment IP" and a comparatively low degree of user

140 See Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; see also Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018).

141 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

142 Christel Taillibert and Bruno Cailler, "Video on demand platforms, editorial strategies, and logics of production: The case of Netflix France", in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models And Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (London/New York: Routledge, 2021), 103.

143 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

144 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 36.

145 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "Online Entertainment: A New Wave of Media Globalization?", *International Journal of Communication* 10 (October 2016): 5412f. <https://doi.org/1932-8036/20160005>.

146 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, "'Tech-Tonic' Shifts: The U.S. and China Models of Online Screen Distribution", in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 148.

147 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

interaction.¹⁴⁸ They thus show a certain degree of continuity with traditional TV channels.¹⁴⁹ Thus, while a platform is an “open marketplace”,¹⁵⁰ a portal represents a “walled garden” of professional content, as Ramon Lobato phrases it.¹⁵¹

Cunningham and Craig have pointed out that US-led ‘Western’ OTT services tend to follow *either* a platform- or a portal model relegating more traditional forms of television to portals. In an example of technological “leapfrogging”, Chinese non-linear services, on the other hand, have, so far, been much more successful in integrating the distribution of professionally and user-generated content into the interactive structure of “one-stop-shop” platforms.¹⁵² However, due to the discursive dominance of high-profile productions within the ‘Western’ cultural sphere, TV scholarship in the global North has initially often focused on theorising portals, arguably showing a tendency to treat their emergence as synonymous with the general changes of the post-network era. This has somewhat changed, e.g., with Poell, Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy’s recent examination of the changes in cultural industries through the widespread influence of platforms such as Tik Tok, Twitch, or Instagram.¹⁵³

Lotz posits that a portal curates its library “based on the identity, vision, and strategy that drive its business model”.¹⁵⁴ This new type of content curation is possible because of the technical affordances of internet-based distribution: firstly, there is no temporally limited linear schedule,¹⁵⁵ meaning that in nonlinear television, there is ‘space’ for any amount of content imaginable. This fact has solved some of the core issues previously described as “peak TV”,¹⁵⁶ that is, the production of too much high-profile content to ‘fit’ into linear schedules.

Secondly, media and digital data scholarship have regarded portals’ ability to mine user data and apply algorithms to classify viewers into what Benjamin Burroughs calls “algorithmic audience[s]”¹⁵⁷ and produce ‘individually’ fitted content as one of the main requirements of the nonlinear TV age. What Poell and Nieborg (with regards to news and games) call “algorithmic logic” has brought content developers to turn “their production

148 Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, “‘Tech-Tonic’ Shifts: The U.S. and China Models of On-line Screen Distribution”, in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York university Press, 2021), 149.

149 See Lotz, “Portals”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

150 Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 37.

151 Lobato, *Netflix Nations*, 37.

152 Cunningham/Craig, “‘Tech-Tonic’ Shifts”, 160.

153 Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2021).

154 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

155 Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018), 149.

156 See Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, 104.

157 Benjamin Burroughs, “House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore”, *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (2019): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948>.

and circulation strategies toward the recommendation, ranking, and other kinds of end-user facing algorithms of major platforms".¹⁵⁸ It is a prerequisite for what Lotz has called Netflix's "conglomerated niche strategy":¹⁵⁹ Through collecting and evaluating consumer data, "more strategic curation"¹⁶⁰ makes it possible for subscription portals such as Netflix to target different "taste communities"¹⁶¹ and provide niche audiences with content specifically tailored to their presumed wishes.¹⁶² As algorithms aid curation, extensive content libraries become manageable for audiences and providers alike.

Studies of media economics have remarked that changing technological affordances have altered TV-based business models,¹⁶³ changing, as Sylvia Harvey notes, what television is "as an object and industry, and a cultural form".¹⁶⁴ One such process has been "cord-cutting",¹⁶⁵ that is, the cancellation of cable- and other linear subscription models. Lotz shows that the nonlinear turn has affected industry and consumption practices. This includes an increased focus on international markets,¹⁶⁶ the creation/increase of viewing modes like bingeing,¹⁶⁷ and changes in production, licencing, and secondary marketing models with streaming portals trying to integrate the production and distribution of content vertically,¹⁶⁸ often paying producers "*cost plus*" to allow them to hold licencing rights in perpetuity.¹⁶⁹

Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni have identified the innovations led by pay- and subscription-based services of the early TV IV era – such as the establishment of new markets and revenue models for European productions and the introduction of new or

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- 158 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4280.
- 159 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:4/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 160 Lotz, "Portals", <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 161 See Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast*, p.146
- 162 See Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; and Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing, 2018), 115.
- 163 See, e.g., Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021).
- 164 Sylvia Harvey, "Broadcasting in the Age of Netflix: When the Market is Master", in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed, ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 118.
- 165 See, e.g., Harvey, "Broadcasting in the Age of Netflix", 107.
- 166 Amanda Lotz, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: The MIT Press, 2018), 93.
- 167 Lotz, *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast*, 120.
- 168 Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:6/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 169 Lotz, *We Now Disrupt this Broadcast*, 123. Original emphasis.

renewed industrial production and distribution methods (like the establishment of a showrunner following the US model)¹⁷⁰ – as a root cause for what they call the “contemporary renaissance in European fiction” on TV.¹⁷¹

Since the emergence of cable channels, it has often been argued that subscription-based TV creates content different from classic advertising-based television. Like their linear predecessors, subscription-based OTT services often focus on “content that attracts subscribers” rather than content “that will gather a mass of advertiser-desired eyeballs”.¹⁷² Together with virtually ‘limitless’ nonlinear schedules, this led Lotz to state that “[s]ubscriber-funded portals are arguably good for audiences that have been unvalued by advertisers”.¹⁷³ This marks a significant change to traditional advertising-based TV, whose “Distinct cultures of production create barriers to diversity”.¹⁷⁴

However, Derek Johnson, questioning the notion of limitless nonlinear schedules (and their corresponding diversity), has pointed out that nonlinearity itself is somewhat limited by the linearity of human experience and points out potential biases. He argues that

Netflix [itself a portal] helps us to shape linear flows from the non-linear possibilities of its program offerings, privileging some quantum outcomes over others based on its economic and cultural priorities.¹⁷⁵

Indeed, this echoes larger concerns about systemic biases that have accompanied more recent discussions about machine learning, AI and Big Data.¹⁷⁶ For contemporary textual

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- 170 Luca Barra and Massima Scaglioni, “Introduction: The many steps and factors of a European renaissance”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 2.
- 171 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 15.
- 172 Amanda D. Lotz, “Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television”, open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: *Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library*, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 173 Lotz, “Portals”, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:5/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
- 174 Sharon Marie Ross, “Introduction: IN FOCUS: Writing and Producing TV in the Post-Network Era”, *Cinema Journal* 50, No.2 (2011): 130. See Felicia D. Henderson, “The Culture Behind Closed Doors: Issues of Gender and Race in the Writers’ Room”, *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 145–52.
- 175 Derek Johnson, “Television Guides and Recommendations in a Changing Channel Landscape”, in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10.
- 176 E.g., concerning discrimination through selection and systemic biases. Se, e.g., Katie Seely-Gant and Lisa M. Frehill, “Exploring Bias and Error in Big Data Research,” *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 101, no. 3 (2015): 29–38. And Nina Baur et al., “The Quality of Big Data. Development, Problems, and Possibilities of Use of Process-Generated Data in the Digital Age,” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 45, no. 3 (2020): 209–43. And Betsy Anne Williams, Catherine F. Brooks, and Yotam Shmargad, “How Algorithms Discriminate Based on Data They

analysis, considering the changing affordances of contemporary TV is thus of the utmost significance.

2.2.2 Examining Netflix

As arguably the most high-profile portal and self-proclaimed ‘disruptor’ of TV in its early nonlinear age, no OTT service has received as much scholarly attention as Netflix.¹⁷⁷ However, while the portal’s crucial role in the evolution of the Western TV landscape is largely undisputed, the actual extent and nature of its influence remain far less clear. Scholarly assertions of Netflix’s influence often seem to echo the portal’s own marketing. Examining the service’s brand, Timothy Havens has shown that framing itself as an “individualist and youthful” tech company, as opposed to a traditional media company, is an integral part of the streaming portal’s self-image.¹⁷⁸ Anne Shattuck consequently argues that Netflix is the “single most important company that disrupted and rewrote television in the twenty-first century”.¹⁷⁹ However, Ramon Lobato, in his extensive study of Netflix’s international operations, states that

There is no coherent Netflix effect at global scale. Rather than having a uniformly disruptive effect, Netflix has had quite different effects in different national contexts – ranging from disruption of broadcast and pay-TV incumbents (as in Canada, Australia, and other English-language markets), to modest success as a niche service (in much of Europe and Latin America), or no impact at all (in Africa and the Middle East, for example).¹⁸⁰

Further comparative studies of individual productions and developments – as the one undertaken in this thesis – will, over time, contribute to solving this question. It is particularly pertinent to extended debates surrounding cultural hegemony and the division of power within cultural industrial systems that have been a long-standing focal point of research concerned with popular culture.

Lack: Challenges, Solutions, and Policy Implications”, *Journal of Information Policy* 8 (2018), 78–115. <https://doi.org/10.5325>.

- 177 See, e.g., volumes by Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer International Publishing, 2018); Derek Johnson, ed., *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels* (New York: Routledge, 2018); see also Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021); Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan, eds., *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020).
- 178 Timothy Havens, “Netflix: Streaming Channel Brands as Global Meaning Systems”, in *From Networks to Netflix*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York: Routledge, 2018), 326.
- 179 Jane Shattuck, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 145.
- 180 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 183.

2.2.3 Disputing the Distribution of Power Across Popular Culture and TV

Research across disciplines implicitly or explicitly tends to view the interactions between the different actors involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of a popular TV series as a constant negotiation of the question of who gets to determine its shape and modes of availability. Predating any notion of OTT nonlinearity, the relationship of different actors within popular culture in general, be they distributors, producers, or recipients in their various forms, has long been regarded as “political”, centred around, as Umberto Eco notes, “power and dominance”.¹⁸¹ However, which actors possess just how much power in any pop cultural agential relationship remains a highly contested question.

Older readings, most prominently that of the Frankfurt School’s critical theory, have drawn a dismissive and relatively binary image of the ‘culture industry’ [*Kulturindustrie*] and popular culture as *mass culture*.¹⁸² For them, it is a “paternalistic”¹⁸³ and more or less manipulative realm serving to perpetuate the commercial and political interests of economically and culturally dominant forces as well as the capitalist order in general, thus making consumers complicit in their own exploitation. In this vision of mass culture, of which TV forms a prominent part, “the proletariat consumes bourgeois cultural models, which it believes to be its own autonomous expression”.¹⁸⁴

More recent research suggests that the power relations in popular culture – and between a TV series’ various actors – are much less determined and binary (much like the actors themselves). Audience and fan studies¹⁸⁵ and, more recently, distribution or circu-

181 Umberto Eco, “Massenkultur und Kultur-Niveaus”, in *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1992), 48. My translation: “Es ist vielmehr ein politisches Verhältnis – eines des Machtgebrauchs und der Herrschaft”. Original Emphasis.

182 See, e.g., Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 1969), 128ff. And Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), particularly “The Schema of Mass Culture”, 61–97, and “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, 98–106.

183 Eco, “Massenkultur”, 48. My translation: “paternalistisches Verhältnis”.

184 Umberto Eco, *Apokalyptiker und Integrierte: Zur kritischen Kritik der Massenkultur* (Frankfurt a.M. 1992), 31. My translation: “[...] in der das Proletariat bürgerliche Kulturmodelle konsumiert, die es für seinen eigenen, autonomen Ausdruck hält.

185 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005); Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, (New York/ London: Routledge, 2013); John Fiske, “The cultural economy of Fandom”, in: *Adoring Audience: Fanculture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis, 30–49 (London/ New York: Routledge, 1992); Jason Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Draggable Text”, *Spreadable Media*, last accessed 08.07.2022, https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mitte11/#.XkbF_kOH5os; Jason Mittell, “Sites of Participation: Wiki fandom and the case of Lostpedia”, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (September 15, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0118> (Last accessed 08.07.2022); John T. Caldwell, “Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts”, *Television and New Media* 7, no.2 (May, 2006): 99–134; Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner and Eva- Maria Warth, eds., *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, reissue (London, New York: Routledge, 2013).

lation studies¹⁸⁶ have contributed much to ascertaining the manifold possibilities of direct and indirect cooperation between TV's various agents in general and for recipients' participation in user-led content creation¹⁸⁷ and ("informal")¹⁸⁸ circulation of popular TV and film.¹⁸⁹

Concepts such as Henry Jenkin's convergence culture¹⁹⁰ and the resulting idea of participatory culture famously move away from the pessimistic and dismissive neo-Marxist notions of mass culture. For Jenkins, convergence is the

flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.¹⁹¹

Participatory models often discuss an alleged trend within (digital) popular culture – and television – to democratise itself,¹⁹² following increasing possibilities for recipients' involvement in independent production, contribution, active communication and "*articulation of democratic expectations*",¹⁹³ e.g., through the web 2.0.¹⁹⁴ With recourse to Sharon Marie Ross, Evans likewise states that, in the 2000s, there have been "shifts in power relations (real or imaginary) between viewers, producers and broadcasters".¹⁹⁵

Visions of a more democratic, web-based popular participation culture have been fuelled by hopes of breaking the monopoly of analogue media conglomerates and diversifying the production and distribution in a low-threshold, web-based environment.¹⁹⁶ This notion of popular culture sees users turning from consumers into proactive and creative

186 See, e.g., Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, eds., *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*. (New York: New York University Press, 2021); Luca Barra and Massimo, eds., *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

187 Axel Bruns, "Produsage", In *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition (C&C '07)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York (2007): 99–105. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>.

188 Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age*, 6.

189 See, e.g., Elizabeth Evans' notion of audience-led unauthorised "Guerrilla Networks" of transmedia distribution in Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 43f; also Virginia Crisp, "Disingenuous Intermediaries: The Gatekeeping Power of Distributors and Publishers", in *Digital Media Distribution*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, 87–106 (New York: New York university Press, 2021); Sharon Marie Ross, "Introduction: IN FOCUS: Writing and Producing TV in the Post-Network Era", *Cinema Journal* 50, No.2 (2011): 128–131.

190 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

191 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

192 See Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 252.

193 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, 230. My translation: "*Artikulation demokratischer Ansprüche*". Original emphasis.

194 Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 224f.

195 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 7.

196 See. Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 224.

portmanteau terms like the “prosumers” (producer-consumer) or “produsers” (producer-user).¹⁹⁷ Frank Kelleter states, regarding popular seriality, that despite “jealously guarded borders of access, responsibility, and ownership”,¹⁹⁸ there has been a “high degree of permeability between professional and amateur practices” in commercial storytelling.¹⁹⁹ Seemingly confirming this statement in the most direct way imaginable, auteur-producers like Chris Carter (*X-FILES*, *MILLENNIUM*) or Frank Fontana (*HOMICIDE*, *OZ*) have claimed that they draw on fan sites for inspiration.²⁰⁰

Accordingly, it has been argued that much of the development in transmedia distribution has “been led by the audience”.²⁰¹ More recently, the increasing datafication of user activity has likewise been seen to intensify the seemingly interactional component of the contested relationship between producers and the engaged “prosumers”²⁰² who become both providers of content and data.²⁰³

Fan studies, in particular, have contributed to the recent study of the power dynamics and the fundamental political dimension of popular culture. As Henry Jenkins notes in his famous article on fans as “textual poachers”, some audiences rely on a pop cultural artefact as a means to form an “alternative social community”²⁰⁴ that “constructs its own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts”.²⁰⁵ John Fiske accordingly examined fan cultures as part of the “cultural economy” in which “not wealth but meanings, pleasures, and social identities” are exchanged²⁰⁶ and in which cultural capital is created and unequally distributed according to different markers of social in- and exclusion. Fiske describes this as the struggle of fans to “excporate the products of the industry” and the industry to “incorporate the taste of the fans”.²⁰⁷

Scholars of popular culture and participation have, at times, noted that the division of pop cultural power manifests in the textual structure themselves. Fiske, e.g., claims

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- 197 See Bruns, Axel. “Produsage”, *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition* (C&C’07). Association for Computing Machinery, New York (2007): 99–105. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>. And Claudia Grinnell, “From Consumer to Prosumer to Produser: Who Keeps Shifting My Paradigm? (We Do!),” *Public Culture* 21 (2009): 577–598.
- 198 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 24.
- 199 Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, 24.
- 200 See John T. Caldwell, “Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts”, *Television and New Media* 7, no.2 (May, 2006):122.
- 201 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 43.
- 202 Rocco Bellanova And Gloria González Fuster, “No (Big) Data, No Fiction? Thinking Surveillance With/Against Netflix”, in *The Politics and Policies of Big Data: Big Data Big Brother?*, ed. A.R. Saetnan, I. Schneider, And N. Green (London: Routledge [Forthcoming]), posted January 1, 2018, 6. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3120038>. See also Matthias Frey, *MUBI and the Curation Model of Video on Demand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 5.
- 203 Maase, *Populärkulturforschung*, 240.
- 204 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2013), 2.
- 205 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 3.
- 206 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd ed., (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 314.
- 207 John Fiske, “The cultural economy of Fandom”, in *Adoring Audience: Fanculture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London/ New York: Routledge, 1992), 47.

that successful popular artefacts are “producerly texts”,²⁰⁸ following Roland Barthes’ idea of “writerly” [*scriptible*] vs “readerly” [*lisible*] text.²⁰⁹ As such, they encourage fan activity through their seemingly open, incomplete, and incoherent qualities.²¹⁰ Mittell has examined the creative and investigative practice of engaging with a text’s mysteries and incoherencies as “forensic fandom”.²¹¹ However, even optimistic scholarship has often remarked an inequality between individual recipients. As Jenkins states in his discussion of convergence culture: “not all participants are created equal”.²¹²

After the initial excitement over the web. 2.0’s ability to foster participation, recent research into economic and political developments of pop culture has become much less optimistic. Dreams of democratising popular culture appear to have been partly fuelled by visions of a non-commercial internet. However, it is becoming evident that the web has increasingly been cultivated by for-profit enterprises that have professionalised and divided the online realm into lucrative areas of interest. While a complex and dynamic co-creative process arguably continues to exist, the power division between popular culture’s recipients and the production-/distribution side nonetheless seems to show what Manfred Pfister, regarding the communication process in theatre, once called “institutionalised asymmetry”,²¹³ tilting in favour of the production entities. The many collaborative practices of participatory culture have, as Maase points out, so far “not shifted but reproduced the balance of power in the entertainment area”.²¹⁴

The often-evoked democratisation of popular industries is regarded as a secondary process in the nonlinear era. Studying platformization, Nieborg and Poell have, e.g., remarked upon the “inherent accumulative tendency of capital and corporate ownership and its subsequent effects on the distribution of power.”²¹⁵ It is an observation that seems to extend to the cultural economy and its attribution of cultural capital. Derek Kompare accordingly points out with regards to fan activity that “the real gaps between cult TV fans and ‘the powers that be’ remain, despite the discursive construction of the ‘fan-producer’”.²¹⁶

208 John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd ed., (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 95.

209 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, transl. Richard Miller (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 4.

210 Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, 42.

211 Jason Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text”, *Spreadable Media*, last accessed 08.07.2022. https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/#.XkbF_kOH5os_

212 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3. See also: Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom”, 31.

213 See Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 65. My translation: “institutionalisierte Asymmetrie”.

214 Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, 241. My translation: “Bisher, so kann man sagen, haben die Praktiken der Partizipationskultur im Unterhaltungsbereich die Kräfteverhältnisse nicht verschoben, sondern reproduziert.”

215 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity”, *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>

216 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 111.

Regarding contemporary TV, Mareike Jenner, in her extensive study of the streaming portal Netflix, states that “industry power remains relatively stable, despite increasing control given to viewers”.²¹⁷ She argues that “control” (as opposed to power) is a “crucial concept for an understanding of TV IV and Netflix”²¹⁸ because it allows viewers more agency in the selection and more ways of engagement with content while keeping classic industry structures intact.²¹⁹ In the era of a professionalised internet, scholarship seems to regard portalised and datafied complex TV as encouraging not *participation* but *engagement* as a choice between pre-determined options for activity. Felix Brinker, e.g., has pointed out the pervasive practice of “audience management”, in which “programming offers possibilities for specific kinds of audience engagement and thereby seeks to direct, organize, and manage the time, attention, and activities of its viewers”.²²⁰

Academic focus, particularly in media industry research, has recently turned to distribution or circulation as a phenomenon that “acts as a shaping force in the industrialized practices of cultural dissemination”.²²¹ Distributive practices in TV and elsewhere have, as Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald note, undergone significant changes with the implementation of digital technologies.²²² Acknowledging the complex multi-agential distribution process, Lotz proposes the more multi-directional term “circulation” that “encompasses all the practices involved in completed television texts reaching audiences”.²²³

Like other branches of industry research before it, distribution/ circulation research often emphasises the political component of circulation. As Virginia Crip argues for film, distributors act as gatekeepers “separating producers from potential audiences”²²⁴ across “ten key nodes of gatekeeping power”.²²⁵ Joshua A. Braun likewise points out that

217 Mareike Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan/ Springer International Publishing, 2018), 22

218 Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television*, 40.

219 Jenner, *Netflix & the Re-invention of Television*, 22.

220 Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann, Katja Kanzler et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 44.

221 Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald, “Introduction”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 1.

222 Donoghue, Havens, McDonald, “Introduction”, 2.

223 Amanda Lotz, “Media Circulation: Reconceptualizing Television Distribution and Exhibition”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 48.

224 Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

225 Virginia Crisp, “Disingenuous Intermediaries: The Gatekeeping Power of Distributors and Publishers”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 91.

“it is essential to the democratic project to study whom distribution networks are, in actuality, including and leaving out”.²²⁶

2.2.4 The Politics of Authorship

The political dimension of modern popular culture in general and TV series, in particular, extends to questions of authorship. The “conflictive division of labour”²²⁷ between various agential entities that create a TV series has led to an ongoing debate about the contentions of authorship,²²⁸ originating from a much older discussion in literary studies. The role of the author has been contested at least since Roland Barthes declared him*her dead in 1967 in favour of a concept of a text as a discursive, structural creation.²²⁹ Just two years later, in 1969, Michel Foucault famously brought him*her back as the discursive “author-function”, which serves as a contextualizing force discursively created by audiences.²³⁰ Not least since reader-response criticism, the process of creating meaning from a fictional text has been located somewhere within the co-creative process of readers/audiences individually actualizing and interpreting extant textual²³¹ filmic²³² or televisual signs.²³³

The question of who ‘created’ a work of popular culture has been challenging to answer, at least since the rise of the culture industry in the 19th century, and its increasing

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- 226 Joshua A. Braun: “Points of Origin: Asking Questions in Distribution Research”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 39f.
 - 227 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 22.
 - 228 Most recently discussed, for instance, in Eva Novrup Redvall, “Authorship and Agency in the Media Industries”, in *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, ed. Paul McDonald (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 223–232. For further discussion see also this thesis’ section 3.6.3, especially 3.6.3.1.
 - 229 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 142–148.
 - 230 See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 113–138 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
 - 231 As previously mentioned, see, e.g., Hans Robert Jauf, “Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 126–162; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. by Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 228–252; Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, Mariland/London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); also Jane P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich: dtv, 1998).
 - 232 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge,: Harvard Press, 1991), 3.
 - 233 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 164ff.

application of dispersed industrial means to literary production ushered in the end of the ‘singular creative genius’.²³⁴ As Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns note, the source of popular TV texts has, likewise, “never been clear in the first place”.²³⁵

As a result of their dispersed industrial production, TV series, as Marta Dynel has pointed out regarding film, possess a “collective sender”.²³⁶ Like the equally collective films, audiences routinely equip TV series with a unified vision of an ‘auteur’ – such as directors or showrunners depending on the cultural tradition. Mittell, following Foucault, has referred to the discursively attributed notion of a TV series’ authorship as the “inferred author function”.²³⁷ It personifies “the romantic notion of singular authorship” in the face of TV’s “collaborative realities of production”.²³⁸ According to Mittell, the inferred author function is a “viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses”.²³⁹ The discursively attributed notion of authorship thus becomes a product of a TV series’ network, not the actual source of its text.²⁴⁰

However, textual analysis often ignores the political dimension of dispersed authorial agency (and the complex structures that enable its creation) and its influence on the composition of a serial text. Given the entanglement of industrial and aesthetic factors in popular serial texts, the ultimately unsolved question of who decides what a serial narrative will be pervades textual analysis. While critics are sometimes quick to draw cultural inferences from textual data, they often do so without certainty about how cultural phenomena, groups, and persons can influence the complex systemic collective that creates a TV series in the first place. Recent research on popular seriality has done much to illuminate these processes. The following section will examine this further.

2.3 Popular Seriality

The growing body of research within literary, cultural, and media studies examining the specific characteristics of (popular) seriality is central to this thesis. The aforementioned structural complexity and conflictive political dimension of pop cultural texts seem particularly visible in popular seriality. After a first surge in the late 1980s and early 1990s, seriality research has recently become a focal point of renewed scholarly attention, particularly concerning *popular* seriality.²⁴¹

234 See Gudrun Weiland, “Von einem sensationellen Erlebnis zum anderen getrieben...”: *Kriminalheftromane und die Zeitgestalt ‘Serialität’ 1920er und 1930er Jahren* (Göttingen, Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2017), 94.

235 Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson, “Introduction”, in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), IX.

236 Marta Dynel, “‘You talking to me?’ The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631.

237 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107.

238 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 87.

239 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107. Original emphasis.

240 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 95ff.

241 See the DFG Popular Seriality Research Unit (no.1091), “Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice”, DFG, last accessed July 7, 2022, <http://www.popularseriality.de/>; Shane Denson, “To be contin-

Knuth Hickethier distinguishes “seriality” as a “structure inherent in a TV programme” as opposed to the term ‘series’ itself.²⁴² For Kelleter, seriality is a “practice of popular culture, not a narrative formalism *within* it”.²⁴³ The term ‘popular’ is now broadly understood to describe a form of seriality occurring as a phenomenon in cultural artefacts designed to have a broad appeal across sociocultural backgrounds as opposed to the more ideologically charged definition of popular artefacts as belonging to social groups with lower cultural, economic, and social capital.²⁴⁴ As Christa Juretzka notes, popular cultural commodities have a “notoriously serial character”.²⁴⁵

Knut Hickethier famously described the “double dramatic structure”²⁴⁶ or “double formal structure”²⁴⁷ of serial narrative in which the structure of a single episode has to tie in with the dramatic structure of the overall ‘narrative cosmos’ of the multi-part series.

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- ued...: Seriality and Serialization in Interdisciplinary Perspective,” (paper presented at the graduate conference What Happens Next: The Mechanics of Serialization at the University of Amsterdam March 25–26, 2011), *JLTOnline*, June 17 June, <http://www.jltonline.de/index.php/conferences/article/view/346/1004>; Frank Kelleter, ed., *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012); Frank Kelleter, ed., *Media of Serial Narrative* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017); Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase, 359–402 (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019); Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), for systemic context see especially 7–21; Felix Brinker, “Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series”, *Aspeers* 5 (2012): 87–109; Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann et al. 41–62. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015; Felix Brinker, “On the Political Economy of the Contemporary (Superhero) Blockbuster Series”, in *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st -Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda Falmer. *REFRAME Books*, 2016, last accessed 08.07.2022; Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie visueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020).
- 242 Knut Hickethier, “Die Fernsehserie – Eine Kette von Verhaltenseinheiten: Problemstellungen für die Seriendiskussion”, in: *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 12. My translation: “zu unterscheiden ist von der Serie die Serialität des Programms, als eine dem Fernsehprogramm inhärente Struktur”.
- 243 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 15.
- 244 See Kaspar Maase, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 27.
- 245 Christa Juretzka, “Einlassen auf Irritationen: Ästhetik auf der Spur der Serie”, in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 42. My translation: “notorischen Seriencharakter”.
- 246 Knut Hickethier, “Die Dramaturgie der TV-Serie”, in *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Drama*, ed. Andreas Enghart and Franziska Schöbler (Berlin/Boston de Gruyter, 2019), 576. My translation: “doppelte dramatische Struktur”.
- 247 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 398. My translation: “doppelte Formstruktur”.

Another critical characteristic of seriality is what Eco calls the recurrent structural principle of “Innovation and Repetition”.²⁴⁸ According to Eco, serial texts, in order to remain recognisable as a connected narrative and engaging to audiences as commodities, must strive to “achieve a dialectic between order and novelty, in other words, between scheme and innovation”.²⁴⁹ For Eco, the main appeal of a serial text rests not in its invention of new components but its variation of known motifs.

This realisation ties in with more recent questions of whether and how a multi-part series can be regarded as a joint work. Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz remark that series require a particular connection between individual segments to appear as a single work²⁵⁰ and develop an “intraserial coherence”.²⁵¹ Claudia Stockinger has pointed out the structurally discursive rather than ontic quality of the category of the serial artefact as a ‘work’.²⁵² For her, a series “can be a work if it wants to be one, that is if it creates structures that evoke work-shaped effects”.²⁵³

It has often been remarked that series as cultural commodities attempt to maximise their ability to generate revenue by continuing for as long as possible.²⁵⁴ A series will therefore delay the ultimate dénouement of its central conflicts. As Jeremy Butler notes:

Almost by definition, Serials cannot have total resolution. If they did, there would be no reason to tune in the next day. Climaxes don't generate resolutions. They just create new enigmas.²⁵⁵

Examining this specifically serial characteristic, Mittell distinguishes different types of endings for serial narratives in his poetics of complex TV storytelling. He describes (1)

248 Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics,” *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): 161–84.

249 Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics,” *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): 173. See also Umberto Eco, “Interpreting Serials”, in *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 84.

250 Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie: Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse”, *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 15. <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2008.1.663>.

251 Weber and Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie”, 23. My translation “Intraserielle Kohärenz”.

252 Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019), 266.

253 Claudia Stockinger, “Werk in Serie? Werkförmigkeit unter den Bedingungen von Populärkultur”, in *Das Werk: Zum Verschwinden und Fortwirken eines Grundbegriffs*, ed. Lutz Danneberg, Annette Gilbert, and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2019), 283. My translation: “Serie kann Werk sein, wenn sie Werk sein will, also Strukturen hervorbringt, die werkförmige Effekte erzeugen”.

254 See: e.g. Lothar Mikos, “Serien als Fernsehgenre: Zusammenhänge zwischen Dramaturgie und Aneignungsweise des Publikums”, in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 20 and 24f. And Jeremy Butler, *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (New York/ London: Routledge, 2018), 73.

255 Butler, *Television*, 73.

the “stoppage”, an extratextually motivated, “abrupt, unplanned end”, usually mid-plot-line;²⁵⁶ (2) the “wrap-up”, “a series ending that is neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned”;²⁵⁷ (3) the “conclusion”, a final episode crafted intentionally as the series’ end²⁵⁸, which is, as Mittell notes, a rare occasion for a series due to their commodified nature;²⁵⁹ (4) a “cessation”, which describes not a conclusion but an interruption of a narrative without a definite decision on its future;²⁶⁰ (5) the finale, which is, as he puts it, “a conclusion with a going-away party”²⁶¹ and distinguishes itself from the conclusion by its being embedded in a set of framing paratexts.

In his theorisation of fictional worlds, Mark Wolf has shown that the perpetual continuation of a series requires the constant addition of textual material at the risk of seriously impairing both a text’s aesthetic consistency and its intradiegetic coherence and diluting the original essence of a narrative.²⁶² William Proctor accordingly argues that perpetual continuation results in long-running series inadvertently requiring “reboots” (a new start of a fictional universe after a complete overhaul) and “retcons” (ongoing adjustments of a series’ narrative past to create retroactive continuity) as necessary “strategies of regeneration” of their narrative continuity.²⁶³ However, while these categories of specifically *serial* narrative endings and adjustments are handy for textual analysis, they underestimate the multitude and complexity of the causes of serial adjustments and thus remain somewhat incomplete.

As a result of his work with the Popular Seriality Research Unit, Frank Kelleter has proposed “five ways of looking at popular seriality”.²⁶⁴ He argues that series are (1) “evolving narratives” whose reception “first happens in interaction with the ongoing story itself”.²⁶⁵ (2) They progress recursively, meaning they consider the narrative past in creating the narrative future.²⁶⁶ They are (3) “narratives of proliferation”.²⁶⁷ This tendency to proliferate is, firstly, due to the fact that, as commercial products, a popular story world serves to generate as much revenue as possible, making its proliferation into several series highly desirable. However, as Kelleter points out, a series’ proliferation also arises from a structural need resulting from its perpetual continuation. As the series continues, more and more diegetic data accumulates that cannot always be accommodated within the ongoing story of one series alone. Therefore, excess data will either get lost or migrate

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

257 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 320.

258 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 320.

259 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 321.

260 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 321.

261 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 322.

262 Mark J.P. Wolf, “Narrative Fabric”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 48.

263 William Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 233.

264 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter, (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 7–34.

265 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 12.

266 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 16.

267 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 18.

to another series.²⁶⁸ According to Kelleter, series are (4) “self-observing systems and Actor-Networks” whose existence is the result of a “conflictive division of labour” between various agential entities.²⁶⁹ Furthermore, they (5) are “agents of capitalist self-reflexivity”²⁷⁰ and, as such, “operate as agents of role differentiation”,²⁷¹ allowing other actors, through their very existence, to engage in the activities that turn them into discursive constructs such as ‘producers’ or ‘fans’.²⁷²

In her examination of the “serial figure” Fu Manchu, Ruth Mayer likewise remarks on the systemic extent of seriality and points out the need for a “reconceptualized framework of formal aesthetics to engage fully with the phenomenon”.²⁷³ She suggests formal approaches to analysis that “background [...] the categories of personal intention or individual interest” by considering the various systemic and discursive forces involved in a series.²⁷⁴

It is interesting to compare the advanced state of scholarship on popular seriality to its comparatively low degree of application in textual analysis in general,²⁷⁵ which is even rarer in the otherwise prolific research on fictional polit-series. Acknowledging that seriality, in many ways, acts as a bridge between textual affordances and the media industry, this study will regard its samples’ *seriality* as a decisive factor for the textual analysis of polit-series. It will thus contribute further to operationalising this complex conceptual realm for textual analysis. The following section will explore further how film and television criticism has examined the presentation of politics in polit-fiction.

2.4 Politics in Popular Serial Television Fiction

I have previously pointed out that contemporary polit-series share strong ties with many of the most recent developments in the complex media structures outlined above. Par-

268 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 20.

269 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 22.

270 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 26.

271 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 28.

272 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 28.

273 Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13.

274 Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13f.

275 As above, for more recent examples to the contrary see: Dominik Maeder, *Die Regierung der Serie: Poetologie televisueller Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020). Also Claudia Stockinger, Christian Hißnauer, and Stefan Scherer, *Föderalismus in Serie: Die Einheit der ARD-Reihe Tatort im historischen Verlauf* (Leiden, Niederlande: Brill/ Fink, 2019); Christian Hißnauer, Stefan Scherer, and Claudia Stockinger, eds. *Zwischen Serie und Werk. Fernseh- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte im Tatort*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2014; Stefan Scherer, Claudia Stockinger, and Christian Hißnauer, “Formen und Verfahren der Serialität in der ARD-Reihe *Tatort*: Ein Untersuchungsdesign zur Integration von Empirie und Hermeneutik”. In *Populäre Serialität. Narration – Evolution – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*. Edited by Frank Kelleter, 143–167. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

ticularly in the 2010s, researchers across TV, media, cultural and political studies were intrigued by the seemingly new resurgence of 'political fiction' (as it has most often been called) into the popular mainstream leading to a surge in scholarship on the topic.²⁷⁶ However, politics has been a frequent leitmotif of popular screen fiction, at least since the Hollywood Movie MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (Frank Capra: USA, 1939).²⁷⁷

Before the 2010s, interest in TV's presentation of fictional politics last peaked during the successful run of HBO's series THE WEST WING (USA, 1999–2006). It was arguably reinvigorated following the local success of the British polit-comedy THE THICK OF IT (2005–2012) and its US adaptation VEEP (2012–2019) and rose to global prominence during the run of the genre's preeminent contemporary representative: HoC (2013–2018). Accordingly, scholarly interest in polit-series has notably decreased since the relatively abrupt end of HoC in 2018 (this thesis will examine this further), with releases and newer seasons of older series receiving significantly less academic attention.

The same has been true for productions which carry less cultural capital and, following persistent traditions of pro-Western bias, for non-English speaking and non-European productions (in order of decreasing emphasis).²⁷⁸ Until very recently, this bias has

276 See, e.g., the previously uncited volumes Niko Switek, ed., *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018); Anja Besand, ed., *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018); Steven Fielding, *A state of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); J. Edward Hackett, ed., *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016); Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret J. Tally, eds., *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Peter Swirski, *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also the dedicated issues "Politikserien", *INDES: Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014) and "Fiction in British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2, 2011). Also contributions like Frank Gadinger, Sebastian Jarzebski, and Taylan Yildiz, "Vom Diskurs zur Erzählung: Möglichkeiten einer politikwissenschaftlichen Narrativanalyse", *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 55, no.1 (2014): 67–93; Frank Gadinger, Taylan Yildiz, "Politik", in *Erzählen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, ed. Matías Martínez (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017), 158–165; 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; Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, "The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs", *American Politics Research* 41, no.1 (2013): 122–146.

277 Studied, e.g., by Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002). See also Rob Edelman, "Politicians in the American Cinema", in *A Political Companion to American Film*. Edited by Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 322–330.

278 For recent notable examples to the contrary see, e.g., Ulrike Gansen et al., "人民的名义 (Im Namen des Volkes) versus House of Cards: Polit-Serien als Legitimierungsinstrument aktueller chinesischer Reformpolitik", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 327–344; Florian Gilberg et al., "Eichwald, MdB: Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 105–124; Jonathan Beierl et al., "Sex, Drugs and Politics: Die Polit-Serie Marseille", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 201–224; Taylan Yildiz, "Gomorrha: Mafia und Staat im Verhältnis", in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 225–242; Audun Engelstad, "Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama", *Nordicom Review* 29, no.2 (2008): 309–324; Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles: Commander in Chief

rarely been the subject of much reflection. TV scholarship frequently implies a broader tradition of polit-fiction in the anglosphere as the reason for its limited perspective.²⁷⁹ While this claim has always been questionable, the increasing number of prominent non-English-speaking polit-series has long made it unsustainable, as my overview of contemporary polit-series shows (see section 11). Another reason for a Western research bias is the (implied) assumption of a pop-cultural hegemony of Hollywood²⁸⁰ and, more recently, US-based streaming portals. Western and US American cultural hegemony has been a persistent trope in postmodern discourses with Frederic Jameson, e.g., critically claiming that the “whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination throughout the world [...]”.²⁸¹ The idea of a pop-cultural current or “one-way flow”²⁸² from the “West to the rest”/ “West-versus-the-rest”²⁸³ is rightly a controversial and contested one. While critical examination of potential Western cultural hegemonies is crucial, their undifferentiated presupposition runs the risk of reproducing biases by overestimating the impact of so-called Western contributions and underestimating the productivity and independence of cultural industries and spheres, especially in the global South.

Despite the migration of politics as a fictional trope from the big to the small screen in the late 1970s, scholarship has, until the late 1990s, tended to concern itself with cinematic presentations of politics before turning its attention to television. Even today, exegetes often make little distinction between films and serial TV narratives. Although there can be no talk of a seamless transition between the two mediums (film and TV), research into cinematic presentations of fictional politics forms part of the legacy of TV scholarship's own investigations into polit-fiction and must – to a certain extent – be

et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis”, *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no.1 (2012): 37–51.

279 See, e.g., Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9. Niko Switek notes the traditional productivity of the US and the UK and remarks a recent relative increase in European polit-series: “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 12. For affirmation of British tradition see, e.g., Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives 1965–2009”, *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 264.

280 See Mittell, *Complex TV*, 9.

281 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 5.

282 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 138ff.

283 Pointed out, e.g., in Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald. “Introduction: Media Distribution Today”, in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 12 and 14. For a more differentiated discussion with regards to current non-linear TV see Lobato: *Netflix Nations*, 138ff. In her study of Netflix, Lotz likewise remarks that the portal's existing national biases are not “uniformly ‘Western’”: Amanda D. Lotz, “In between the Global and the Local: Mapping the Geographies of Netflix as a Multinational Service”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (March 2021): 204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920953166>.

considered here. Film and TV studies share, e.g., an insecurity about the extent to which the findings of textual analysis reveal sociocultural conditions, as the following section will illustrate further.

2.4.1 Debating Polit-Fiction's Conflictive Relationship with Historical Reality

Scholars of (popular) literature, film, and, most recently, television have long wrestled with the question of transferability between the results of textual analysis and contextual historical reality.²⁸⁴ Setting aside, for the moment, the hermetic, formalist approaches of New Criticism in literary studies, which demanded to regard fictional texts as self-contained (aesthetic) phenomena, the analysis of polit-series often attempts to examine if and how much fiction and sociocultural affordances can be said to have influenced one another.

Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon propose four general analytical perspectives in the study of popular culture (and its artefacts) and (international) politics: (1) an examination with regards to its causal relationship with specific political developments and concerns;²⁸⁵ (2) as a pedagogical “mirror” serving to illustrate and educate audiences about politics;²⁸⁶ (3) as “data” allowing inferences regarding “dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs in a particular state, society, or region”²⁸⁷ (see, e.g., the film-historic tradition spearheaded by Siegfried Kracauer’s famous book *From Caligari to Hitler*); and (4) as “constitutive”²⁸⁸ for political beliefs and actions through “determining”, “informing”, “enabling” or “neutralizing effects”.²⁸⁹ The latter assumption follows notions of cultivation theory and its particular emphasis on the lasting effects of television in creating audiences’ realities.²⁹⁰

284 This is, e.g., one of the vantage points of Niko Switek’s edited volume *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

285 Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”. *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 11.

286 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 11f.

287 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 13f.

288 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 14ff.

289 Nexon and Neumann, “Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics”, 17–20. For a summary of this and further discussion of the political in popular culture see also Kaspar Maa-se, *Populärkulturforschung: Eine Einführung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 204–212. With regards to polit-series see also Niko Switek, “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative. Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 11–31.

290 Originally conceived by George Gerbner. See, e.g., George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nanoy Signorielli, “Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process”, in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 17–40 (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1986). And George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nanoy Signorielli, and James Shanahan, “Growing up with Television: Cultivation Processes”, in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, 43–67 (New York: Routledge, 2002). More recent overview: W. James Potter, “A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory”, *Journal of Communication* 64, no.6 (December 9, 2014): 1015–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12128>.

Manfred Pfister, asking similar questions for literary drama criticism, proposes to distinguish between “reception sociology” [*Rezeptionssoziologie*], which sees a correlation between the structure of a text and its audience²⁹¹ and a “sociology of content” [*Inhaltssoziologie*], which asks how selective a particular fictional vision of the world is towards social reality and what determines this selection.²⁹² For a critical examination of polit-series, the analytical perspectives of series as symptoms or data (3) and series as cultivating discursive influences (4) have had a powerful impact, as the following sections will illustrate.

2.4.1.1 Series as Symptomatic Data and the Notion of ‘Realism’

The eponymous leitmotif of *politics* in polit-fiction has sometimes prompted the assumption that the study of these series allows inferences on their audiences’ political attitudes. This conjecture presumes a somewhat direct line between audiences’ ideological convictions and their entertainment tastes. Matthew Bailey e.g. has argued that “if British political fiction is a little negative, it is only a reflection of wider cultural attitude towards politics and politicians”.²⁹³

In his examinations of British polit-fiction, Steven Fielding has likewise followed a symptomatic approach using narratives as clues for audiences’ convictions.²⁹⁴ He argues that an analysis of polit-fiction can show “*what politics means to citizens*”,²⁹⁵ stating

plays, novels and films, along with television dramas and comedies, have long articulated Briton’s hopes and (more often and increasingly) fears about the exercise of political power.²⁹⁶

Other approaches, while regarding fiction as containing symptomatic social data, assume a less direct line between fictional presentation and the socio-political articulation of audiences’ desires. Dörner, e.g., states that while TV series may “not lose contact to the extra-medial reality, otherwise they will seem meaningless to us”,²⁹⁷ they do subject re-

291 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 56.

292 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 58.

293 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 287.

294 Steven Fielding, “A Mirror for England? Cinematic Representations of Politicians and Party Politics, circa 1944–1964”, *Journal of British Studies* 47, no.1 (2008): 107–128.

295 Steven Fielding, “New Labour ‘sleaze’ and television drama”, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16, no.2 (2014): 326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00538.x>. Original emphasis.

296 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British politics on screen, stage and page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

297 Andreas Dörner, “Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg”, *Politische Kulturforschung reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 165. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839447475-008>. My translation: “sie dürfen doch bei aller Zuspitzung den Kontakt zur außermedialen Wirklichkeit nicht völlig verlieren, sonst erscheinen sie uns belanglos”.

ality to aesthetic transformations as “meaningfully structured extracts of reality”.²⁹⁸ He consequently argues for a course of research that examines, among other perspectives, how TV series production entities glean political expertise.²⁹⁹ Sandra Nuy, following a similarly indirect sociocultural approach in her extensive study of political film, has proposed the identification of a narrative’s “Mythomotor”.³⁰⁰ It is a term drawn from Jan Assmann’s influential work on mythology and denotes a narrative’s “directional impetus”³⁰¹ concerning the society that produced it.³⁰²

Regarding criticism of polit-series, particularly in the prominent case of HoC, some TV scholars have been eager to examine what they regard as the ‘realism’ of a series’ portrayal of politics – an accurate representation of historical reality – thus taking the idea of series as symptomatic data to great lengths. Solange Landau argues, e.g., that HoC aims for the “greatest possible realism”, trying to “capture the reality of the spectator on-screen as accurately as possible”.³⁰³

However, such approaches tend to ignore that the notion of ‘realism’ itself is problematic when it comes to fictional texts. Accordingly, Henrik Schillinger proposes a distinction between the “reality principle” that imitates reality and a “realism principle” that tells stories “as if they were true”.³⁰⁴ For him, contemporary television’s portrayal of fictional politics shows the “hyperreality of an ‘authentic fake’”.³⁰⁵ Mark Arenhövel uses the term “para-politics” to denote such “pseudo-realistic presentations of politics”.³⁰⁶

298 Andreas Dörner, *Politische Kultur und Medienunterhaltung: zur Inszenierung politischer Identitäten in der amerikanischen Film- und Fernsehwelt* (Konstanz: UVK Univ.-Verl. Konstanz, 2000), 202. My translation: “sinnhaft strukturierte Wirklichkeitsausschnitte”.

299 Andreas Dörner “Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg”, *Politische Kulturforschung reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2019), 169f.

300 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild. Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 22.

301 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996306>.

302 See also Jan Assmann, “Frühe Formen politischer Mythomotorik: Fundierende, kontrapräsentische und revolutionäre Mythen”, in *Revolution und Mythos*, ed. Dietrich Harth and Jan Assmann (Frankfurt: Fischer Wissenschaft, 1992), 39–61.

303 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. My translation: “In der modernen Serienlandschaft herrscht ein Wille zum größtmöglichen Realismus – das heißt, die Wirklichkeit des Zuschauers soll bestmöglich auf den Bildschirm gebannt werden”.

304 Henrik Schillinger, “Politik in Serie(n): Politik, das Politische und die Tragödie”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 55. My translation: “Realitätsprinzip”, “Realismusprinzip”, “als ob sie wahr sein könnten”.

305 Schillinger, “Politik in Serie(n)”, 57. My translation: “Hyperrealität eines ‘authentischen Fakes’”.

306 Mark Arenhövel, “Zwischen Ideologie und (Gesellschafts-)Kritik: Über die politische Lesbarkeit von Qualitätsserien”, in *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien*, ed. Anja Besand (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018), 16f. My translation: “pseudo-realistische Darstellungen der Politik”.

This approach ultimately follows literary studies' assumption that fictional narratives adhere to dramatic truth first and historical truth second. As Wolfgang Iser states, fictional texts "possess a historical substrate," but "the way in which they constitute and communicate it seems no longer determined exclusively historically".³⁰⁷ To him, fictional texts are, therefore, different from texts that "introduce [...] a subject matter which possesses an existence independent of the text".³⁰⁸ Laura Saxton, studying historical fiction such as the royal bio-series *THE CROWN*, accordingly distinguishes between a text's "accuracy" and its "authenticity".³⁰⁹ For her, accuracy defines "the extent to which a text's representation is consistent with available evidence", while authenticity "refers to an *impression* of accuracy and the extent to which readers believe that a representation captures the past".³¹⁰

Stuart Hall, drawing on Charles Sanders Peirce's classes of signs, has argued that television's remarkable ability to produce effects of realism [as a sidebar note Roland Barthes homonymous 1968 article *L'Effet de réel*] is a result of its reliance on audio-visual codes. As iconic signs, they share identifying characteristics with the things they represent (e.g., historical role models).³¹¹ While this does not cause their actual reality, iconic signs, for Hall, are

particularly vulnerable to being 'read' as natural because visual codes of perception are very widely distributed and because this type of sign is less arbitrary than a linguistic sign [...].³¹²

In order to approach the much-discussed issue of just how 'accurate' or 'realistic' politics can be regarding sociocultural reality, Katja Schwer and Hans-Bernd Brosius have proposed a "spheric model of policy transmission on TV".³¹³ They argue that mass media not only pick up societal currents but are themselves influenced by internal media discourse, which blurs their ability to act as a "seismograph" for societal currents.³¹⁴

Similarly, Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson have pointed out that texts owe their existence to a "complex web of cultural, social, political, and formal conventions and ex-

307 Wolfgang Iser, "Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa", in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 230. My translation: "historisches Substrat" – "die Art wie sie es konstituieren und mitteilbar machen, scheint nicht mehr ausschließlich historisch determiniert zu sein".

308 Iser, "Appellstruktur", 231. My translation: "die einen Gegenstand vorstellen oder mitteilbar machen, der eine vom Text unabhängige Existenz besitzt".

309 Laura Saxton, "A true Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction", *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (March 2020): 127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

310 Saxton, "A true Story", 127.

311 Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding", in *Culture, Media, Language*, e-Library ed., ed. Stuart Hall et al. (London/New York: Routledge, 2005), 121f.

312 Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", 122.

313 Katja Schwer and Hans-Bernd Brosius, "Sphären des (Un-)Politischen: Ein Modell zur Analyse von Politikdarstellung und -rezeption", in *Sesimographische Funktion von Öffentlichkeit im Wandel*, ed. Hein Bonfadelli, Kurt Imhof, Roger Blum, Ottfried Jarren (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2008), 197. My translation: "ein Sphärenmodell der Politikvermittlung im Fernsehen".

314 Schwer and Brosius, "Sphären des (UN-)Politischen", 207.

pectations",³¹⁵ which renders direct sociocultural inferences difficult. In an even more critical stance, it has likewise been argued that postmodern television is "an intense but fragmentary and transitory aesthetic experience"³¹⁶ that draws into question any meaningful sociocultural inferences. Often implicitly inspired by critical theory's suspicion of popular culture, a second subset of TV scholarship has examined polit-series' role in creating historical political meaning.

2.4.1.2 Cultivating Audiences?

At least since the introduction of cultivation theory in the 1960s,³¹⁷ media reception scholars have repeatedly examined how television influences audiences in their perception of reality, especially on social groups and political issues.³¹⁸ Given the pessimistic, fatalist, and often dystopian image of politics that prevails in contemporary fiction, it is no wonder that academics following the cultivation approach have turned their anxious attention to the question of how polit-series can shape the perception of historical politics itself.

However, while the general ability of fictional presentations to influence the perception of politics and reality is rarely disputed, there seems to be some uncertainty about just how far-reaching this impact is. Some scholars, e.g., Aristoteles Nikolaidis or Liesbet van Zoonen, see a more indirect effect. They argue that polit-fiction does not shape audiences' perception of individual issues and instead influences their "overall angle on politics".³¹⁹ Steven Fielding, Enric Castelló, Peter Swirski, and Jeff Smith have each pointed out that, particularly in the US, film and TV series in general and polit-fiction in particular play a significant role in constructing what Benedict Anderson calls "imagined

315 Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson, "Introduction", in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Gary Burns and Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), IX.

316 Doug Kellner, "Critical Perspectives on Television from the Frankfurt School to the Politics of Representation", in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed., ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 28.

317 As mentioned previously. For a more recent overview see W. James Potter, "A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory", *Journal of Communication* 64, no.6 (December 9, 2014): 1015–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12128>.

318 For a study on the relations between television and political communication see, e.g., Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (London/Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999).

319 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 139. See also Aristoteles Nikolaidis, "The Unexpected Prime Minister: Politics, Class and Gender in Television Fiction", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 296; For an empirical inquiry see also Liesbet van Zoonen, "Audience reactions to Hollywood politics", *Media, Culture and Society* 29, no. 4 (2007): 531–547; also Liesbet van Zoonen, "A Day at the Zoo: Political Communication, Pigs and Popular Culture", *Media, Culture & Society* 20, no. 2 (April 1998): 196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344398020002002>.

communities”³²⁰ by helping to create “the perceived ‘realities’ of politics – its institutions, policies and leading figures”³²¹ in common societal discourse.³²²

Christiane Eilders and Cordula Nitsch propose a typology classifying the intensity of the presentation of the political in fictional series and its perceived degree of realism.³²³ While their results vary, for some polit-series, including THE WEST WING, they find “not only a reflection of sociopolitical issues and state officials but considerable attention to institutional politics in terms of issues and characters”, accordingly attesting to the series’ high level of ‘realism’.³²⁴

Several studies have attempted to empirically quantify and qualify the cultivating impact of polit-fiction focusing on anglophone (primarily American) audiences. R. Lance Holbert illustrates a nine-part typology to categorise how political different audiences perceive a fictional program to be.³²⁵ He argues that positive presentations of the US presidency (e.g., in the series THE WEST WING) prime viewers to develop positive attitudes towards the office.³²⁶ Diana C. Mutz and Lilach Nir likewise argue that fiction produces high levels of emotional involvement in audiences.³²⁷ Furthermore, Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel have shown that watching the outlandish conspiracy comedy WAG THE DOG (Barry Levinson: USA, 1997) can prime audiences for conspiracy theo-

320 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 2006).

321 Steven Fielding, “Fiction and British Politics: Towards an Imagined Political Capital?”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011), 223.

322 Enric Castelló, “The Nation as a Political Stage: A Theoretical Approach to Television Fiction and National Identities”, *The International Communication Gazette* 71, no.4 (2009): 306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048509102183>; Peter Swirski, *American Political Fictions: War on Errorism in Contemporary American Literature, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 146; Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 9.

323 Christiane Eilders and Cordula Nitsch, “Politics in Fictional Entertainment: An Empirical Classification of Movies and TV Series”, *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1568; see also Cordula Nitsch and Christiane Eilders, “Die Repräsentation von Politik in fiktionaler Unterhaltung: Instrument, Anwendung und Befunde zur Systematisierung von Filmen und Fernsehserien”, *Studies in Communication: Media* 3, no.1 (2014): 120 – 143.

324 Eilders and Nitsch, “Politics in Fictional Entertainment”, 1571.

325 Robert Lance Holbert, “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no.3 (November 2005): 436–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279419>.

326 Robert Lance Holbert, “A Typology for the Study of Entertainment Television and Politics”, *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no.3 (November 2005): 440. See also Robert Lance Holbert, Owen Pillion, David A. Tschida et al., “The West Wing as Endorsement of the U.S. Presidency: Expanding the Bounds of Priming in Political Communication”, *Journal of Communication* 53, no.3 (September 2003): 427–443, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb02600.x>.

327 Diana C. Mutz and Lilach Nir, “Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence Real-World Policy Preferences?”, *Mass Communication and Society* 13, no.2 (April 9, 2010): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205430902813856>.

ries³²⁸ leading them to suggest that fictional framing can affect real-life political attitudes.³²⁹

This study is not focussed upon verifying or disproving these empirical findings. Instead, it proposes a structural addition to illustrate how exchanges between complex collective entities like ‘audiences’ and ‘TV series’ can take place at all and why historical discourse surrounding polit-series feels the need to create notions of ‘realism’ in the first place. Notwithstanding their presumed stance on a series’ historical influence, the ways in which pertinent research has studied polit-series’ presentation of politics merits a closer look.

2.4.2 Examining the Evolving Presentation of Politics and Politicians

Regarding the presentation of politics in fictional film and TV series, media and television criticism has focused primarily on two interconnected issues: (1) the operational modalities of dramatizing politics and (2) the normative evaluations that inform its presentation in film and TV series. Lingering questions of ‘realism’ almost always implicitly or explicitly pervade these studies.

2.4.2.1 Describing the Serial Dramatization of Politics

Regarding the dramatic operationalisation of politics, John Corner and Kay Richardson have pointed out that “In many countries, political fiction on television has been determined strongly by the generic system of the medium”,³³⁰ making the presentation of politics contingent on the requirements of the particular narrative form. Matthew Bailey, Audun Engelstad, and later Andreas Dörner have likewise each noted that fictionalisations of politics are adjusted to and simplified for popular entertainment standards, including the distortion and simplification of historical political processes. As they point out, polit-series omit what Max Weber famously calls the “slow, powerful drilling through hard boards”³³¹ of lengthy and often ambivalent political procedures.³³² Instead, as Nick Randall notes, series usually focus on “elections and intra-party struggles” as a “preferred source of political drama”.³³³ This affirms Brian Neve’s earlier thesis that “neither film nor

328 Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, “The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs”, *American Politics Research* 41, no.1 (August 2012): 124, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X12453758>

329 Kenneth Mulligan and Philip Habel, “An experimental test of the effects of fictional framing on attitudes”, *Social Science Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (March, 2011): 79–99. See also: Mulligan and Habel, “The Implications of Fictional Media for Political Beliefs”, 125.

330 John Corner and Kay Richardson, “Political Culture and Television Fiction: The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no.4 (November 2008): 390.

331 Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 93.

332 See Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (2011): 284; Andreas Dörner, “Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 7; Audun Engelstad, “Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama”, *Nordicom Review* 29, no. 2 (2008): 310.

333 Nick Randall, “Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011): 267.

other forms of popular culture seem to have the power to provide effective models of political participation or action".³³⁴ A judgement which again implies dismissive notions of 'realism' and (failed) historical accuracy as a marker for a fictional series' 'quality'.

A similar assumption has led political scholar Karl-Rudolf Korte to assert that the comparatively complex parliamentary procedures of German consensus politics were impossible to accurately and engagingly dramatize for TV.³³⁵ This idea of a structural incompatibility of political reality and dramatic requirements, together with a historically sparse record of polit-fiction in German television, coincides with the somewhat debatable assumption of cultural incompatibility. It argues that German audiences are unwilling to engage with fictional politics.³³⁶

It is questionable whether the historical lack of a narrative tradition in (and success of) polit-series in Germany – compared to Britain or the US – is due to a cultural incompatibility or whether it simply results from circumstantial shortcomings in the dramatizations themselves. My analyses of the successful German Polit-comedy EICHWALD, MDB (2015–2019) and the French polit-thriller BARON NOIR (2016–2020) will show that the co-existence of a comparatively complex political system and a weak tradition in polit-fiction (both prevalent in France and Germany) are, in many ways, coincidental and by no means proof for an inherent systemic and cultural incompatibility.

Another central characteristic of the dramatization of popular polit-fiction is the narrative focus on what Nuy calls "figurations of the political".³³⁷ It denotes the transformation of political processes into discernible individual characters and their interactions. Nuy argues that engaging dramatizations require politics to be "moralised"³³⁸ by focusing on a character that serves "to raise the political from its abstract state".³³⁹ This process ultimately manifests, as Engelstad notes, the Aristotelian principle of drama (be it on TV or elsewhere) as a display of characters in action.³⁴⁰ This generically determined agential focus results in a narrative emphasis on interpersonal relationships and a tendency toward 'executive bias', that is, the focus on the executive branch of government.³⁴¹ As the

334 Brian Neve, "Frames of Presidential and Candidate Politics in American Films of the 1990s", *The Public* 7, no. 2 (2000): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2000.110087>.

335 Karl-Rudolf Korte, "Warum eigentlich nicht? Über die Unmöglichkeit, deutsches Politikmanagement im Fernsehen abzubilden", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 363–371.

336 See, e.g., Andreas Dörner, "Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimireihen des deutschen Fernsehens", *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 57

337 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 19. My translation: "Figurationen des politischen".

338 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 83.

339 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 95. My translation: "um das Politische seiner Abstraktheit zu entheben". See also Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 171f.

340 Audung Engelstad, "Watching Politics: The Representation of Politics in Prime-Time Television Drama", *Nordicom Review* 29, no.2 (2008): 309. See also Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK: Themes, characters and narratives 1965–2009", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 265.

341 Niko Switek calls this "Exekutivlastigkeit": "Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House*

coming sections will discuss, this emphasis has been particularly evident in US polit-fiction (both in film and TV), where the office of the president has been the dominant focal point.³⁴²

Schillinger, examining the presentation of 'the political' in TV series, accordingly remarks that fiction's agential focus leads series to emphasise *politics* as a "dynamic process" and "power relationship" between protagonists while remaining vague about *policy* and using the *polity* merely as the "playing field on which the protagonists show their mastery of politics".³⁴³ Accordingly, van Zoonen finds polit-series to tend to displaying a "political generality" concerning concrete issues.³⁴⁴ Textual criticism has, at times, underestimated the far-reaching effects of these narrative conventions in its consideration of the normative dimension of polit-series, which often appears in a separate discussion.

2.4.2.2 Studying Polit-Series' Normative Vision of Politics

Literary and TV criticism and social and political studies, particularly in the 2010s, paid significant attention to the moral assumptions polit-series make about politics, politicians, and particular national polities. Dörner has famously stated that politics in TV series appears as either "idealistic politics" [*Idealpolitik*], in which minor human flaws accompany an overall idealistic political agenda,³⁴⁵ "Realpolitik", in which positive ends justify morally questionable means,³⁴⁶ or as "power politics" [*Machtpolitik*] in which neither the means nor the ends require moral justification.³⁴⁷

In television and film studies, there currently exists a broad scholarly consensus that contemporary (TV) fiction's outlook on politics is predominantly negative.³⁴⁸ However, there are some temporal and local differences in the normative portrayal of politics that

of *Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 16. See also Nick Randall, "Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011), 267.

342 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 265; Philipp Loser "Wie im Film: Fernsehserien haben die Mechanismen westeuropäischer Politik verändert", *INDES: Zeitschrift für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 38; Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 3–6. Switek, "Spiegel, Daten Narrative", 15.

343 Henrik Schillinger, "Politik in Serie(n): Politik, das Politische und die Tragödie", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 61. My translation: "[...] Spielfeld, auf dem die Protagonisten ihre meisterliche Beherrschung der *politics* bis hin auf die Ebene der Verfahrenstricks vorführen".

344 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 139.

345 Andreas Dörner, "Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no. 51 (December 16, 2016): 8.

346 Dörner, "Politserien", 9.

347 Dörner, "Politserien", 9. For this triad see also Andreas Dörner, "Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimireihen des deutschen Fernsehens", *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 54–56.

348 Dörner mentions a "disillusioned and pessimistic image of politics" as a typical marker of "quality series". See Dörner, "Politserien", 6. ["ein illusionsloses und pessimistisches Bild der Politik"].

seems to have seen a certain degree of consolidation as recently as the 2010s, with television's increasing transnational scope following the nonlinear turn. This has been particularly visible in (disproportionately studied) US and UK productions.

2.4.2.2.1 Serial Fictional Politics in the UK and Continental Europe

Since its inception as a dominant trope in mainstream TV in the late 1970s, British polit-series have, as Nick Randall points out, tended to portray politics as a morally ambivalent or outright corrupt business, governed by a remote deep state and populated by either corrupt or incompetent politicians.³⁴⁹ Protagonists' shortcomings are inevitable and either due to their deficient "personalities, the constraints of the system, or their innate self-interest".³⁵⁰ Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, coming to similar conclusions, identify an overall gloomy vision of UK polit-fiction regarding systemic and individual morality.³⁵¹ They note a dominance of the "theme of self-interest",³⁵² stating that classic 'heroes' are rare in British polit-TV.³⁵³

Fielding points out the paradox that, until recently, the only positive aspect of the fictional British polity had been the monarchy,³⁵⁴ which has maintained a continuous presence in British and US fiction. Mandy Merck has edited a volume that examines this "continuing role of royal representation in film and television as patriotic signifier and entertainment commodity".³⁵⁵ The largely positive presentations of the monarchy in mainstream fiction have traditionally been presented as the antithesis of corrupt politics, implicitly following long-established albeit questionable notions of the historical monarchy as the 'unpolitical' and 'dignified' arm of politics.³⁵⁶ In discussing fictional representations of monarchy, Film and TV criticism often reference the motif's complicated relationship with melodrama³⁵⁷ and – as "Monarchy Film"³⁵⁸ – with the controversial genre of Heritage film. Today, the cinematic 'Heritage' label justly carries negative associations of turning Britain's complex history and its dark imperial past into a simplified, selective,

349 Nick Randall, "Imagining the Polity: Cinema and Television Fictions as Vernacular Theories of British Politics", *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (April 2011): 264–267 and 273.

350 Randall, "Imagining the Polity", 273.

351 Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK: Themes, characters and narratives 1965–2009", *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 275.

352 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 269.

353 Zoonen and Wring, "Trends in political television fiction in the UK", 271.

354 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British politics on screen, stage and page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 265.

355 Mandy Merck, "Introduction", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1.

356 See, e.g., Walther Bagehot's famous theorisation of the British Monarchy in his book *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001/2012). Here, he describes the monarchy, e.g., as serving in a "dignified Capacity," (34) introducing "irrelevant facts" into the political process (37), acting as a "disguise" for actual politics, although Bagehot, too, states that there is, in fact, "no authentic explicit information as to what the Queen can do any more than of what she does" (49).

357 Merck, "Introduction", 4f.

358 Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2012), 35f.

and often revisionist story of white, upper-class Englishness that caters to the demands of mainstream, largely non-British (especially US-American) audiences.³⁵⁹

On a related note, Frederic Jameson has identified what he calls the “insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode”³⁶⁰ as a common feature of postmodern culture. He states that, in a society faced with the simulacra of postmodern existence,

nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation.³⁶¹

Besides the favourable monarchy, the otherwise mainly negative diagnosis of UK fictional politics essentially extends to the less prolific, non-anglophone landscape of Western-European polit-fiction. One example is Dörner’s assessments of the pessimistic and defeatist construction of fictional politics in German TV. Here, the political realm traditionally appears as a dirty³⁶² but ultimately unchangeable sphere³⁶³ juxtaposed against the foil of a positive, private realm.³⁶⁴ Interestingly, the pessimistic vision of UK/ European polit-fiction recently seems to have transitioned into US-American productions.

2.4.2.2.2 Polit-Fiction in the US

Until the release of *VEEP* in 2012 and *HoC* in 2013, TV and film criticism traditionally distinguished between the negative European portrayals of politics and its positive, even idealistic presentation in US-American fiction.³⁶⁵ In 2012, van Zoonen and Wring argued, for example, that the bleak outlook of UK fiction contrasted with

359 As discussed, e.g., by Andrew Higson in “Re-presenting the National Past: nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film”, in *Fires were started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 91–109; Thomas Elsaesser, “Images for Sale: The ‘New’ British Cinema”, in *Fires were started*, 45–57; Vidal, *Heritage Film*, e.g., p.8f. and 14; Lester D. Friedman, “The Empire Strikes Out: An American Perspective on the British Film Industry”, in *Fires were started*, 1–14; Kara McKenchie, “Mrs Brown’s Mourning and Mr King’s Madness: Royal Crisis on Screen”, in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and, Imedla Whelehan (London: Pluto, 2001), e.g., 102f. and 110; Kara McKenchie, “Taking Liberties with the Monarch: The Royal Bio-Pic in the 1990s”, in *British Historical Cinema: The History, Heritage and Costume Film*, ed. Claire Monk and Amy Sargeant (London/ New York: Routledge, 2002), e.g., 219 and 224; Claire Monk, “The British heritage-film debate revisited”, in *British Historical Cinema*, 176–198.

360 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 20.

361 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

362 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 213.

363 Andreas Dörner, “Machthungrige Schurken? Zum Bild politischer Akteure in Serien und Krimi-reihen des deutschen Fernsehens”, *tv diskurs* 21/80, no.2 (2017): 58.

364 Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 223.

365 See, e.g., Dörner, *Politainment*, 212 and 223.

most American political television and film fiction in which the outcome of the characters' struggles with conspiracy, bureaucracy, political and personal predicaments is mostly positive, showing that one can prevail regardless of strongly adverse circumstances.³⁶⁶

However, Matthew Bailey, likewise before the release of HoC, has pointed out that while the US – other than the UK – possesses a “grand tradition of idealism”,³⁶⁷ the notion of a more optimistic US polit-fiction is an oversimplification.³⁶⁸ Indeed, much of classic US polit-fiction features a negative portrayal of a corrupt or dysfunctional institutional structure where the positive outcome is a result of the personal integrity of the central protagonist, most often the US president.

Patricia Phalen et al., in their study of the pop cultural portrayal of TV presidents in selected series, have accordingly found fictional presidents to appear as “heroes, often faced with impossible choices in an effort to do what is best for the country”.³⁶⁹ Gregory Frame states that until the 2010s, “mainstream film and television have, over the course of the past twenty-five years, become two of the presidency’s support mechanisms”.³⁷⁰

Van Zoonen has noted that the trope of the idealist hero (president) moving against an adverse system follows a “populist tradition” of building oppositions between tainted “elites and ‘the people’” and pervades many of Hollywood’s portrayals of politics.³⁷¹ It is, for example, at the centre of the 1939 film classic “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (Frank Capra: USA, 1939).³⁷² The trope of the idealised US presidency draws from long-established cinematic traditions. In his study of polit-fiction in Hollywood, Ernest Giglio, for example, states that “with a few exceptions, the film industry has treated the American presidency with respect and dignity, if not reverence”.³⁷³

Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, comparing the political visions of Hollywood classics MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON, THE PARALLAX VIEW (Alan J. Pakula: USA; 1974), and THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE (John Frankenheimer: USA; 1962) to

366 Liesbet van Zoonen and Dominik Wring, “Trends in Political Television Fiction in the UK: Themes, Characters and Narratives 1965–2009”, *Media, Culture & Society* 34, no.3 (2012): 275.

367 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011): 282.

368 Matthew Bailey, “The Uses and Abuses of British Political Fiction or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love Malcom Tucker”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no.2 (March 4, 2011): 283. For a similar remark on US film see also Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 113f.

369 Patricia F. Phalen, Jennie Kim, and Julia Osellame, “Imagined Presidencies: The Representation of Political Power in Television Fiction”, *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no.3 (March 23, 2011): 536, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00812.x>.

370 Gregory Frame, “The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61. He references his earlier study: *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2014).

371 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 110f.

372 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 110.

373 Ernest Giglio, *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 105.

the hit TV series *THE WEST WING* likewise argue that the idealisation of the US presidency (at the expense of other democratic institutions) stems from a concept of democratic representation as a process of frictionless transfer between abstract constitutional regulations and the naïve trust of the people.³⁷⁴ Historically, the idea of hero-president lies on the opposite end of the established dramatic trope of systemic conspiracy. In his examination of political thrillers, Robert Silberman has pointed out the pervasive “paranoid style in American political film”,³⁷⁵ which is based on the “notion of heroic individualism”.³⁷⁶

The cultural juxtaposition of positive individualism and a negatively framed institutional realm corresponds to a pervasive narrative archetype which Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have famously described as the “American Monomyth” (AM).³⁷⁷ It arises from originally puritan notions of exceptionalism, individualism, and redemption and centres around a harmonious community “*threatened by evil*” that is saved by a “*selfless superhero*” after its institutions fail to solve the threat.³⁷⁸ Discussing the trope of the (super)hero president, Lawrence and Jewett have likewise pointed out that US polit-fiction dramatically mediates the historical limits on presidential powers to maintain the individualist structure of the AM and fulfil its demands for an all-powerful messiah-hero.³⁷⁹

The motif of the hero-president has been considered as the result of particularly US American cultural notions of individualism that, as Robert N. Bellah et al. have remarked, “lies at the very core of American culture”.³⁸⁰ Ian Scott, studying fictional polit-cinema, likewise points out the “crucial ideological framework that has been built around individualism at the core of political thinking in America”.³⁸¹

While the trope of hostility towards systemic politics can arguably be traced back to the beginning of fictional on-screen politics, TV and film scholarship continuously sought to pinpoint historical breakout events. For Cinema, Silberman proposes, e.g., an influence of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.³⁸² Felix Brinker implies that for tele-

374 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, “Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, *The Parallax View*, *The West Wing*”, in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 63.

375 Robert Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, in *A Political Companion to American Film*, ed. Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 320. With reference to the famous essay by Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, last accessed 01.08.2022. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

376 Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, 321.

377 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977).

378 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX. Original emphasis.

379 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, USA/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 128.

380 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 142.

381 Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 20.

382 Silberman, “Political Thrillers”, 321.

vision, the theme of conspiracy became particularly prevalent after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.³⁸³ However, rather than fixating on historical markers, he argues that the conspiracy trope ultimately corresponds to the requirements of basic narrative logic³⁸⁴ and, as such, is particularly well suited to the demands of serial narrative, e.g., because of its ability to create endlessly deferrable conflict.³⁸⁵

Televisual representations of US politics seem to have traditionally skipped cinema's earlier pro-systemic moments and, until recently, concentrated mainly on juxtaposing a favourable presidential protagonist and an antagonistic system in line with the AM. The trope of the hero-president seems to be partly the result of a pervasive – although by no means categorical – hesitancy to portray a given TV series' native heads of state as negative figures. Examining the notion of traditionally positive fictional US presidents, Rob Edelman has, e.g., pointed out the influence of the sacrosanctity of the historical presidency in cinematic portrayals of real-life presidents previous to Watergate and the Vietnam war.³⁸⁶ Marlène Coulomb-Gully notes a long-standing taboo of irreverent fictional portrayals of the French president.³⁸⁷ In the UK, a similar taboo to feature a living monarch in a fictional production had been broken as late as 2006 with Stephen Frears' film *THE QUEEN*. The first fictionalised (not entirely hagiographic) portrayal of Elizabeth II in a fictional TV series came as late as 2016 (*THE CROWN*) and had tellingly received its financing from the non-British streaming portal Netflix.

In US polit-series, the dominant tradition of juxtaposing a hero-president and a villainous polity arguably changed with *THE WEST WING*'s much more differentiated portrayal of politics. Friedrich Balke remarks that while the series retains its idealised notion of the president as a paternally benevolent person and official, it features a much more procedural image of representative politics as a co-creative process as opposed to earlier monomythical (pseudo-monarchical) ideas of a presidential "one-man corporation".³⁸⁸ In the 2010s, this evolution away from presidential idolatry seems to have continued with textual analyses of high-profile contemporary series describing decidedly more negative portrayals of fictional politics across national contexts, particularly in the US, that had hitherto been more common in European productions.

383 Felix Brinker, "Hidden Agendas, Endless Investigations, and the Dynamics of Complexity: The Conspiratorial Mode of Storytelling in Contemporary American Television Series", *Aspeers* 5 (2012): 87.

384 Brinker, "Hidden Agendas", 91f.

385 Brinker, "Hidden Agendas", 97 and 106.

386 Rob Edelman, "Politicians in the American Cinema", in *A Political Companion to American Film*, ed. Gary Crowdus and Edward Asner (Lakeview, Michigan: Lakeview Press, 1994), 323.

387 Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles : Commander in Chief et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis", *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no 1 (2012): 38, doi: 10.1080/09639489.2011.631701.

388 Friedrich Balke, "Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in *The West Wing*", in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein and Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2015), 70. My translation: "Einmann-Körperschaft".

2.4.2.2.3 Observing a 'Cynical Turn'?

Critical analyses in TV and media studies concerned with the 2010s most prominent polit-series attest to US productions (above all the popular HoC and VEEP) a high degree of negativity, pessimism, and cynicism in their portrayal of fictional politics. The unanimity of these observations suggests that polit-fiction in the US approached and perhaps surpassed the pessimistic (European) tradition in the early 2010s in what one might call a cynical turn. Betty Kaklamanidou, e.g., notes that the amoral aspect of politics as a standard feature in fictional politics to create conflict had traditionally been the domain of secondary characters. In contrast, the polit-series of the 2010s "introduced a narrative which dared question the integrity of the American political protagonist".³⁸⁹

One of the most pervasive notions in more current TV scholarship is demystification and disillusionment in US polit-series. It expresses itself, e.g., in the breaking of taboos regarding the cinematic portrayal of formerly sacrosanct offices starting in the early 2000s, where Peter Rollins remarks that "poking fun at the president" has become more common.³⁹⁰ With regards to the presentation of fictional US presidents, Gregory Frame points out that, following the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency in 2008,

popular culture is finding it substantially more difficult to provide the necessary buttress to what is beginning to be the rather weatherworn construct of the heroic presidency.³⁹¹

US polit-fiction's pessimism arguably reached its first peak in the 2010s with the release of the cynical presidential satire VEEP. As Marc Edward Shaw argues, the series draws its humour from the difference between the standing of the presidency and the flawed characters, which creates an aesthetic of hyperbolic "omnishambles".³⁹² Nicholas Holm has pointed out that polit-comedies generally display humour that demystifies the political sphere by pointing out the discrepancy between the ideal "and its sordid particulars".³⁹³

A second pervasive notion is that of fatalism. Fielding, in his examination of British politics on screen, has remarked that while older polit-fiction shows a continuous struggle with a deeply flawed system, the recent series *THE THICK OF IT* (UK, 2005–2012) portrays a systemic and personal fatalism in which politicians "have to run just to stay

389 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), 105.

390 Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 14.

391 Gregory Frame, "The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 61.

392 Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television. Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f.

393 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 80.

still".³⁹⁴ Holm likewise lists "discomfort, provocation and absurdity" as the "key modes of contemporary humour."³⁹⁵ He argues that polit-series such as VEEP, following an absurdist and fatalist tradition, do not present political humour but "jokes about politics",³⁹⁶ pointing out systemic flaws without proposing ways of change.³⁹⁷ For him, postmodern entertainment is "concerned only with a doubtful and dissentful opposition to any existing structure".³⁹⁸

Similarly, Margaret Tally has argued that absurdist humour is one of the hallmarks of the Millennial generation.³⁹⁹ Roderick P. Hart, studying the role of TV in political communications in the 1990s, already describes an "ample supply of cultural cynicism"⁴⁰⁰ (particularly towards politics) that has grown since the 1950s.⁴⁰¹ As one of the causes, Hart identifies what he calls the "naturally cynical" language of television⁴⁰², endowing audiences with an (involuntary) meta-perspective, a "strategic lens", on political processes⁴⁰³ and making cynicism appear as the "cool"⁴⁰⁴ or "intelligent option".⁴⁰⁵ In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk famously theorized and described Cynicism as a pervasive cultural impetus and concomitant of modernity (and arguably mass media) and its subsequent eras.⁴⁰⁶

Analysing contemporary polit-fiction, sociocultural TV criticism paints the picture of a general sense of decline and dystopia together with a defeatist notion stemming from a sense of lacking alternatives. Frame, e.g., states that the moral deterioration of US fictional presidents goes along with historical "declinism",⁴⁰⁷ that is, increasing insecurity about the US' position as the undisputed global superpower and the internal potency of the US presidency.⁴⁰⁸

Giving in to the temptations of the sociocultural *series as data* approach, TV critics have, at times, argued that this cynical and defeatist fictional attitude follows changing

394 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 259.

395 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 16.

396 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82.

397 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 82f.

398 Holm, *Humor as Politics*, 202.

399 Margaret Tally, "Comedy Natives': Generations, Humour and the Question of Why Smart + Funny Is the New Rock and Roll", in *The Millennials on Film and Television. Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (Jefferson: NC: McFarland & Co., 2014), 146.

400 Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (London/Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 17.

401 Hart, *Seducing America*, 81.

402 Hart, *Seducing America*, 83.

403 Hart, *Seducing America*, 9.

404 Hart, *Seducing America*, 81.

405 Hart, *Seducing America*, 82.

406 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, transl. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

407 Gregory Frame, "The Leader of the Free World? Representing the Declining Presidency in Television Drama", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 72.

408 Frame, "The Leader of the Free World?", 62 and 72f.

historical attitudes towards politics and the world in general. Edward J. Hackett, e.g., has claimed that HoC “plays off the anxieties of our current realities” in which politics seems unable to “deliver on the promise of justice”.⁴⁰⁹ Florian Breitweg et al., likewise examining HoC, attribute the series’ sinister portrayals to an “erosion of trust” in the US’ unifying “civic religion” and its political institutions.⁴¹⁰ Sebastian M. Herrmann sees the pervasive radical scepticism in polit-series resulting from increasing complexity and postmodern “epistemic uncertainty”.⁴¹¹

Dan Hassler-Forest, regarding worldbuilding,⁴¹² and Jöran Klatt, in his analysis of House of Cards,⁴¹³ have each pointed out that fiction’s defeatist embrace of the cynical and demystified political dystopia corresponds to an aesthetic internalization of neoliberal or neo-conservative values. This thesis will pursue the notion that this assumption is akin to what Mark Fisher has called “capitalist realism”,⁴¹⁴ which erroneously assumes that the merciless and unsustainable structures of the neoliberal order represent the lamentable but unchangeable natural state of the world.

Nonetheless, Betty Kaklamanidou, in her examination of HoC and THE AMERICANS (USA, 2013–2018), argues that while the former might show an overall dystopian vision of the moral state of (US) politics, it still retains the notion of American exceptionalism. In the series, the US, flawed as its system and officials may be, remains charged with protecting the world from a perhaps even greater evil.⁴¹⁵

Ignoring polit-series *serial* character, most studies have naturally assumed that their diagnosis within a TV series not only somehow reflects a social reality but that it remains static throughout a series’ run. Acknowledging that long-running series change over time, this study’s comparative approach will examine series and their formal and normative presentation of politics across cultural and media backgrounds. Moreover, many newer series have not been the subject of much scholarly attention due to their comparatively young age. It will be interesting to see how the cynical turn that took up speed at the beginning of the 2010s looks shortly after the decade’s end. Indeed, as this study will show, not all series have followed the cynical turn. Moreover, some younger series seem to replace their predecessors’ defeatist visions of capitalist realism

409 J. Edward Hackett, “Introduction: Contemplating a House of Cards”, in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood’s Republic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 1.

410 Florian Breitweg, Jakob Hager, Vanessa Molter, and Cornelius Witt, “House of Cards: The American Machiavelli”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018.), 257. My translation: “Vertrauenserosion”.

411 Sebastian M. Herrmann, “Vor dem Post-Faktischen: The West Wing und die postmoderne, ‘epistemische Verunsicherung’ in der Politik”, in *Von Game of Thrones bis House of Cards: Politische Perspektiven in Fernsehserien*, ed. Anja Besand (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2018), 153–166. See especially 153.

412 Dan Hassler-Forest, “Worlds and Politics”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*. Edited by Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 308.

413 Jöran Klatt, “Ränkespiele zweier Serien (1): House of Cards”, *Göttinger Institut für Demokratieforschung*, blog, May 17, 2016, http://www.demokratie-goettingen.de/blog/house-of-cards_

414 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009).

415 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.

with more cautiously optimistic images of political representation and significantly improved notions of social diversity. As the coming section will discuss, a prominent example of this evolution is nonlinear TV's presentation and, at times, its rejection of binary gender norms in politics and beyond.

2.4.3 Examining Notions of Gender in Political Fiction and Polit-Series

The topic of gender in politics and polit-fiction has been a widely discussed issue in more recent political, literary, and media television scholarship. Indeed, gender representation has – alongside questions of race, sexual orientation and gender identity – become one of the most prevalent topics of discussion, particularly following the emergence of the MeToo movement in 2017. However, the focus on gender, politics, and representation in mainstream entertainment predates these developments. Focusing on the evolving historical images of masculinity in politics, Wieland Schwanebeck describes a paradoxical situation for politicians who are at once compelled to project traditional notions of virility without being able to resort to their sexuality to prove it.⁴¹⁶

Examining fictional representations of female politicians, van Zoonen states, “In many other forms of popular fiction, politics and women are [...] constructed as the antithesis of each other”.⁴¹⁷ Popular polit-fiction long seemed to struggle with the consolidation of patriarchal binary constructions of women and femineity as nurturing forces and “symbols of innocence and virtue”, on the one hand, and the requirements of confident protagonists who succeed within the common frame of the contemporary fictional polity as a self-oriented “cesspit of dishonesty”,⁴¹⁸ on the other hand. Accordingly, Bettina Soller and Maria Sullima have elaborated on the notion of the “*Double Bind*” of being a female politician stating that, within the realm of the static binary gender scale, neither traditional masculinity nor traditional femineity seem to function as “satisfactory options for [female] politicians”.⁴¹⁹

The question of (still unbalanced) gender representation – both on and off screen – has become a similarly prevalent issue in more recent scholarship concerned with the cultural and structural affordances of popular culture in general and film and television in particular. As Kaklamanidou and Tally argue, there has been a notable increase in female representation and female protagonists in polit-fiction due to (1) a cultural shift in

416 Wieland Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters: The Body Politic and Its Restrained Libido”, in *A Man's World? Political Masculinities in Literature and Culture*, ed. Birgit Sauer and Kathleen Starck (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 143.

417 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 87.

418 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 87. See also: Valentina Cardo, “The Amazing Mrs Politician: Television Entertainment and Women in Politics”, *Parliamentary Affairs* 64, no. 2 (April 2011): 311–325, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsq056>.

419 Bettina Soller and Maria Sulimma, “‘It’s A Great Time To Be A Woman In Politics’: Politikerinnen als Protagonistinnen von US-Fernsehserien”, *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (2014): 85. My translation: “ [...] in einem zwangsweise zweigeschlechtlich konstruierten Raum, in dem weder Weiblichkeit noch Männlichkeit eine zufriedenstellende Option für Politikerinnen bedeutet”. Original Emphasis

the 2010s that has viewers “becoming more comfortable with women as leaders”;⁴²⁰ (2) an increase in historical women in prominent political roles,⁴²¹ and (3) a “television renaissance wherein women are now finally beginning to be the storytellers in Hollywood in numbers rarely seen before”.⁴²²

However, there remains much uncertainty about the extent and quality of the evolution of ongoing TV series and their changing attitudes regarding the representation of binary (and, as recently as the early 2020s, non-binary) gender norms. This study will show how evolving extratextual discourse and a change in production and circulation context can influence such norms in ongoing series.

2.5 Where Does This Leave Us?

Despite its advanced state, the research into the various phenomena pertinent to this thesis leaves us with one fundamental question: how can all these highly relevant insights become useful for the textual analysis of complex serial (polit-)fiction in emergent (often nonlinear) structural and industrial environments?

Strictly structuralist and formalist approaches classically offer powerful models of foundational deep structures. However, they usually remain hermetically focused on the text, excluding any historical and contextual influences. Both the research into popular seriality and the study of agential (power) dynamics in popular culture reveal highly complex conceptual structures that seem challenging to integrate into practical textual analyses. This practical difficulty is arguably one of the reasons why TV criticism traditionally often omits (or only superficially touches upon) these areas.

Overall, sociotechnical and economic studies of TV and other creative media industries, on the one hand, and the textual analysis of polit-series have, to date, remained notably separate. Regarding narrative analysis, this distance sometimes suggests a subconscious continuation of the controversial demands of post-war new criticism, which saw the text itself “as the sole legitimate frame of reference for work in literary studies”.⁴²³ With TV studies still, at times, struggling to prove their academic legitimacy even decades after the cultural turn and Leslie Fiedler’s famous call to “Cross the Border – Close the Gap”⁴²⁴ between ideological presumptions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, critical theory’s distrust of the culture industry still seems to haunt many scholarly perspectives.

Whatever the reason, textual analyses of polit-series often avoid including the larger industrial and historical perspective of the narrative phenomena they describe. However,

420 Betty Kaklamaniidou and Margaret Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s: showrunners, reality and gender”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamaniidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24.

421 Kaklamaniidou and Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s”, 25.

422 Kaklamaniidou and Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s”, 25.

423 Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 7.

424 Leslie Fiedler, “Cross the Border – Close the Gap: Post-Modernism, reprinted ed., in *American Literature since 1900*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975), 344–366.

for the study of popular serial narratives, which exist both as aesthetic artefacts and cultural commodities, this limited perspective ultimately precludes scholarly inquiry from considering crucial aspects, such as a series' own *serial character* or its ongoing narrative evolution. This thesis is not interested in any normative notions of cultural hierarchy. It is, therefore, free to propose a structured approach to analysing popular TV series that includes both their properties as aesthetic objects and as products of a highly dynamic culture industry.

To date, many contextual approaches like NFH and historical poetics have primarily considered linear, pre-digital narratives. ANT, which shows much promise in consolidating the various pertinent research perspectives, has only begun to prove its usefulness for textual analysis of contemporary popular narratives.

Finally, the research into polit-series has shown a notable bias for anglophone productions, in general, and, at least in the 2010s, for one production in particular: HoC. Comparative studies, however, remain rare. Many series have escaped scholarly focus due to their release after the recent peak of polit-fiction in the mid-2010s, their comparatively low cultural capital, or their non-English or non-Western background. However, in the constantly evolving world of nonlinear TV with its simultaneously globalized and localized dynamics of production, circulation, and reception, the focus of textual criticism must move on from Anglocentric perspectives based on altogether questionable notions of 'the West to the rest'.

This study will demonstrate that more recent linear and nonlinear polit-series remain highly relevant subjects of scholarly inquiry. They continue to undergo fascinating evolutions that are closely tied to the technological and economic developments of television, its increasing transnational scope, and broader changes in political, cultural, and ideological landscapes.

In what might well turn out to be a 'woke turn'⁴²⁵ in contemporary nonlinear TV fiction, e.g., there seem to be increasing signs of a shift in the underlying logic of recent high-profile productions. At first glance, they appear to move away from previous cynical, transgressive, and defeatist notions and towards a more generous, differentiated, constructive and decidedly more diverse view of politics, representation, and narrative composition. This development is, in no small part, made possible by the changing socio-technological and socioeconomic affordances of TV industries with its means of digital circulation and nonlinear schedules. Therefore, disregarding a TV series' economic, sociocultural, sociotechnical and systemic ecology ultimately means remaining blind to essential evolutions in contemporary popular television storytelling that are taking place right now.

Besides its own analyses, this thesis will provide valuable vantage points for future inquiry into the complex evolving phenomenon of popular serial TV. It will combine, adjust, and extend many of the approaches discussed in this chapter to devise a methodological tool that operationalises central characteristics of the broader phenomenon, which colloquially carries the name 'popular TV series' for textual analysis, including complex industry structures, seriality, ontological questions of character and world

425 I use the term to denote a heightened political and social awareness but without any of the dismissive connotations that more conservative discourse has, at times, imbued it with.

status, discursive authorship, and narrative composition. The following chapter will illustrate how such an approach can be effectively applied.

3. Actors, Games, and Players

An Analytical Model for Serial Television Fiction

At first glance, the objective of this study seems straightforward: It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how contemporary television series present fictional politics. Why, then, does this chapter presume that a more detailed illustration of what exactly comprises a television series is necessary? The answer comes in the wake of the non-original but fundamental realisation that popular commercial texts in general, and *popular serial television texts*, in particular, are highly complex phenomena that extend beyond the scope of mere textual analysis or a search for proof of direct cultural representation.¹

This chapter follows the assumption that the complexity of the phenomenon that colloquially carries the name ‘television series’ derives from the unique properties of *serial* texts and the dispersed, interconnected, and constantly evolving means of contemporary TV’s production, circulation, and reception. This realisation led Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni to remark that

A television fiction product is a living creature. Working on it is a journey of unexpected twists, turns, and subtle adjustments, a constant hive of activity lasting for months, even years, an ecosystem teeming with life.²

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- 1 As discussed in chapter 2. See Frank Kelleter’s notion of series as “Moving targets” and resulting methodological consequences: Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 14 and 15f. See also Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), e.g., 2–5. Also expressed in approaches of New Film History, see James Chapman, Mark Glancy, and Sue Harper, “Introduction”, in *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*, softcover reprint, ed. James Chapman, Mark Glancy, Sue Harper (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–10, which has been taken up for TV, e.g., by Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, “The political TV shows of the 2010s: showrunners, reality and gender”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 17–33.
 - 2 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 27.

Following Roger Silverstone's claim that "technology arrives, [...] carrying on its back a burden of social, economic and political implications",³ it can be stated that the digital and nonlinear shifts of televisions' "post-network"⁴ era have significantly impacted the shape of serial storytelling and its various historical contexts throughout the 2010s. "Portalization" and "platformization" have increased the character of TV series as "*contingent [media] commodities*".⁵ As this chapter will discuss, contemporary TV series are, as David Nieborg and Thomas Poell have stated for digital news and games, "unstable texts"⁶ that "are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation"⁷ and subject to the demands of "complex multisided markets".⁸

This chapter assumes that a TV series' ecosystem extends beyond material and institutional affordances. Indeed, serialization as a "social practice" influences, as Felix Brinker states, all aspects of serial media texts.⁹ He notes:

[...] the concrete textual form of specific series mediates the demands of the different actors involved and, among other things, links the economic imperatives of producers to the reception practices of the audience.¹⁰

Frank Kelleter has remarked that TV series, in many ways, behave like actor networks¹¹ that "consist not just of the stories they tell but also of the manifold proceedings and forces that are gathered in their acts of storytelling".¹² A 'TV series' is a complex web of human, institutional, conceptual, discursive, and various textual actors and actor-relations embedded in what Marsha Kinder calls an intertextual "supersystem".¹³ This chapter will further pursue the assumption that a TV series' various actors are determined by interdependent historical, textual, and fictional factors alike that, through their interplay, shape each other across ontological boundaries. A series' complexity, that is, its

3 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003 (1994)), 79.

4 See Amanda D. Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:3/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

5 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4276, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>. Original emphasis.

6 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4289.

7 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4276.

8 Nieborg and Poell, "The platformization of cultural production", 4281.

9 Felix Brinker, "On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*", in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann, Katja Kanzler et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 46.

10 Brinker, "On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series", 47.

11 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25f.

12 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 26.

13 Marsha Kinder, *Playing With power in movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley/L.A./London: University of California Press, 1991), 122.

“organization and patterning involving a multiplicity of elements and their connectivity and variety, evoking surprise and wonder”,¹⁴ thus describes both its systemic and aesthetic dimensions.

If it is true that “watching television draws the viewer into a world of ordered meanings, ordered by and within an increasingly global network of institutional and cultural systems”,¹⁵ the task of describing and analysing the presentation of fictional politics on serial TV suddenly exceeds what mere narrative analysis can achieve.

Structural and narrative complexity continues to pose a range of problems for the analysis of serial television texts by exceeding the analytic capabilities of human-led close-reading or historical source work. Some selection, therefore, becomes necessary: Which actors and influences does one consider and which does one leave out? Moreover, given the often vaguely defined assemblage of Actors involved, how would approaching such a selection even work?

Before attempting textual analysis, this chapter proposes to pursue the examination of serial TV narratives as a “dynamic structural model”.¹⁶ The original model this chapter develops aims to facilitate the description and analysis of serial narratives within the complex networks that condition them. Drawing on a variety of approaches outlined in the literature review, from historical poetics, narratology, TV, film, and media studies, psychology, Actor-Network- and Systems Theory, as well as game theory and game studies, the model describes the conscious and unconscious interplay between historical and textual entities as they create and navigate both the textual world and its historical framework.

Describing diegetic interactions as regular, rule-based *games*, the model will reveal narrative patterns and enable their analysis in the context of the unique, interdependent textual and historical logics that determine popular serial television fiction. The model is transversal in that it is not limited to one narrative phenomenon (in this case, *poli-series*), country, or system but is generally suitable to describe popular serial TV storytelling.

It is crucial to note here that this study is interested first and foremost in facilitating a comprehensive tool for its narrative analysis. Its focus, therefore, rests on illustrating fictional narrative patterns and their relationship with historical influences.

3.1 The Network of a Fictional Television Series

A fictional TV series is a complex network formed by various interconnected textual and historical actors who determine each other through their interactions (the next section will discuss the term ‘actor’ more closely). Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has proposed

14 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, “Introduction: Narrative Complexity”, in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 2.

15 Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003 (1994)), 79.

16 Christa Juretzka, “Einlassen auf Irritationen: Ästhetik auf der Spur der Serie”, in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag: Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 45, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann, 41–48 (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 41. My translation: “dynamisches Strukturmodell”.

a framework for describing complex networks that is – to a certain extent – useful for modelling fictional serial narratives within their historical conditions. Following Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank's assessment of teen film, I propose to, firstly, regard TV series as a network that is "made, re-made, and performed by the dynamic relations that arise from the actions and interactions of human and non-human actors".¹⁷

As the authorial function of a TV series is dispersed across a variety of distinct actors,¹⁸ the *network of a popular TV series* is neither controlled by clearly discernible primary forces nor completely free of a hierarchal organisation between individual actors. As a multi-agential system, it shows what Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, with regards to narrative complexity, call "weakened central control"¹⁹ and a "tension systemic and agentic dynamics".²⁰ As a complex system, the network of a TV series is arguably an "emergent" system, meaning its overall functionality exceeds the sum of its parts and that it can, as Marie-Laure Ryan notes with regards to narrative emergence, organise its individual elements "into larger functional patterns without the top-down guidance of a controlling authority".²¹ Serial stories, as Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer note, "possess a momentum which makes the recourse to authorial entities and intentionalities seem obsolete or at least inadequate".²²

For Kelleter, "Series are not intentional subjects but entities of distributed intention".²³ He defines serial agency as "something dispersed in a network of people, roles, organizations, machineries, and forms".²⁴ However, it is crucial to distinguish between the serial text and the narrative it conveys and the network that comprises the entirety of a series, the former two being contained in but inferior to the latter. In its use here, the term *network of a series* neither refers solely to the serial text or the meanings transmitted by audio-visual signs nor exclusively to the various historical actors that shape a serial

17 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 16.

18 See e.g., Marta Dynel, "You talking to me?" The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse", *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631; and Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson, "Introduction", in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Gary Burns, Robert J. Thompson (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), IX.

19 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 12f.

20 Grishakova and Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", 12.

21 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative as/and Complex System/s", in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 42.

22 Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer, "Grenzgänger: Serielle Figuren im Medienwechsel", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 186. My translation: "Ihnen kommt ein Moment von Eigendynamik zu, das den Rekurs auf Autoreninstanzen und Intentionalitäten obsolet oder doch unzulänglich erscheinen lässt".

23 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25.

24 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 26.

text. A TV series is a *hybrid network*. Its actors comprise the historical human, institutional, and technological entities involved in the production, circulation, and reception, furthermore the serial text itself and the diverse textual and non-textual functions created by the network's activity.²⁵ The latter comprises discursive functions like 'authors' and 'audiences' and the text's fictional characters (all of which I will discuss in more detail in the course of this chapter).

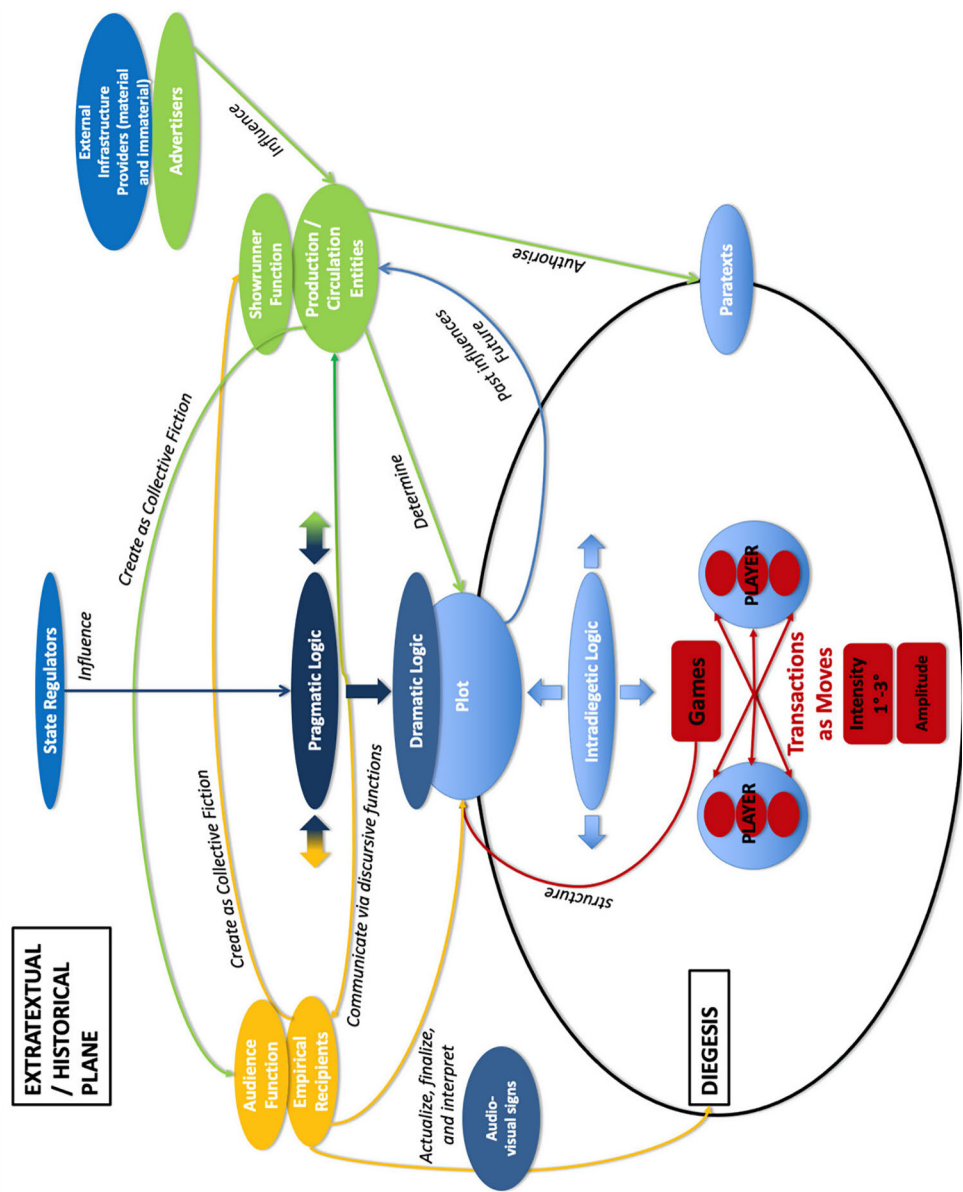
The network of the TV Series HOUSE OF CARDS (HoC), for example, contains the historical institutions (e.g., the streaming portal Netflix or the production companies Trigger Street Productions and Media Rights Capital) and individuals who worked on producing the series both as human persons and in their discursive functions as 'producers', 'showrunners', 'Writers', 'Gaffer's etc. It, furthermore, comprises the gatekeepers of the infrastructure used to transmit the series' audio-visual code and its various viewers both as human individuals and as collective 'audiences'. However, the network of HoC also contains the serial text itself (in its shape as distinct audio-visual signs) and the fictional characters and other fictional agential entities within the series' diegesis that emerge as meanings from the text, e.g., the series' protagonists Claire and Frank Underwood. Therefore, the network of the TV series HoC contains and exceeds the serial text (although it forms its own network of lower order).

As an emergent and contingent network, a TV series possesses intentionality that differs from and exceeds the assembled individual intentions of its agential elements. This point is central to the question of whether a fictional TV series can serve as evidence for authorial intention or broader sociocultural currents in the symptomatic readings of classic literary and film histories. A series' presentation of politics, e.g., is not a reflection of the attitudes of a showrunner or production company towards politics. Nor is it the reflection of the views of influential audience groups, e.g., prestige audiences with high cultural capital. Instead, the presentations visible in a polit-series are themselves a product of this series' particular emergent network and must be analysed as such.

Figure 1 visualises my model of the *emergent network of fictional television series*. The model's nodes represent individual (human or non-human) actors who can be historical, discursive, or fictional. Depending on their ontological status, the model locates the actors either on the diegetic or the historical plain outside the text or within the textual structure itself. The colours designate groupings of actors and actions with similar origin or impetus. The arrowed connections between the nodes indicate the one- or multi-directional interactions with which the different Actors influence and determine one another. Figure 1 below is a first complete illustration of the complex serial network. This chapter will discuss (and illustrate) the individual parts of its model in more detail.

25 As Kelleter remarks, "serial narratives, as actor-networks and self-observing systems, contribute to how the people who produce and consume them [...] understand themselves and proceed in these roles". In *ibid.*, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 28.

Figure 1: The Emergent Network of Fictional Television Series



3.2 Defining Actors

It is essential to be clear about what exactly an ‘actor’ in a TV series’ network is. According to Bruno Latour, in ANT, “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a

difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant”.²⁶ Actors “become visible when they cause other actors to act”.²⁷ Actors can be “micro-actors” (single entities) and “macro-actors”, e.g., groups or institutions, which usually consist of various associated micro actors²⁸ whose actions share a common directional impetus. Actors are often hybrids, that is, “mixtures of humans, natures, and technologies”.²⁹ They are often “composite entities”,³⁰ that is, effects that are themselves “emerging from other networks”³¹ to act as primary entities in a network of higher order. In his*her functional role as the creative head of a TV production, e.g., a ‘showrunner’ is an effect of various other networks attributing this role to a human micro actor. I will discuss this further. Accordingly, the true nature of an actor within a network is not always clearly discernible to second-order observers.

For my model, all discernible entities that emerge from a TV series (micro or macro, historical or fictional) are actors if they possess *agency*. This thesis follows Janet Murray, who defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices”.³² This concept of agency assumes a certain level of consciousness. Particularly with regards to discursive, fictional, and textual actors, the question of agency thus merits further discussion.

3.3 The Serial Narrative as Actor?

If agential status requires agency and agency requires (self-) consciousness, then why is the serial narrative itself an actor? A series is more than the passive product of a collaborative effort.³³ The unique properties of series as “self-observing systems”, as noted by Kelleter,³⁴ endow them with a special kind of agency that makes them become macro actors in their respective networks in what Sonnenberg-Schrank, in his discussion of film, calls “The agential shift induced by the self-awareness and referentiality of the texts”.³⁵

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- 26 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.
 - 27 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 16.
 - 28 Michael, Mike. *Actor-Network Theory: Trials, Trails and Translations*. London: Sage, 2017), 153.
 - 29 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 158.
 - 30 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 153.
 - 31 Michael, *Actor-Network Theory*, 36.
 - 32 Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 126.
 - 33 See, e.g., Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 13f.
 - 34 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 25.
 - 35 Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank, *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies: Reassembling the Contemporary American Teen Film with Latour* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 7. Sonnenberg-Schrank notes this with regards to film, however, the agential properties of film and series doubtlessly vary significantly.

Contingent, 'unstable' serial texts thus possess a self-consciousness and agency that results from their network's emergent systemic affordances.³⁶

A serial narrative's self-awareness and self-referentiality result from the unique properties of popular seriality. As popular TV series are typically released while they are still in development, "certain narrative options are still open"³⁷ at the time of reception. As long as it is still ongoing, a series' plot and its fictional world are *open* texts, meaning that additional "canonical material is still being added".³⁸ By contrast, the text of a one-part movie or a mini-series is usually *closed* at the time of its first release, meaning that it has been "declared 'finished'" by an authorial authority preventing the addition of further canonical material.³⁹ A series' *open* status as what Kelleter calls "evolving narratives"⁴⁰ has far-reaching consequences for its role in the overall network. A series' narrative evolution is contingent upon the extratextual production entities' constant observation of the historic environment of a series. Consequently, ongoing serial narratives can 'respond' to factors like consumer reactions, current events, or changing cultural sensibilities by incorporating them into the story's continuation.⁴¹

What is more, as "narratives of recursive progression",⁴² series constantly readjust the continuation of their plot "to already established [narrative] information".⁴³ This, however, means that the diegesis is not merely defined by a series' historical actors in a one-way process. Instead, the existing serial narrative, in turn, influences the historical forces in their determination of its own continuation. Thus, for the purpose of modelling a series' actor-network, the narrative itself gains agential status as a macro function within the network.

A television series remains *open* as long as its production is ongoing. This remains true even in times of full-season releases and full-season production (as practised, e.g., by the streaming portal Netflix). In such cases, the arc of the recursive self-observation merely expands to a seasonal rather than episodic perspective. Accordingly, the analysis of a TV series has to consider their nature as formally *open* texts even if they have terminated at the time of analysis.

36 See Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung: Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality-TV", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 221.

37 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 12.

38 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 270. He writes with regards to "open" fictional worlds. For a similar conception of 'open and closed games' see also Vilém Flusser, "Spiele", in *Ist das Leben ein Spiel?: Aspekte einer Philosophie des Spiels und eines Denkens ohne Fundamente*, ed. Florian Rötzer (Köln: Walther König, 2013), 5.

39 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 270.

40 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 12.

41 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 14.

42 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 16.

43 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 17.

3.4 Ontological Planes

The actors of any TV series are dispersed across two ontological planes: the diegesis and the historical plane, which I will call the extratextual plane. According to Gérard Genette, the diegesis is “not the story but the universe in which the story unfolds”.⁴⁴ It contains, as Étienne Souriau remarks, “all that occurs according to the [...] presented fiction and what it implies if one regarded it as true”.⁴⁵

For my model, all fictional characters and institutions endowed with agency are diegetic (micro or macro) actors. I will call them *players* for better distinction. The nature of their agency and the structural schematisation of their actions require further discussion, which will follow shortly. For now, suffice it to say that diegetic actors (players) are of a very different substance from historical actors and interact in accordance with a different set of rules.

The extratextual plane contains all non-fictional elements and actors of a TV series' network. These can be ‘real’ micro actors like the human persons who work as writers, producers, screen actors (in the thespian sense) or recipients. They can also be macro actors, such as institutions, or discursive functions, like ‘authors’, ‘stars’ or ‘audiences’, involved in a series' production, circulation, or reception. The extratextual level also contains the principles that determine the extratextual world, such as laws of nature or the – although much less self-evident – mechanisms of a capitalist market economy.

3.5 The Triple Logic of Serial Fiction: *Pragmatic, Dramatic, Intradiegetic*

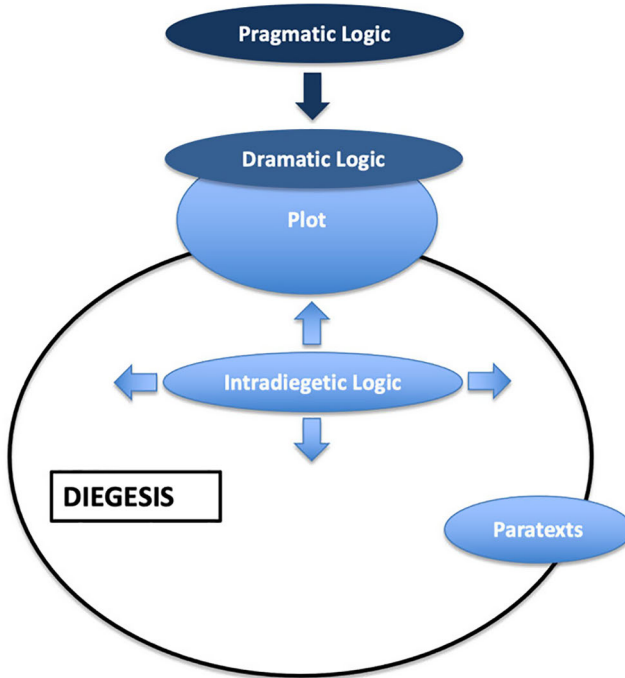
Due to their double identity as aesthetic objects and contingent cultural commodities, serial texts, the fictional world they present, and the plot they convey behave according to three distinct sets of logics, that is, regular “set[s] of factors that determine the conditions under which individual agents and organizations can participate” in systemic interactions.⁴⁶ While the three logics are situated on different ontological planes, they indirectly affect all actors of the network across ontological planes (though to different degrees). Their distinction (see figure 2) is of the utmost importance to analysing contingent serial texts.

44 Gérard Genette, *Die Erzählung*, 3rd ed., transl. Andreas Knop (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2010), 183. My translation: “Die Diegese ist mithin nicht die Geschichte, sondern das Universum, in dem sie spielt [...]”.

45 Étienne Souriau, “Die Struktur des filmischen Universums und das Vokabular der Filmologie”, *Montage/AV* 6, no. 2 (1997): 156. My translation: “[...] alles, was sich laut der [...] präsentierten Fiktion ereignet und was sie implizierte, wenn man sie als wahr ansähe [...]”.

46 John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business In The Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed., Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 11.

Figure 2: The Triple Logic of Serial Fiction



There is (1) the extratextual or *pragmatic logic*, which comprises the historical world's natural, economic, moral, political, or societal affordances, laws, and conventions; (2) the *dramatic logic* of aesthetic narrative and formal composition; (3) the *intradiegetic*⁴⁷ logic as the collection of natural, economic, moral, political and societal affordances and laws that govern the fictional world. These three sets of logics are distinct from one another but interdependent. While pragmatic logics primarily exist outside a TV series' immediate network, the dramatic and intradiegetic logics emerge as a result of and are contingent on the multi-agential network's activity.

The model of the *triple logic* partly builds on (and extends) Jan Mukařovský's formalist concept of (aesthetic) norms. For him, the term 'aesthetic norm' denotes the uncoded "regulating energetic principle"⁴⁸ as a potential force limiting and guiding any form of activity pertaining to an artistic object.⁴⁹ Mukařovský distinguishes a "multiplicity of norms" that determine "the unstable equilibrium which is the structure of a work".⁵⁰ He notes (1) the norms of a work which derive from "the material of a given art", such as

47 For the term "intradiegetic" see the famous concept by Gérard Genette, e.g., *ibid.*, Die Erzählung, 3rd ed, transl. Andreas Knop (Paderborn: Fink Verlag, 2010), 148.

48 Jan Mukařovský, "The Aesthetic Norm", in *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukařovský*, ed. and transl. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1978), 49.

49 Mukařovský, "The Aesthetic Norm", 50.

50 Mukařovský, "The Aesthetic Norm", 54.

language for literature;⁵¹ (2) “technical norms”, which are formal conventions, such as the “regularities of genres [...] and styles”,⁵² that fall under *dramatic logics* in my model (3) “practical norms” located outside the aesthetic sphere, which “nevertheless acquire the range of action of aesthetic norms because of the role which they perform in the structure of the work of art”, such as “ethical norms, political norms, religious norms, [or] social norms”,⁵³ which would fall under *pragmatic logics* in my model; (4) aesthetic traditions as “systems of aesthetic norms” which predate the work but become “elements of its structure”;⁵⁴ (5) “‘anthropologically’ motivated postulates”,⁵⁵ which derive from the organization of joint human experience⁵⁶ and thus constitute “basic aesthetic norms”.⁵⁷ Mukařovský’s model provides a formalist differentiation of the discrete influences on aesthetic works of art. However, its distinctly formalist and aesthetic focus causes imprecisions concerning a work’s broader network that impede its direct application for textual analysis. The model, e.g., contains little room for affordances beyond the concept of ‘norms’ and says little about the status, activity, and relation of concrete actors and agential structures. It likewise does not locate them on their respective ontological planes. This makes it challenging to ascertain precisely the systemic origin of a network’s parts and clearly describe their conflictive interplay.

My concept of a *triple logic* of popular TV series furthermore extends previous, usually binary distinctions of the norms that shape fictional cultural commodities. It corresponds, in part, to Roland Barthes’ idea of the “*pertinence interne*” and “‘*pertinence esthétique*” of mass cultural artefacts.⁵⁸ According to him, the “false rationality of the story”,⁵⁹ that is, the inner logic of the fictional world, and the “aesthetic logic that effectively regulates the course of the action”⁶⁰ often contradict one another. According to Barthes, the plot is determined by the joined conflictive demands of (1) narrative convention and commercial utility, which often oppose (2) the diegesis’ ‘internal’ logic. However, he does not clearly distinguish the demands made by the aesthetic conventions of engaging storytelling and the pragmatic, often (but not always) economic demands of the cultural industry and the broader historical world.

Another binary example that owes much to Mukařovský is Bordwell’s and Mittell’s work on film and television, respectively. Discerning primarily processes of meaning-making in TV, Mittell has argued for a distinction between (1) a series’ “*extrinsic norms*”,⁶¹

51 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

52 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

53 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 53.

54 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 54.

55 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 56.

56 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 55.

57 Mukařovský, “The Aesthetic Norm”, 56.

58 Roland Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, *Communications* 2 (1963): 171, DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1963.959>

59 Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, 171. My translation: “la fausse rationalité du récit”.

60 Barthes, “Œuvre de masse et explication de texte”, 171. My translation: “logique esthétique qui règle effectivement le déroulement de l’action”.

61 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 167. Original emphasis.

which are the “norms of the television medium”⁶² that “guide our comprehension process, including genre conventions, stylistic modes, and standard expectations for what a television series is supposed to do”;⁶³ (2) “intrinsic norms” that, is “the patterns and expectations that a given series establishes for itself”⁶⁴ in order to teach “viewers how to watch and what to expect from future episodes”.⁶⁵ The approach closely follows David Bordwell’s discussion of modes and norms in his poetics of cinema.⁶⁶ For Bordwell, “A narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension”.⁶⁷ A narrational norm, on the other hand, is a “coherent standard established by fiat or by previous practice”.⁶⁸ Acknowledging the influence of historical contexts on cinema, he notes, “every mode of narration is tied to a mode of film production and reception”.⁶⁹ However, this concept of modes and norms focuses primarily on the interplay of aesthetic form and intertextual environment concerning the reception of a filmic or serial text. It does not clearly distinguish the various influences at play in the ongoing (self-)determination of a serial text and its network.

Felix Brinker similarly takes a reception-centred binary approach in his discussion of the politicization of TV series through the “interactions between the formal strategies of narratively complex programming and the practices of audiences”.⁷⁰ He describes TV series as “commercially produced cultural artifacts whose form and function is determined”⁷¹ (1) by their economic profitability and (2) by them being “objects of audiences’ recreational media consumption and cultural activity”.⁷²

Marta Dynel, in her binary distinction of textual presentations, describes “two distinct layers” present in film and series: “the fictional world and underlying multifold layer comprised of sublayers representing discursive and cinematographic techniques”.⁷³ Manfred Pfister, for drama, notes the “embedding of an internal communication system into an external one” as “fictionality’s specific relation to reality”.⁷⁴ In his study on

62 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 167.

63 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 168.

64 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 44. The concept derives from David Bordwell who defines “‘secondary’ or intrinsic norms” for film as “standards attained within the text itself”: *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150.

65 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 168.

66 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 149–155.

67 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 150.

68 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 150.

69 Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 154.

70 Felix Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series: Operational Self-Reflexivity and Audience Management in *Fringe* and *Homeland*”, in *Poetics of Politics: Textuality and Social Relevance in Contemporary American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sebastian M. Herrmann, Carolin Alice Hoffmann, Katja Kanzler et al. (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015), 42.

71 Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series”, 42.

72 Brinker, “On the Formal Politics of Narratively Complex Television Series”, 43.

73 Marta Dynel, “You talking to me?” The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (May 2011): 1631f., <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>. Original emphasis. [sic!]

74 Manfred Pfister: *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 30. See also 20–22. My translation: “Einbettung eines inneren Kommunikationssystems in ein äußeres”, “der spezifische Realitätsbezug der ‘Fiktionalität’”.

games, Eugen Fink describes the internal and the external “sense of a game” [*Spiele Sinn*].⁷⁵ According to him, the internal sense is “the context of played things, deeds and conditions” within the game itself. The external sense of the game is “the meaning which the game has to those that commit to it, that intend it”.⁷⁶

However, at least from the perspective of textual analysis, binary approaches often fail to clearly differentiate (1) between the aesthetic affordances (that I call *dramatic logic*) and the distinct intradiegetic logic of the fictional world itself and (2) between the *dramatic logic* and the *pragmatic logic*, which is often but by far not exclusively pervaded by economic considerations. This distinction, however, is vital. In contingent serial narratives, formal *dramatic logic* and its aim to create *engaging* and *coherent* narratives, on the one hand, and the pragmatic requirements of the historical realm (e.g., commodification), on the other hand, often differ from one another as much as from the *intradiegetic logic* of the fictional world. Nonetheless, all three logics determine the shape of a serial text. For unstable serial texts, this interdependent triple logic has far-reaching and, at times, confusing narrative consequences that cannot be captured by a text-centred analysis alone. It is, therefore, central to understanding how the network of a TV series operates in creating the serial text.

3.5.1 Extratextual Pragmatic Logic

A set of reoccurring extratextual considerations determines the creation of every TV series operating as a cultural commodity. Due to the relatively extensive resources required to produce a popular TV series, this applies to many of them. Following perspectives established, e.g., by critical theory, scholarship often reduces extratextual logics to purely economic concerns and dismisses them – and the cultural commodities they produce – as an alien, disruptive influence to ‘purely’ aesthetic practices. However, the influence of pragmatic logic exceeds economic concerns and by no means causes necessarily inferior or somehow compromised works of art.

What a series looks like ultimately depends on more or less economic factors like its budget and other production means, technological affordances, release schedules and the availability of screen actors and other creative personnel (although this is often not a purely economic concern). However, it is also contingent on official regulations, cultural context, and political discourse. Likewise, a narrative is determined by a set of largely extratextual conventions tied to genre or franchise,⁷⁷ which form part of the “extrinsic norms” of film and TV.⁷⁸

75 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Aber, 1957), 29.

76 Fink, *Oase des Glücks*, 29. My translation: “Sinnzusammenhang der gespielten Dinge, Taten und Verhältnisse”, “die Bedeutung, welche das Spiel für diejenigen hat, die sich erst zu ihm entschließen, die es vorhaben”.

77 Rodrigo Lessa and João Araújo “World Consistency”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 92. They distinguish between two layers of world consistency and a consistency with extrinsic norms without making explicit mention of the concept.

78 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 150f.;

A series with a high release frequency and a limited cast, e.g., will often increase turnover by remaining studio-based and thus feature conflicts that can play out in limited indoor sets (in polit-fiction, often the Oval Office).

Rooted in the historical world, pragmatic logic is the most complex set of rules within the *triple logic*. This is due to the fact that it is not reliant on the limited data of the serial text but instead constituted by the limitlessly complex interactions of historical actors. The extensive and ongoing academic debate surrounding questions of 'popular-' or 'mass culture' and cultural commodification (e.g., regarding the distribution of power) attest to this. Due to this complexity, it is almost impossible to discern all actors and actor-relations that shape the pragmatic logic of a TV series (not least because 'pragmatic' does not necessarily equal 'rational' actions). However, dominant factors like natural laws, prevalent economic considerations, specific regulations, and certain breakout events (e.g., highly publicised scandals) usually make it possible to discern the general outline of a series' historical pragmatic logic.

Every TV series must accommodate a set of unique historical circumstances. HoC, e.g., had to adjust its dramatic and intradiegetic logic to the high-profile dismissal of its main star, Kevin Spacey (see chapter 8). SLUHA NARODU arguably accommodated the developing political ambitions of its star, Volodymyr Zelensky (see chapter 6). THE CROWN has adapted to changing attitudes towards the royal family throughout its run (see chapter 4). However, other extratextual factors, like the all-important economic logic of cultural commodification, apply to all series alike and have similar consequences.

The often-remarked potential perpetuity of a series⁷⁹ that results primarily from a need to maximise revenue is a particularly prominent example of the impact of the pragmatic logic of commodification. A series' end, for example, is usually determined primarily by extratextual factors (most often, its failure to return revenue or the loss of key personnel).⁸⁰

The pragmatically motivated potential perpetuity forces the plot to evolve in unforeseen ways, delay resolution, and add detours and additional material that are, at times, neither coherent within the logic of the fictional world nor with the series' aesthetic principles. Indeed, in a long-running series, this pragmatically motivated delay will often seriously impair a text's aesthetic consistency and intradiegetic coherence⁸¹ and risk wearing out its continued ability to engage audiences.⁸² According to Jahn-Sudmann and Kel-

Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), e.g., 44 and 168.

79 See: e.g. Lothar Mikos, "Serien als Fernsehgenre: Zusammenhänge zwischen Dramaturgie und Aneignungsweisen des Publikums", in *Serie: Kunst im Alltag*, ed. Peter Hoff and Dieter Wiedemann (Potsdam: Vistas, 1992), 20 und 24f. And Jeremy Butler, *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (New York/ London: Routledge, 2018), 73.

80 Jason Mittell has remarked on the various more or less coherent forms of endings a series can take as a result of this extratextual need for potential perpetuity ranging from an abrupt mid-plotline "stoppage" to the highly marketed "finale" in: *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 319ff.

81 See Mark J.P. Wolf, "Narrative Fabric", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 48.

82 Andreas Jahn-Sudmann and Frank Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung. Amerikanische Fernsehserien und das Konzept des Quality-TV", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Di-*

leter, this dilemma results in a long-running series' tendency towards recursive "one-upmanship" [*Überbietung*] regarding the repetition of its defining textual schemata and its serial competitors.⁸³

Another result of the serial attempt at perpetuity is a successful series' tendency to proliferate and produce diversified continuations, spin-offs, revisions, subgenres, and so on to accommodate accumulating surplus narrative material.⁸⁴ The relocation of a series' breakout characters into a new, independent series is one of the most common examples of this proliferation.

3.5.2 Dramatic Logic: Narrative Composition and Audio-visual Form

Serial narrative's structure is, secondly, governed by the *dramatic logic* of aesthetic composition (both concerning narrative and audio-visual composition). It corresponds to what Sigmund Freud, regarding literature, calls the "real *Ars Poetica*", the 'poet's secret' to structure his*her fantastic creation in a way that will make an audience enjoy an otherwise unrelatable daydream.⁸⁵ Dramatic logic is a liminal phenomenon that governs the arrangement of the signs of an audio-visual text (transmitted by digital or other means) to convey immaterial meanings and construct a series' intrinsic norms in accordance with or contrary to extrinsic norms.

Accordingly, pragmatic logic is essential in establishing a serial narrative as an engaging aesthetic artefact. It serves to, as Sandra Nuy puts it, "organise attention, empathy, and knowledge of the audience and establish meaning"⁸⁶ and determines a narrative's dramatic structure as a "collection of explicit and implicit structural principles for the cohesion of *Geschehen*, *story*, *plot*, and *discourse*".⁸⁷ In audio-visual TV series, the dramatic logics that structure the plot work in conjunction with the principles of the formal composition of images and sound in the presentation of the narrative. As such, TV series' dramatic logic is much more contingent on extratextual, pragmatic factors like laws of nature, budget, or technological affordances than purely text-based forms.

In its determination of the selection, arrangement, and presentation of diegetic events, the requirements of dramatic logic are distinct from the logic of cause and effect that governs historical reality and the conceptually parallel diegesis. In shaping a plot, dramatic rules expand, contract, omit and rearrange events. They cause the delayed

stinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 206.

83 Jahn-Sudmann and Kelleter, "Die Dynamik serieller Überbietung", 207.

84 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 20.

85 Sigmund Freud, "Der Dichter und das Phantasieren", in *Der Dichter und das Phantasieren: Schriften zur Kunst und Kultur* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010), 111. My translation: "die eigentliche *Ars Poetica*".

86 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 12. My translation: "Aufmerksamkeit, Empathie und Wissen des Publikums zu organisieren sowie Sinnhaftigkeit zu etablieren".

87 Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild*, 57. My translation: "Sammlung von expliziten und impliziten Strukturprinzipien für den Zusammenhalt von *Geschehen*, *Story*, *Plot* und *discourse*". Original emphasis.

resolution or the timed escalation of conflicts that would run a much more stringent (albeit less engaging) course if left to the internal logic of historical or diegetic reality. In many popular narratives, dramatic logic strives for “total causality”, creating an “*over-coherence*”⁸⁸ in which all diegetic events and characters are linked by comprehensive chains of cause and effect that audiences can discern. However, particularly with the emergence of more complex TV, this does not necessarily imply – as has been claimed by dismissive critics of popular culture – a lower ‘quality’ of the series or an *undue* narrative reduction to “simple causation chains” and a dramaturgy that exhausts itself “almost entirely in the order of the duel”.⁸⁹

An engaging narrative is usually committed to dramatic logic first and stringent presentation of events second. This order is the reason for Friedrich Schiller’s remark that, in fiction, “only a dilettante borrows from the material a force which he despairs of laying into the form”.⁹⁰

As audio-visual aesthetic artefacts, all TV series contain a large number of “cinematic strategies”.⁹¹ They are formal and diegetic elements of a TV series that serve no intradiegetic purpose but instead exist to communicate meaning to audiences. A typical example of this is the frequent contextualizing dialogue in TV series. It does not exist to further communication between characters but to provide audiences with the necessary information, context, or plot reminders (e.g., after a commercial, episode, or seasonal break). As Marta Dynel points out, “Characters may not talk to us, but they certainly talk for us”.⁹²

Dramatic principles risk appearing at odds with *intradiegetic logic* to the detriment of continuity (particularly in long-running TV series). As Marie-Laure Ryan states

When the actions of characters are too obviously dictated by the interest of the plot, this is perceived as a ‘cheap plot trick’ [...], this is to say, as an authorial failure.⁹³

88 See Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 80. Original emphasis. See also Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 250.

89 Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012) 250. My translation: “Verursachungsketten”, “Dramaturgisch erschöpft es sich nahezu völlig in der Ordnung des Zweikampfs”. He notes and subsequently refutes this claim, see *ibid.* 251ff. For the initial criticism see also Theodor W. Adorno, “Fernsehen als Ideologie”, in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1963), 81–98.

90 Friedrich Schiller, *Ueber das Pathetische in Schillers Werke: Philosophische Schriften: Erster Teil*, vol. 20, Nationalausgabe, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlau, 1962), 219. My translation: “nur der Stümper borgt von dem Stoffe eine Kraft, die er in die Form zu legen verzweifelt”.

91 “‘You talking to me?’ The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse”. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (May 2011): 1632, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>.

92 Dynel, “You talking to me?”, 1642.

93 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative as/and Complex System/s”, in *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 34.

In some cases, the aesthetic conventions of TV's (audio-visual) narration have become so firmly established that audiences no longer perceive them as compositional formulas at all and instead accept them as 'natural' or 'realistic'.⁹⁴ What exactly compositional rules should be like has been a matter of scholarly debate at least since Aristotle's "Poetics".⁹⁵ They do not exist a priori but are themselves emergent and contingent on historic narrative convention, medium, and the activities of a given network. For popular serial storytelling, in general, and serial television fiction, in particular, a host of recurring dynamic aesthetic principles has emerged over the years. This study will examine the prevalence of many of these formal conventions throughout its analyses. However, some basic principles are worth mentioning here because they have long been regarded as being inextricably intertwined with popular seriality and have significant consequences for textual analysis.

3.5.2.1 Innovation, Repetition, and Limitation of Conflict

In order to remain recognisable and appealing to audiences over several episodes and seasons, a series will, as Umberto Eco remarks, contain a significant amount of formal and structural repetition while adding just enough new details to create an engaging sense of novelty. Popular series often achieve this dialectic of "innovation and repetition"⁹⁶ by retaining a basic character constellation and structure of reoccurring interactions (I will model them as *games* in 3.6.2) while varying the details of their individual presentations. As chapter 4 will show, the reoccurring conflict in *THE CROWN*, e.g., is the Windsor family's struggle with their royal role. While the set of characters and the nature of the struggle remain largely unchanged (repetition), the age of the characters and the concrete way in which they experience this struggle varies and usually features additional secondary characters (innovation).

This principle has significant consequences. As long as a TV series aims at retaining its central character ensemble (repetition), it will limit the intensity of its central conflicts to a reversible degree (for more on this, see 3.6.2.1). This limitation allows characters to credibly revert to a state in which they can repeatedly repeat the same structural conflicts. To give an extreme, contrary example: if a mortal character's story arc leads to his*her death, it would be highly at odds with intradiegetic and narrative continuity (though by far not unheard of) to resurrect him*her for the next episode to feature in the same structural conflict again.

Recent, more complex serial storytelling has been more willing to – partly – forego the principle of innovation and repetition and the resulting limitation of conflict. *GAME OF THRONES* (USA, 2011–2019), e.g., gained fame (or notoriety) for frequently and unexpectedly killing off its protagonists. However, the serial principle of innovation and

94 Knut Hickethier, "Serie", in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

95 Aristotle, *Poetik: Griechisch/ Deutsch*, ed. and transl. Manfred Fuhrmann (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014).

96 Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics", *Daedalus* 114, no. 4 (1985): see particularly 167f., 173 for "Dialectic between order and novelty" and 179.

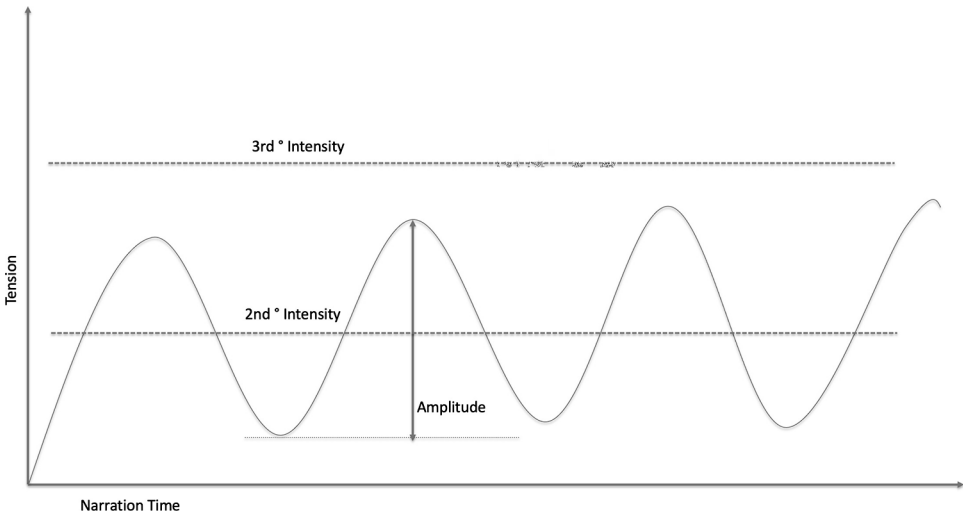
repetition often remains pertinent even when characters are removed or conflicts are resolved. In either case, the series will repeat central structural conflicts with a different set of characters or in a different set of circumstances.

3.5.2.2 Narrative Amplitude and Frequency

Like most popular narratives, series rely on conflict and the pursuit of its resolution to create suspense and engage audiences. However, the delayed resolution of conflict typical for popular serial narratives results in a curve of rising and falling narrative tension that resembles what Umberto Eco describes as a “*sine wave structure*”.⁹⁷ It marks a potentially endless (albeit not necessarily steady) transition from rising suspense to delayed resolution to falling suspense, which, in turn, acts as a starting point for rising tension.

Following F.J.J. Buytendijk’s similar discussion of games, I will call any extent between the narrative equilibrium (o) and any high point within this dynamic of rising and falling tension over time the *amplitude* of a narrative⁹⁸ (see figure 3). An ongoing serial narrative’s amplitude usually does not exceed a certain intensity to enable its own continuation. Likewise, it usually does not fall below a certain level to remain engaging to audiences.

Figure 3: Narrative Amplitude, Frequency, and Intensity



The number of a plotline’s transitions from rising to falling and back to rising tension over a given period of narration time is that plotline’s *frequency*. It is not steady but depends on a plotline’s position in the overall narrative structure.

97 Umberto Eco, “Eugène Sue: Sozialismus und Verdrängung”, in *Literatur für viele 2: Studien zur Trivialliteratur und Massenkommunikation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Helmut Kreuzer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 63. My translation: “Sinuskurven-Struktur”. Original emphasis.

98 Frederik J.J. Buytendijk, *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels: Das Spielen des Menschen und der Tiere als Erscheinungsform der Lebenstriebe* (Berlin: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1933), 126.

3.5.2.3 Transparent Continuity vs Editorial Presence

Notions of a distinctly ‘televisual aesthetic’ have become highly questionable with increasing media, social, and cultural permeability. Nevertheless, I want to distinguish two different approaches to TV’s audio-visual and narrative aesthetics in general. The first aims to create the impression of what Hickethier calls the “transparency of the medium”.⁹⁹ Through “continuity editing”, “invisible editing”,¹⁰⁰ or “invisible dramaturgy”,¹⁰¹ the series’ formal composition is arranged to support and follow the “progression of the story”¹⁰² instead of drawing attention to itself, thus creating effects of realism.

More recently, some TV series (often those supposed to confer cultural capital) have shown an increasing willingness to forego principles of invisible editing. Like cinema before it, contemporary TV has seen a gradual shift towards ways of editing and mise-en-scène that intentionally forego the illusion of a smooth formal-narrative continuum and instead draws attention to the aesthetic, artificial surface of the presentation. Regarding storytelling, Joan Bleicher uses the term “constructed dramaturgy” to describe this phenomenon.¹⁰³ I propose to call the visible emphasis on the constructed artificial surface of a series’ formal composition the *editorial presence*. All editing is, by its very nature, selective and artificial. Therefore, whether something is perceived as invisible editing or editorial presence is ultimately a matter of convention and audiences’ viewing habits. An editorial presence, therefore, requires some notion of formal novelty.

One example of a strong editorial presence are the noticeably static camera setups, consciously ill-timed edits, and conspicuously pastel-coloured sets in the Netflix series *THE POLITICIAN*. The series’ ostentatious (albeit incoherent) formal artificiality supports the narrative’s hyperreal characters and satirical overtones as a formal reference to the films of Wes Anderson (my analysis of the series in chapter 5 will discuss this further).

An example of decreasing editorial presence is the mockumentary style that gained mainstream popularity with the traditionally transgressive comedies of the 2000s and early 2010s, e.g., the polit-comedy *VEEP* (see chapter 5). The traditional mockumentary style’s use of an unsteady camera and the interaction of characters with the camera ‘as if’ they were filming a documentary in a filmic metalepsis that simulates authentication and suggests to the audience a witnessing of the image creation¹⁰⁴ draw significant at-

99 Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

100 Jeremy Butler, *Television: Visual Storytelling and Screen Culture*, 5th ed. (New York/ London: Routledge, 2018), 348.

101 Joan Bleicher, “‘Wer Vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen’: Das Wechselspiel der Emotionen: Spezifika der Fernseh dramaturgie”, in *Der Dramaturgische Blick: Potenziale und Modelle von Dramaturgie im Medienwandel*, ed. Christa Hasche, Eleonore Kalisch, and Thomas Weber (Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2014), 172.

102 Butler, *Television*, 348.

103 Joan Bleicher, “‘Wer Vieles bringt, wird manchem etwas bringen’: Das Wechselspiel der Emotionen: Spezifika der Fernseh dramaturgie”, in *Der Dramaturgische Blick: Potenziale und Modelle von Dramaturgie im Medienwandel*, ed. Christa Hasche, Eleonore Kalisch, and Thomas Weber (Berlin: Avinus Verlag, 2014), 172. My translation: “konstruierte Dramaturgie”.

104 Stefan Hölten, “Metalepse”, *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe*, last modified March 6, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/m:metalepse-2582>.

tention to the series' formal composition. However, having become one of contemporary TV's formal standards, causing the habituation of audiences to the style, the *editorial presence* of the mockumentary has arguably waned in recent years. Indeed, as chapter 5 will discuss further, in the 2010s, the already overused style often emerged merely as a formal reference to evoke an alignment with established comedic conventions but without its previous metaleptic properties.

The more and more pervasive deviations from TV's continuity editing are primarily due to changes in distribution infrastructure with subscription channels and on-demand portals increasing the commercial space for more innovative and complex narratives. However, as my analyses will show, the principle of invisible editing and dramaturgy ultimately remains a pervasive default option even in series with an otherwise strong editorial presence.

3.5.3 Intradiegetic Logic

The *intradiegetic logic* comprises the principles that constitute the fictional world and its characters, the "world logic", as Mark Wolf calls it.¹⁰⁵ These "ontological rules" of the fictional world "specify what can and cannot exist, what is and isn't possible in a particular type of storyworld".¹⁰⁶ As Marie-Laure Ryan,¹⁰⁷ Mark Wolf,¹⁰⁸ Simon Provencher¹⁰⁹ and other scholars of worldbuilding have pointed out, the rules of the imaginary secondary world, by default, follow those of the primary, real world as long as the narrative does not explicitly state otherwise. However, the possibilities for secondary worlds to deviate from the primary world are ultimately limitless.¹¹⁰

It should be noted that, contrary to popular opinion, this potential liberty of fiction ultimately remains in place even if a fictional narrative references a historical precedent (e.g., in bio-series about real historical personalities like *THE CROWN*, or when series draw on historical affordances like a specific culture, places, polity, or event). While they are well within the purview of fiction, deviations from well-known historical precedent usually have to be implicitly justified by evident narrative necessity or a particularly engaging creative variation (which usually creates a strong editorial presence) in order to appeal to audiences.

105 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 53.

106 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Ontological Rules", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 74.

107 Marie-Laure Ryan call this the "Principle of Minimal Departure", in "Fiction, non-factuals, and the principle of minimal departure", *Poetics* 9, no. 4 (August 1980): 403–422, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(80\)90030-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(80)90030-3).

108 Mark J.P. Wolf: "World Design", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 67.

109 David Langon, "World-Building Tools", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018.), 142. He cites Simon Provencher's "Golden Rule of Worldbuilding", which states: "unless specified otherwise, everything inside your world is assumed to behave exactly as it would in the real world". Posted on his blog in 2012, the "golden rule" has been often cited but is no longer available on the original platform.

110 See Ryan, "Ontological Rules", 75ff.

The intradiegetic rules specify not only the functional laws of the fictional world but also the way in which fictional characters would behave ‘if they were real’. Within the fictional world, “Characters think of themselves as freely acting human beings, and they know nothing of authorial designs”.¹¹¹

While its extent may vary, a series’ diegesis, in order to function as an engaging popular fiction, ideally possesses reliable internal consistency¹¹² and is “internally intelligible”,¹¹³ thus conveying what Hills calls “ontological security”.¹¹⁴ In other words, the composition of the fictional world and its inhabitants ideally constitute a comprehensive unit from which the narrative action naturally derives and which hides its underlying dramatic logic. As Ryan puts it:

Narrative is [...] a top-down, centrally controlled system on the level of authorial design, but it must give the impression of an emergent, bottom-up system on the level of plot.¹¹⁵

Extensive intradiegetic logic is an essential feature of engaging popular narratives. The intradiegetic logic of a world extends to and is supported by what Matt Hills has called the hyperdiegesis. The term denotes

the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension.¹¹⁶

For Hills, the existence of a coherent hyperdiegesis (together with “*auteurism*” and an “*endlessly deferred narrative*”) are the common features of texts with cultish fan engagement.¹¹⁷ This assumption references Umberto Eco’s famous discussion of cult texts as providing “a completely furnished world”¹¹⁸ (besides displaying imperfections that enable fans to “break it up” and appropriate it at will and a noticeable “living textuality” making the text the embodiment of literary or cinematic discourse, which cannot be discussed here).¹¹⁹

111 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative as/and Complex System/s”, in *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 33.

112 Mark J.P. Wolf, “World Design”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 72.

113 Lars Konzack, “Subcreation”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 210.

114 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 104.

115 Marie-Laure Ryan, “Narrative as/and Complex System/s”, in *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 34.

116 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 104.

117 Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 98. Original emphasis.

118 Umberto Eco, “Casablanca’: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage”, *SubStance* 14, No. 2, Issue 47 (1985): 3.

119 Eco, “Casablanca”, 4.

A popular series' ongoing attempt at perpetuity causes a steady increase in what Mark Wolf calls the "density of world detail".¹²⁰ This is likewise the case concerning characters and their conflicts. While this increase in density initially contributes to the immersive power of a fictional world, it ultimately reaches a point where (1) the accumulated material can no longer be contained within a narrative structure alone, causing the series to either drop material (potentially damaging continuity) or proliferate by 'outsourcing' core narrative material into new formats;¹²¹ (2) the world's intradiegetic logic no longer allows for a believable repetition of core themes and the continuation of the core narrative. Due to its need to continue in perpetuity, a series thus has the inherent tendency to ultimately reveal the *pragmatic* and *dramatic* designs behind its *intradiegetic logic*. Thus, a series' perpetual continuation must almost inevitably reach the point where it wears out the illusion of the sovereignty of intradiegetic logic. Once the dominance of pragmatic and dramatic principles over the intradiegetic logic becomes visible in the text, the immersive appeal of a serial narrative usually begins to lose its hold over mainstream audiences.

3.5.4 Recalibration vs Development

I propose distinguishing between two types of serial narrative progression contingent on the respective motivating logic: *recalibration* and *development*. Both terms describe the serial evolution of diegetic events, characters, or circumstances. In both cases, these changes become tangible via the plot and can be accompanied by a change in a series' formal composition.

A *development* describes the evolution of a fictional character, event, or circumstance according to intradiegetic logic, that is, as a result of a coherent diegetic chain of cause and effect.

A *recalibration* is a change of plot, a fictional character, event or diegetic circumstances that primarily follows *pragmatic* or *dramatic* logic.

This distinction is essential for describing contingent serial texts. In long-running series, recalibrations are an omnipresent phenomenon that can sometimes dominate the plot more forcefully than actual character development. One example, which this study will discuss in some detail, is the recalibration of HoC's final season six and its replacement of former protagonist Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) with the series' previous deuteragonist Claire Underwood (Robin Wright). The reason for this adjustment does not derive from intradiegetic necessity: No diegetic development at the end of HoC's fifth season had suggested the departure of its protagonist. Frank Underwood's death is exclusively the result of actor Kevin Spacey's dismissal from the series following allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse (see chapter 8).

Another example of a recalibration that is particularly prevalent in long-running series are what William Proctor describes as "reboots" and "retcons" (a portmanteau for

120 Mark J.P. Wolf, "World Design", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 68.

121 See Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 20.

“retroactive continuity”), which cause the complete or partial revision of “pre-established ‘facts’ about an imaginary world”.¹²² A reboot deletes the previously established narrative state of affairs to resume a story from the beginning. A retcon serves to revise parts of the narrative past in order to align it with the narrative present or intended future and thus retroactively establish narrative continuity.¹²³

It is important to note that a recalibration can – and ideally does – correspond to both dramatic and intradiegetic logic. However, recalibrations can (and often do) appear as a break with both. I, therefore, propose to distinguish between *soft recalibrations* and *hard recalibrations*.

In a *hard recalibration*, the implemented changes are not disguised by intradiegetic adjustment. A typical example is the departure of a screen actor (thespian). In a hard recalibration, the character is either removed from the narrative without a satisfying diegetic explanation or retained but played by another screen actor without providing an explanation for his/her changed appearance.

Any hard recalibration is a risky undertaking, especially in a long-running series. It disrupts narrative coherence and destroys the discursive illusion of a fictional world’s shared ownership between authorial entities and audiences. In the conflictive relationships within a series’ network, a hard recalibration essentially constitutes an unconcealed act of extratextual sovereignty on the part of the authorial entities. As such, it usually reveals the asymmetrical distribution of power within a TV series’ network. This often irritates even less-involved audiences and usually highly upsets more involved fans.

The second *soft* option for recalibration is to provide the disruptive adjustment with an explanation that pays tribute to dramatic and intradiegetic logic. A soft recalibration will often come with the creation of intradiegetic reasons for the pragmatic adjustment in question. In HoC, for example, the disappearance of the series’ protagonist was framed as a mysterious death.

While ultimately still a sovereign act by the production entities, a soft recalibration constitutes a noticeable concession to narrative coherence and the position and ‘rights’ of engaged audiences within the series’ network. Therefore, while a soft recalibration still disrupts narrative coherence, it is usually met with more favourable reactions from audiences than a hard recalibration. A reboot is always a hard recalibration. A retcon can disguise as a soft recalibration, but it will usually be perceived as a hard recalibration by engaged audiences because it disrupts narrative continuity. However, this does not mean that recalibrations are necessarily a weakening factor in any series. In the potentially perpetual narratives of popular seriality, recalibrations are a necessary evil that ensures narrative continuation. Reboots and retcons, e.g., aid as “strategies of regeneration”¹²⁴ for the intradiegetic and narrative continuity of long-running series that would otherwise continue to be diluted by the continuous addition of material. Other recalibrations, such

122 William Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 224.

123 Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, 230.

124 William Proctor, “Reboots and Retroactive Continuity”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 233.

as the replacement of a character, enable the series' network to react to historical developments that are adverse to their continuation.

3.6 Actors, Games, and Players

It is crucial, at this stage, to take a closer look at the fictional and historical actors that constitute the dynamic network of a TV series. This section will first elaborate on the status of fictional characters as diegetic actors. Following popular series' dramatic requirement of creating a coherent plot with repetitive structural characteristics, the actions of fictional characters usually occur in regular, interactional, and clearly discernible cause-and-effect chains, which this thesis proposes to model as structural *games*. The second part of this section will differentiate the historical actors' part in determining each other and the text.

3.6.1 Diegetic Actors

Actors on the diegetic plain of a TV series' network are the fictional characters as part of "dynamic interactional structures".¹²⁵ A few words must be said about the "curious ontological status"¹²⁶ that fictional characters occupy. This step is necessary to establish how fictional characters, as non-real agglomerations of signs, attain the agency required to become actors in the first place. What is the source of, as Albrecht Koschorke puts it, this "animism that inspires all [fictional] beings and equips them with the power to act"?¹²⁷

A fictional world consists of, as Eugen Fink notes regarding games, "subjective fantastic and objective, ontic elements".¹²⁸ With regards to a fictional TV series, these objective, ontic elements comprise the digitised codes that determine the audio-visual signs that, in turn, convey a narrative and its characters. Furthermore, the material ontic elements consist of the hard drives that store these codes as data sets, the technological infrastructure needed to distribute this data, the hardware necessary to decode it, and the hardware used to display the resulting audio-visual signs. However, fictional characters transcend these material circumstances.¹²⁹

Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider define fictional characters as "entities in fictional worlds which are brought forth through signs, but are not identical with those

125 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 232. My translation: "dynamische Interaktionsstrukturen".

126 Mark J.P. Wolf, "Virtual Worlds", in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192.

127 Albrecht Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung: Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, 2nd ed (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2012), 79. My translation: "Das Erzählen steht so im Bund mit einem Animismus, der alle Wesen beseelt und mit Handlungsmacht ausstattet".

128 Eugen Fink, *Oase des Glücks: Gedanken zu einer Ontologie des Spiels* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1957), 46. My translation: "Die Spielwelt enthält subjektive Phantasieelemente und objektive, ontische Elemente".

129 See, e.g., Wolf, "Virtual Worlds", 192.

signs.”¹³⁰ Instead, fictional characters come to life, together with the rest of the diegesis, through the interpretative “actualisation”¹³¹ of audio-visual signs through the active “mental participation of a recipient”.¹³² As David Bordwell puts it, “The text is inert until a reader or listener or spectator does something to and with it”.¹³³

Reader response criticism¹³⁴ has shown the role of the interpreting recipient, or the “Lector in Fabula”,¹³⁵ as the entity charged with finalizing and realizing a unique version of a fictional universe by interpreting a text’s given signs in accordance with intrinsic and extrinsic norms. In what came to be known as cognitive poetics for film, David Bordwell has named a similar conceptual entity the “viewer” or “spectator”.¹³⁶ For my analytical model, I will – for the moment – acknowledge and then sideline more conceptual notions of the interpreting recipient and assume the empirical recipients as carriers of the conceptual burden of interpretative actualization (see figure 4).

Fink states, “The Chimaera and other mythological creatures do not exist, but there is the poetic phantasy-production of such creatures, a real consciousness of unreal content”.¹³⁷ In the guided imagination of audiences, a character and his*her world move from non-existence to the liminal state of discursive conceptual being. Fictional characters are, to say it with Wolfgang Iser, “form without reality”.¹³⁸

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- 130 Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction”, in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 17. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110232424>.
- 131 As claimed by reader-response criticism: see e.g., Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 229. My translation: “Aktualisierung”.
- 132 Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 41. My translation: “mentalen Mitarbeit des Rezipierenden”. Original emphasis.
- 133 David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, 1st HUP paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 3.
- 134 See e.g., Wolfgang Iser, “Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa”, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 229; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 107; see also Roland Barthes conception of texts after the ‘death’ of the author, in Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, transl. Stephen Heath, 142–148 (London: Fontana Press, 1977).
- 135 Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: Die Mitarbeit der Interpretation in erzählenden Texten*, transl. Heinz-Georg Held (Munich/ Vienna: Hanser, 1987).
- 136 David, Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 30.
- 137 Eugen Fink, *Spiel als Weltsymbol* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960), 72. My translation: “Es gibt nicht die Chimaira und andere Fabelwesen, aber es gibt die poetische Phantasieproduktion solcher Fabelwesen, ein wirkliches Bewußtsein von unwirklichem Inhalt”.
- 138 Iser, “Appellstruktur”, 231. My translation: “[Fiktion ist] Form ohne Realität”.

tions based on fictional texts".¹⁴⁰ They come into being through a diverse set of communications between production entities and audiences,¹⁴¹ e.g., by way of the textual code, paratexts or fan activity. The signs that denote a fictional character (or world) at any given moment of narrative reception are predetermined and finite. However, as communicative artefacts, the resulting characters are emergent entities and retain, as Eder puts it, the "ability for mental intentionality".¹⁴² In other words, fictional characters possess agency within the imaginative realm because audiences imagine them to do so.

From an extratextual perspective, fictional characters are, therefore, discursive macro actors that transcend ontological planes. Their agency, however, only exists within the confines of the diegesis. Outside the diegesis, fictional characters, or "Figures", as Manfred Pfister calls them, are not autonomous but "intentional construct[s]" defined by their fictional context and the dramatic function they serve¹⁴³ and thus adhere to *dramatic* instead of *intradiegetic* logic.

As part of narrative composition, characters can be (1) *static*,¹⁴⁴ meaning they do not undergo significant development relevant to the story, or (2) *dynamic*, meaning their development is central to the story.¹⁴⁵ In serial narratives, static characters can still change – and in long-running series, they often do – but this adjustment occurs through *hard* or *soft recalibration*, not *intradiegetic development*. According to the principle of innovation and repetition, many series feature more or less static characters who interact in "dynamic relationships" instead of changing themselves.¹⁴⁶ These relationships create an engaging 'illusion of change' by dynamizing the social periphery of a character instead of the character him*herself, as I will show in my analysis of the recalibrated sixth season of HoC (see chapter 8). In other words: the conflicts change, but the character does not.

3.6.2 Modelling Diegetic Interactions: *Games and Players*

Manfred Pfister suggests that fictional characters can be regarded "as a system of corresponding and contrasting relations".¹⁴⁷ Forming a narrative's "agential constellation",¹⁴⁸ they influence each other according to their position as protagonists, secondary characters, or background characters. As a dramatic medium, popular television series

140 Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2008), 64. My translation: "Fiktive Wesen". 68. My translation: "Fiktive Wesen sind kommunikative Artefakte, die durch die intersubjektive Konstruktion von Figurenvorstellungen auf der Grundlage fiktionaler Texte entstehen".

141 Eder, *Die Figur im Film*, 69–71.

142 Eder, *Die Figur im Film*, 64. My translation: "der Fähigkeit zu mentaler Intentionalität".

143 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 221. My translation: "ein intentionales Konstrukt".

144 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 241f.

145 Pfister, *Das Drama*, 242f.

146 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 137.

147 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: UTB, 2001), 225. My translation: "ein System von Korrespondenz- und Kontrastrelationen".

148 Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 97.

construct and convey their plot primarily through the actions of fictional characters. As Lubomír Doležel notes, “The semantics of narrative is, at its core, the semantics of interaction”.¹⁴⁹ Although Engell, in his discussion of serial causality, suggests that serial TV storytelling exceeds simple diegetic and visual “Causation chains”,¹⁵⁰ describing diegetic interactional structures remains central to the textual analysis of a series.

Fictional characters only possess the necessary agency and intentionality to become actors when viewed as part of the diegesis. However, as they usually serve the dramatic purpose of conveying the plot, intradiegetic interactions will almost always be rule-based and regular. Furthermore, the textual data that constitutes fictional characters and their interactions are finite and, at least in popular narratives, usually clearly accessible to extratextual observers.¹⁵¹ Theoretically limitless intradiegetic games become limited structural phenomena when viewed from an extratextual perspective.

As fictional characters behave according to the triple set of narrative logics (intradiegetic, dramatic, pragmatic), modelling their intradiegetic interactions becomes a helpful tool for the overall textual analysis. A descriptive model (1) can illustrate specific narrative patterns and allow inferences about the intradiegetic and dramatic logics that shape them; (2) it highlights extratextual intervention into the narrative, especially in cases where textual elements diverge from intradiegetic or dramatic logic, thus allowing additional inferences on the respective series’ network.

Given their time-tested usefulness in modelling complex interactional structures, I propose to describe character interactions as *games*.¹⁵² In a first definition, all regular and recurring diegetic interactions between two or more fictional (macro or micro) Actors shall constitute a *game*. As regular agential patterns, games serve to convey the plot. Not all games in a given narrative become dominant narrative patterns. However, the (popular) dramatic logic of narrative economy that derives from a text’s limited ability to contain and convey data suggest that a well-established game will usually serve an essential function within the plot.

All diegetic actors involved in a distinct, regular and ongoing interaction chain shall be called *players* of that game. A game can feature a set of recurring or changing players and remain the same game as long as it features the same interactional patterns between

149 Doležel, *Heterocosmica*, 97.

150 Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 250. My translation: “Verusachungsketten”. For his discussion see 251ff.

151 See a similar reasoning for the use of the play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” as an illustrative example for psychological analysis of communication structures in Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson, “Kommunikationsstrukturen im Theaterstück ‘Wer hat Angst vor Virginia Woolf’”, in *Menschliche Kommunikation: Formen, Störungen, Paradoxien*, ed. Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, Don D. Jackson (Bern/Stuttgart: Hans Huber, 1969), 138f.

152 The general idea to apply structural game approach to serial narrative has more recently also been suggested, e.g., by Thomas Klein, in “Diskurs und Spiel: Überlegungen zu einer medienwissenschaftlichen Theorie serieller Komplexität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 235f. I have applied a precursor to the approach proposed in the following sections in my master’s thesis: Sebastian Naumann, “HBO’s ‘Girls’ and the Presentation of the Generation Y”, unpublished Master’s Thesis, Humboldt University Berlin. 2016.

players who figure the same set of *actants*. According to Algirdas Julien Greimas, actants are fundamental roles or “classifications of actors”,¹⁵³ or, following Bruno Latour and ANT, actors without a precise figuration.¹⁵⁴ However, other than Greimas’ structural semantics, I do not introduce the term *actant* for its presumed role as the constituent parts of a narrative deep structure. Instead, I use it as a purely descriptive entity to denote a formal role serving a predetermined compositional purpose within a fictional interactional game that needs to be filled by a concrete actor (or player) to come into existence. This means, however, that games can transcend both individual players and individual texts.

Dominant games in classic monster-of-the-week series, e.g., often consist of a static main player (the series’ protagonist) who engages with a chain of different antagonists that figure the same actant (a somehow characterised antagonist) in the same repetitive game. Anthology series likewise often use a thematic frame and reoccurring games to create intra-serial continuity despite changes in plot and ensemble.

The individual actions of any player, so long as they form part of a game, shall be called *moves* (see figure 4). Following psychological Transaction Analysis (TA), an exchange of moves between players can be described as a *transaction*, that is, an exchange of stimulus and response.¹⁵⁵ As Eric Berne states, transactions are the “unit of social intercourse”¹⁵⁶ and usually unfold as chains in which each response becomes, in turn, a new stimulus for another response.¹⁵⁷ In his study of serial causality, Engell notes the various dismissive assumptions of TV series’ diegetic and formal focus on “stimulus-response-chains”.¹⁵⁸ However, I postulate that their undoubted existence in the dramatic medium of TV, by no means, presupposes a somehow reduced narrative complexity, depth or ‘quality’. Instead, I claim their usefulness for the illustrative analysis of narrative TV texts of varying complexity.

Berne introduces a complex set of distinct transactions that I want to adapt for my model due to its high descriptive value. According to TA, each player acts from one of three different “ego states”. For Berne, ego states are systems “of feelings accompanied by a related set of behaviour patterns”.¹⁵⁹ They determine how a player sends and receives a transactional stimulus. Berne describes the three ego states as (1) “ego states which resemble those of parental figures”, (2) “ego states which are autonomously directed toward an objective appraisal of reality”, and (3) ego states “which represent archaic relics, still-

153 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, transl. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 200.

154 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71.

155 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 29.

156 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29.

157 Berne, *Games People Play*, 30.

158 Lorenz Engell, “Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 250. My translation: “Reiz-Reaktions-Ketten”. He goes on to contextualize and partly refute these dismissive claims.

159 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

active ego states which were fixated in early childhood".¹⁶⁰ Technically called "extero-psy-chic", "neopsy-chic", and "archaeopsy-chic", this study shall follow Berne's suggestions and name the states "*Parent, Adult and Child*".¹⁶¹

Individual players will 'act out' the behavioural patterns determined by the three ego states in different ways, taking on a *role* in a game.¹⁶² A role is, as Berne notes, "something like what Jung calls persona, except that it is less opportunistic and more deeply rooted in the individual's fantasies".¹⁶³ A player taking a parental position, for example, may take on the role of "tough", "righteous", "helpful", or "indulgent" Parent,¹⁶⁴ thus causing very different effects within their respective games.

TA further distinguishes different types of transactions that take place along "nine possible vectors of social action between an agent and a respondent".¹⁶⁵ Accordingly, transactions can occur between varying ego states and be complementary or crossed¹⁶⁶ and either simple or ulterior.¹⁶⁷

Transactions are *complementary* if the ego state responding to a transactional stimulus corresponds to the ego state to whom the stimulus had been sent.¹⁶⁸ Some (fictional) examples based on the player ensemble of *THE CROWN* – the series features as my first subject of analysis – will illustrate this. If Queen Elizabeth II tells off her unruly sister Margaret, she initiates a transaction from her Parent to Margaret's Child. If Margaret's Child, in turn, executes the response, e.g., in the shape of one of her frequent unproductive complaints about her sister's emotional coldness, the Parent-Child transaction is complementary and the chain of alternate stimulus and response continues.

Transactions are *crossed* if the responding ego state is not the one for whom the transactional stimulus was intended.¹⁶⁹ Suppose Elizabeth II engages her younger sister in a discussion about royal duty, thus initiating an Adult-Adult transaction. In that case, the communication will fail if Margaret's transactional response is, again, executed by her Child and addressed to Elizabeth's Parent, e.g., by Margaret justifying her failure to fulfil her sister's presumed expectations. In such a case, one player will either adjust his* her ego state into a complementary position or see the transaction fail.¹⁷⁰ Either Margaret stops justifying herself and starts contributing her thoughts about royal duty (switching to her Adult), or Elizabeth takes on a parental role and tells Margaret what she expects of her.

160 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

161 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23. My emphasis.

162 See Berne, *Games People Play*, 45 and 54.

163 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45.

164 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45.

165 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 32.

166 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29ff.

167 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33f.

168 Berne, *Games People Play*, 29f.

169 Berne, *Games People Play*, 30ff.

170 See Berne, *Games People Play*, 31f.

Other than simple transactions, *ulterior transactions* are “those involving the activity of more than two ego states simultaneously”.¹⁷¹ Ulterior transactions consist of a superficial transaction between ego states on a tangible “social” vector and a more impactful second transaction on an “ulterior, or psychological vector”.¹⁷² They divide into angular and duplex transactions. Angular transactions comprise the interaction of three ego states across the social and ulterior levels, and duplex transactions involve four ego states across the two levels.¹⁷³

If Elizabeth II ostensibly engages her sister in a discussion of royal duty (social vector: Adult-Adult) but really uses this opportunity to demonstrate Margaret’s failure to comply with house rules and thus manipulate her into fulfilling royal expectations (ulterior vector: Adult-Child), we have an angular transaction. We have a duplex transaction if Elizabeth successfully uses the ostensibly coequal conversation about royal duty (social vector: Adult-Adult) to implicitly lecture her sister about her failure, thus ensuring her submission (ulterior vector: Parent-Child).

In TA, the ulterior transactions generally form the “basis for games”.¹⁷⁴ However, for narrative analysis, all transactional chains shall be games if they occur as regular, established patterns between players, or as Berne puts it, if they are “not random, but are programmed”.¹⁷⁵

I will call the combination of a game’s fixed set of players (or actants) and the rules that govern their interactions a game’s *configuration*. The set of assembled games that connect a character ensemble will be the narrative’s *character configuration*. Following the serial rule of repetition and innovation, most popular TV series feature a relatively stable character configuration. However, in long-running series, the configuration usually becomes the subject of frequent recalibration.

Many games have become established narrative templates that are easily recognised by audiences and often serve as shortcuts inducing inferences about characters, constellations, and events. However, despite their, at times, formulaic character, audiences will rarely perceive games as formulas at all.¹⁷⁶ On the contrary: because many games have become such well-established narrative conventions, they often appear to audiences as synonymous with storytelling and, in some cases, even reality. However, *games* are in no way self-evident or universal textual phenomena in the tradition of archetypal criticism.¹⁷⁷ The recurring games this study will identify are present in many popular serial narratives simply by virtue of convention and because of their ability to accommodate the various requirements of popular serial storytelling in sustaining an ongoing and engaging narrative (some examples for this will follow shortly).

171 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33.

172 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33. Original emphasis.

173 Berne, *Games People Play*, 33.

174 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 33.

175 Berne, *Games People Play*, 35.

176 See Knut Hickethier’s concept of the “Transparency of the medium” and TV’s distinct “Appearance of reality” [*Realitätsschein*]: Knut Hickethier, “Serie”, in *Handbuch Populäre Kultur: Begriffe, Theorien und Diskussionen*, ed. Hans-Otto Hügel (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler/Springer, 2003), 402.

177 See M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 12–14.

It is crucial to distinguish *games* and *plotlines* as well as fictional characters as *players* and as *elements of a narrative composition*. A game is a rule-based, ongoing transactional pattern within a narrative. The plot and its plotlines, on the other hand, consist of various games presented in a dramatic structure. As a game's protagonist, a player is the central player of that interactional configuration. However, this does not imply a central role in a given narrative and is not necessarily congruent with his*her purpose in the overall narrative composition. A narrative protagonist may be a central figure within the series' plot; however, within any given game, he*she can be a relatively minor player or not appear at all.

3.6.2.1 Properties of Games

Every game is defined by a set of factors that I will call the *properties of a game*. (1) Following Eric Berne, every game possesses an *intensity*¹⁷⁸ (see figure 3). The intensity increases in degrees from one to three depending on the consequences that victory and defeat have for a player. A defeat in a game of *first-degree intensity* means only minor irritations. A defeat in a game of *second-degree intensity* causes significant disruption, but this disruption is still reversible. A defeat in a game of *third-degree intensity* has final consequences: the most common being death.¹⁷⁹

The intensity of a game can be different for different players involved. Indeed, the difference in intensity within the same game is often a source of dramatic suspense, comedy, or tragedy. Some examples: Harjo Eichwald's (EICHWALD, MDB) quarrels with his party leader are of the highest importance to him but of little to no importance to her (3rd-degree intensity vs 1st-degree intensity), resulting in a comical Parent-Child dynamic between the two (see chapter 5). Elizabeth II's (THE CROWN) struggle for the right to choose her private secretary¹⁸⁰ is a question of personal convenience for herself (2nd degree), of life-changing importance to the candidates (3rd degree), and absolutely no relevance to Downing Street (1st-degree). For Frank and Claire Underwood (HoC), the battle for political supremacy is a game of life and death and, therefore, of 3rd-degree intensity, even though not all players are aware of this intensity.

The intensity of games involving central characters can become essential in measuring a narrative's structural continuity. Audiences will usually expect games involving central characters and displaying a high intensity to also feature prominently in the plot. If highly intense games fail to take a prominent narrative position, audiences will often perceive this as a compositional imbalance.

178 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th edition (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 63f.

179 Berne, *Games People Play*, 64.

180 In *The Crown*, season 1, episode 7, "Scientia Potentia Est", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, [https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80025678](https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20crown%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C501031dc-525c-4272-9a4f-17f162718519-1055847%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80025678).

The (2) property of a game is its *cooperative* or *uncooperative character*, a distinction that derives from mathematical game theory.¹⁸¹ Whether a game is cooperative or uncooperative is not determined by its players' good- or ill-faith but by its structure: In a cooperative game, the rules can be enforced by an entity of higher order. In uncooperative games, no mechanism of a higher order can ensure that the rules of a given game remain intact.¹⁸²

For the analysis, this is relevant both with regards to intradiegetic and dramatic logic. Games can be uncooperative on a diegetic level, meaning the players are not held accountable for their actions. However, dramatic logic can (and traditionally often does) impose a cooperative structure on a diegetically uncooperative game, e.g., by ensuring that righteous characters are rewarded and evil ones punished by the end of a narrative through a recalibration.

Cooperative games have been the narrative standard for the longer part of fiction's known history. In classic myth and literature, a divine order often guarantees the enforcement of fundamental rules (perhaps with the exception of trickster characters). Ancient Greek mythology, e.g., prominently features a set of unshakeable cosmical laws that bind mortals and gods alike.

In much of classic literature and popular entertainment, diegetically uncooperative games find themselves offset by dramatic intervention, which ensures that there is just punishment for the villain – no matter his*her superior slyness – and a – at least moral – victory for the hero*ine. The dissolution of the divine order and, subsequently, of other common sets of universal values throughout modernity has arguably resulted in a recession of cooperative games.

More recent popular fiction aiming at audiences with high cultural capital often extends the uncooperative principle from diegetic anti-heroes who break the rules and get away with it to an extradiegetic logic that no longer promises audiences a resolution that reinforces a common set of values. In prestige contemporary fiction, evil no longer has to fear eventual retribution. Series like *GAME OF THRONES*, e.g., have made it their distinctive quality to feature a set of games in which no player is safe from potential 3rd-degree consequences. *HoC*, likewise, ends with a 3rd-degree purge of much of the series' previous tritagonists (see chapter 8).

Uncooperative games seem especially suited for the structural requirements of serial narrative with its need for potential perpetuity. In series that have to continue indefinitely, central anti-heroes and villainous antagonists often cannot be brought to justice for their rule-breaking because they are needed for the games to come.

It should be noted that players can either participate in a game in accordance with its rules as *adjusted players* or attempt to change the game by modifying its rules as *creative players*. *Creative* participation in a game can have a constructive or destructive quality. However, successfully creative players will always produce a new game. Popular serial narratives will usually feature limited *player creativity* to retain their serial coherence and appeal, depending on the degree of repetition.

181 Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, s.v. "Spieltheorie", ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394.

182 Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", 1394.

3.6.2.2 Examples of Fundamental Games

This study will examine many of the more prominent games in popular seriality in its analyses. However, some games are so fundamental to popular serial storytelling and fictional politics that I want to mention them in advance. These fundamental games often appear in conjunction with other more specific games.

3.6.2.2.1 The Zero-Sum Game

A helpful notion I want to borrow from mathematical game theory is the concept of the *Zero-Sum* game. The term denotes a game in which one player's gain has to be balanced by the loss of another.¹⁸³ In a narrative game with a *zero-sum* structure, this dynamic of proportional 'gain' and 'loss' can refer to either soft or hard power or all types of capital, be it economic, social, cultural or symbolic. *Zero-Sum* structures can underly intradiegetic games or be implicit in a narrative's dramatic structure.

In popular fictional narratives, with their structural tendency towards over-causality, players' correlated gains and losses usually result from a clearly identifiable cause-and-effect chain within a limited set of games involving these players (often just one). Some examples: If *SLUHA NARODU*'s protagonist Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko wants to win the presidency and reform Ukraine, the sinister oligarchs that oppose him must lose power and wealth in equal measure and through Holoborodko's actions. If *THE CROWN*'s Elizabeth II wants to come into her own as queen, she needs to reduce the influence of her influential advisors. If *VEEP*'s Selina Meyer and *EICHWALD*, *MDB*'s Harjo Eichwald suffer continuous humiliation and defeat, there need to be (and are) discernible actors who will *do* the humiliating and defeating and profit from it in equal measure.

A *Zero-Sum* game forcibly needs a winner and a loser and thus manifests in an *agonal* structure, that is, as an open or hidden, conscious or unconscious competition.¹⁸⁴ 'Agon' is one of the guiding principles of almost all popular fiction because it creates a clearly discernible protagonist-antagonist structure around a recognisable, competitive conflict.

An agonal game must not forcibly be a *Zero-Sum* game. There are many competitive situations where the winner's gain is independent of his*her competitors' status. In a foot race, e.g., the speed of the fastest runner does not decrease that of his*her competitors, nor is he*she usually compensated for his*her win from the competitors' personal properties. However, in popular storytelling, the zero-sum structure is arguably the agonal motif that provides the strongest and most easily recognisable motivation for characters to engage in high-intensity conflict as it infuses a competitive situation with personal stakes. Therefore, the general dramatic logic of popular storytelling often causes fictional politics to appear as a (frequently uncooperative) *Zero-Sum* game.

183 Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394. For its origins in mathematical game theory see John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 85ff.

184 Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 35ff.

In polit-fiction, zero-sum Agon is a particularly prevalent principle. This is partly due to politics' agonal properties as the process of negotiating the distribution of power. For Roger Cailliois, Agon is the main principle for the organisation of the selection of (real and fictional) politicians.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the necessity of a certain degree of struggle in attaining power is widely accepted. However, the degree of intensity appropriate for these agonal struggles is far less clear. The presentation of fictional politics in a zero-sum structure turns it from a competition into an antagonistic struggle with high personal stakes.

Jöran Klatt argues that the zero-sum motif in contemporary series like *HoC* points toward an internalisation of neoliberal principles according to which the world's natural state is itself an agonal *Zero-Sum* game.¹⁸⁶ Remarkably, many audiences throughout the 2010s have perceived the narrative convention of the *Zero-Sum* game as a compelling and 'realistic' portrayal of politics and, indeed, the state of the world. My analyses will examine this further. However, this symptomatic reading neglects the dramatic logic of fictional narrative itself. To a certain extent, the zero-sum structure is not a marker for sociocultural currents but simply follows the dramatic requirements of popular fictional narratives to create engaging, personalized conflict. My analyses will examine this further.

3.6.2.2.2 The Coming-of-Age Game

One of the most common tropes of popular storytelling is the *Coming-of-Age* game (CoA game).¹⁸⁷ It occurs in both character-based and action-based narratives (albeit in different forms) and demonstrates a character's transition from outsider to insider and his*her development of a consolidated self through structured interactions with other characters.

Developmental psychology describes the often-painful process of creating an identity as – to put it simply – integrating personal needs, abilities, other constitutive psychological mechanisms and external conditions.¹⁸⁸ For literature, G.W.F. Hegel accordingly describes the fictional coming-of-age process in a very similar way. He states:

One of the most common and most suitable collisions for the novel is, therefore, the conflict between the heart's poetry and the opposing prose of reality's conditions.¹⁸⁹

185 Cailliois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen*, 138f.

186 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>.

187 See, for example remarks on the commonness of the Bildungsroman (as a hypostasis of the CoA motif) in Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, "Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction", in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 43.

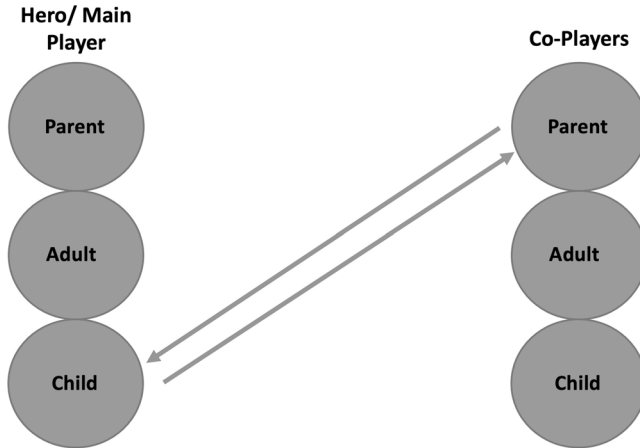
188 Erik Erikson, *Der vollständige Lebenszyklus*, transl. Waltrud Klüwer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), 96. He writes about "eine Konfiguration, die allmählich konstitutionelle Gegebenheiten, höchst persönliche Bedürfnisse, bevorzugte Fähigkeiten, wichtige Identifikationen, wirksame Abwehren, erfolgreiche Sublimierungen und konsequente Rollen integriert".

189 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: "Eine der gewöhnlichsten

According to psychology, the struggle for identity is the main task in transitioning from the psycho-social phase of adolescence to that of adulthood in the epigenetic process of human development.¹⁹⁰ As a fictional trope, the CoA game thus narratively mimics (and simplifies) the psychological process of transitioning from psycho-social adolescence to adulthood independent of a respective fictional character's physical age.

Like most internal processes, the demonstrative audio-visual medium of popular TV usually expresses this development through characters' external actions. The CoA game consists of two consecutive sets of complementary transactions between the main player and his*her co-player(s). The first involves simple or ulterior Child (*protagonist*)-Parent (*co-player*) transactions and serves to establish the main player as pre-coming-of-age (see figure 5). The second game consists of either Adult-Adult or Parent-Child transactions between the main player and his*her co-player(s) (see figure 6). It illustrates the character's post-coming-of-age status to audiences.

Figure 5: Pre-Coming-of-Age



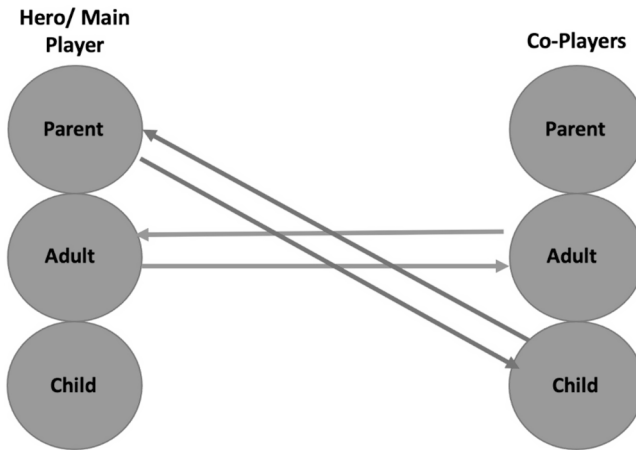
A CoA game that ends in an Adult-Adult configuration usually indicates a character's peaceful integration into his*her environment. A CoA game ending in a Parent (*protagonist*)-Child (*co-player*) configuration and thus a reversal of the game's initial structure usually indicates an (intradiegetic or dramatic) *Zero-Sum* game in which the developing hero*ine overcomes and diminishes former mentor figures. An example of the former is THE POLITICIAN's protagonist Payton Hobart. After unexpectedly winning a crucial election, he teams up with his experienced older competitor Dede Standish to form an alliance of equals (see chapter 5). Elizabeth II's relationship with Winston Churchill in THE

und für den Roman passendsten Kollisionen ist deshalb der Konflikt zwischen der Poesie des Herzens und der entgegenstehenden Prosa der Verhältnisse [...].

190 Erikson, *Der vollständige Lebenszyklus*, 36f, 70, and 94ff. See also: Erik Erikson, "Wachstum und Krisen der gesunden Persönlichkeit", in *Identität und Lebenszyklus: Drei Aufsätze*, 2nd edition (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), 106f.

CROWN is an example of the latter. As my analysis (chapter 4) will show, *her* growing into the role of Queen is accompanied by *his* proportional physical and mental deterioration.

Figure 6: Post-Coming-of-Age



As mentioned above, the coming-of-age motif is a common trope in fiction. One famous example is the rites-of-passage dynamic in Joseph Campbell's *Monomyth*. He names the transition of separation, initiation, and return as the “nuclear unit of the monomyth”.¹⁹¹ Another example is the classic *bildungsroman*, which shows a protagonist growing up from childhood to adolescence and adulthood in a “succession of stages”.¹⁹² These include the

development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood [...] into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world.¹⁹³

One of the reasons for the prevalence of this motif within fiction is the peculiar parallelism of perspectives between the coming-of-age hero and the reader/audience. Both initially face the similar task of getting to know a set of fictional characters and an unknown (fictional) world. This becomes particularly clear in highly divergent secondary worlds, where, as Lily Alexander notes, the audience sees the new world through the eyes of the “traveler” for the first time.¹⁹⁴ The coming-of-age character thus becomes the ves-

191 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Commemorative ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.

192 Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, “Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction”, in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and other Media*, ed. Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 43.

193 Meyer Howard Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999), 193.

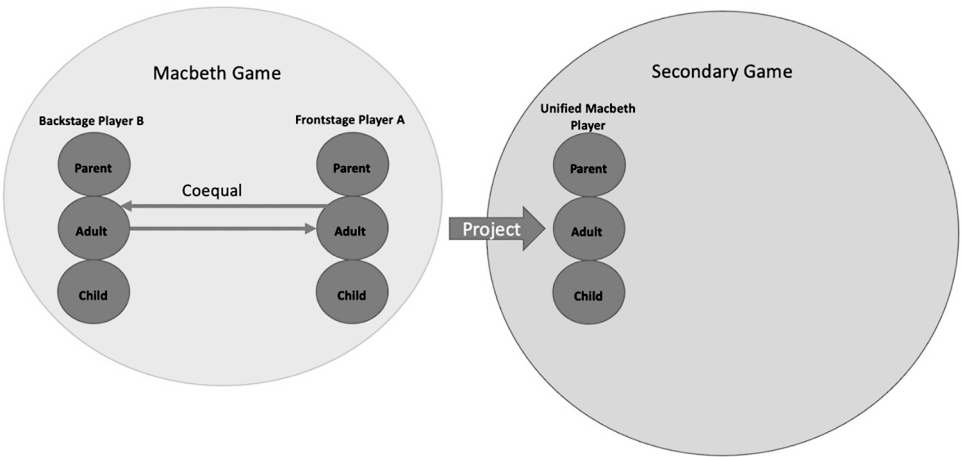
194 Lily Alexander, “The Hero's Journey”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 11.

sel for the audience into the diegesis and the story. As he*she explores the new world, so do audiences.

3.6.2.2.3 The Macbeth Game

The *Macbeth* game roughly follows the structural configuration of the infamous anti-heroes Lord and Lady Macbeth in William Shakespeare's homonymous play. A common trope in fiction, it usually includes two allied players who join forces against a third party (or parties), forming a transactional unit for participation in secondary diegetic games (see figure 7).

Figure 7: The Simple Macbeth Game



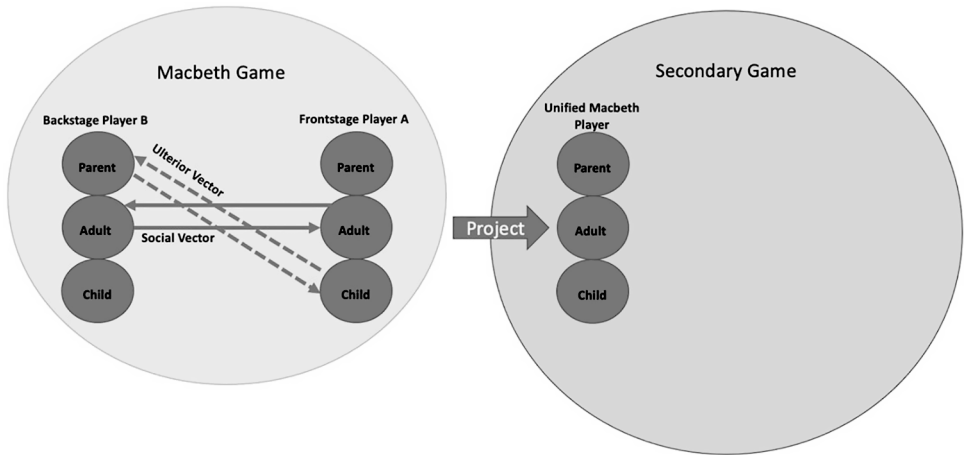
The allied players in the *Macbeth* game split into a frontstage player A, who occupies a high-profile external position in the diegesis (e.g., a political office) and a backstage player B, who does not have access to or does not wish to have access to such an exposed position. While the transactions within the allied unit are superficially coequal, backstage player B usually occupies a formally subordinate position outside his*her transactional *Macbeth* unit. This subordinate position, however, is external and usually contrary to his*her actual personal and intellectual qualities.

As an old narrative trope, the configuration of the *Macbeth* game conventionally assigns players' roles according to binary patriarchal gender norms. They are by no means self-evident but, so far, remain a constant presence in mainstream popular entertainment by virtue of (sexist) convention. In the typical *Macbeth* game, a female player B is conniving and clever but ultimately operates from the backstage as an enabling force or *éminence grise*. The male player A is usually physically forceful, institutionally legitimised, and occupies the front stage.

If the players are real confidants, their game will often feature simple Adult-Adult transactions to form the *Simple Macbeth* game (see figure 7). Suppose backstage player B occupies the role of a more manipulating force. In that case, the game will come with a duplex ulterior vector on which backstage player B, as the personal and intellectually

superior party, takes the parental state, and frontstage player A, as the personally inferior party, unwittingly responds with his Child to form the *Complex Macbeth* game (see figure 8). However, due to his*her already established external dominance, frontstage player A cannot take a similar duplex parental position within the allied unit without dissolving the *Complex Macbeth* game.

Figure 8: *The Complex Macbeth Game*



The initially trusting and intimate relationship between the anti-heroes Claire and Frank Underwood in the US-version of HoC is an example of the former. Shakespeare's Lord and Lady Macbeth and their TV successors, the sinister Urquharts in the original UK version of HoC (1990), are examples of the latter. In all cases, a female machinator encourages and enables a male ally to pursue what she/they regard/s as their common interest. Chapter 5 will show that THE POLITICIAN features a satirical variation of the *Macbeth* game between the capricious and extrovert protagonist Payton Hobart (male frontstage player A) and his girlfriend/partner in crime, the icy and limitlessly self-controlled Alice Charles (female backstage player B).

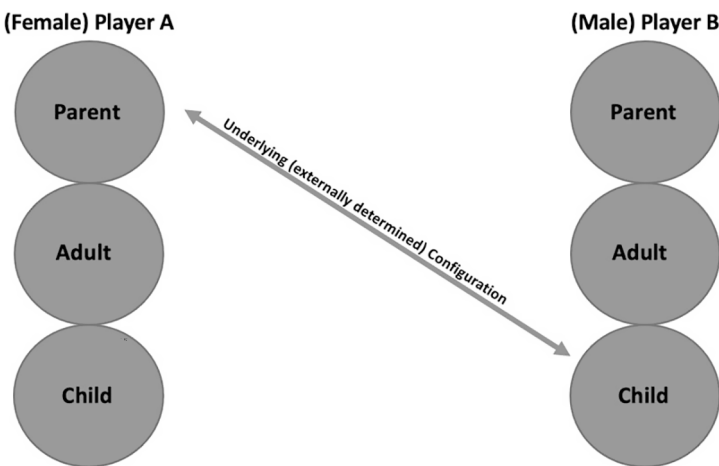
As a narrative convention, the *Macbeth* game is so well-established that it can be evoked using only a few narrative cues. The game inadvertently serves as a shortcut to establishing the protagonists' character and the overall tone of a narrative (conspiracy, sinister intrigue, behind-the-scenes machinations, betrayal, 3rd-degree intensity, general zero-sum structure). With its formation of an alliance between otherwise ruthless players, the *Macbeth* game often provides a fascinating counterpoint to a narrative's overall agonal zero-sum structure. However, the game usually does *not* serve to create narrative conflict by itself, as this would lead to the dissolution of the game. For the game to result in engaging dramatic action, additional players must engage with the unified *Macbeth* allies.

3.6.2.2.4 The Reverse Macbeth Game

The *Reverse Macbeth* game (RM game) is a more recent phenomenon. Like its predecessor, the *Macbeth* game, it is a common and easily recognizable narrative pattern that often plays at seemingly reversing the patriarchal, binary gender roles of the *Macbeth* game.

The RM game features two allied players: one an institutionally powerful (usually female) player A, who occupies an external frontstage and the other an externally subordinate (often male) co-player B, who occupies the backstage. The allied players of the RM game usually face an (often involuntary) power imbalance resulting in an underlying Parent-Child configuration between the (female) frontstage player A (Parent) and the (male) backstage player B (Child) (see figure 9).

Figure 9: Underlying configuration of the Reverse Macbeth game



Other than the *Macbeth* game, the RM game almost always introduces a problem-rich personal relationship and serves as a primary source for narrative conflict in usually character-based narratives. The RM game's underlying vector usually remains unchallenged by the players for reasons of dramatic logic (it provides the necessary dramatic foundation for a series' ongoing conflict). In the course of the RM game, this underlying configuration continuously clashes with the players' divergent personal transactional dynamics. Accordingly, the transactions of the RM game usually progress to cross on an additional personal vector. These crossed transactional chains take the form of (1) the (female) player A unsuccessfully introducing an additional social Adult-Adult vector to reflect on the relationship's underlying power imbalance. For maximal dramatic emphasis, this attempt usually clashes with (male) player B's simultaneous effort at a Child (B)-Parent (A) transaction (see figure 10). This progression can also be a step preceding a subsequent level of escalation.

The crossed transaction (2) results from the (male) player B trying to re-assert his perceived dominance through ultimately unsustainable Parent (B)-Child (A) transactions (see figure 11). This move inevitably causes a clash with the dominant underlying configuration leading (female) player A to transfer her underlying authority onto the personal

vector as an open Parent (A)-Child (B) transaction. This progression usually marks the end of a round of the RM game. It has (female) player A winning the match while simultaneously escalating the conflict for a subsequent, intensified round of the RM game.

Figure 10: The first conflictive progression of the Reverse Macbeth game

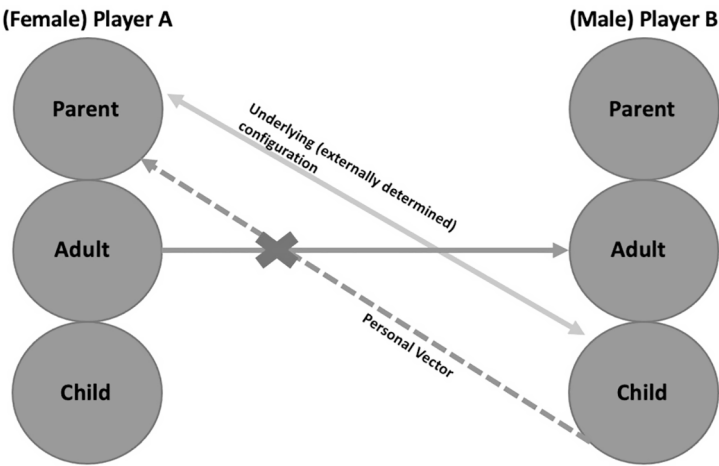
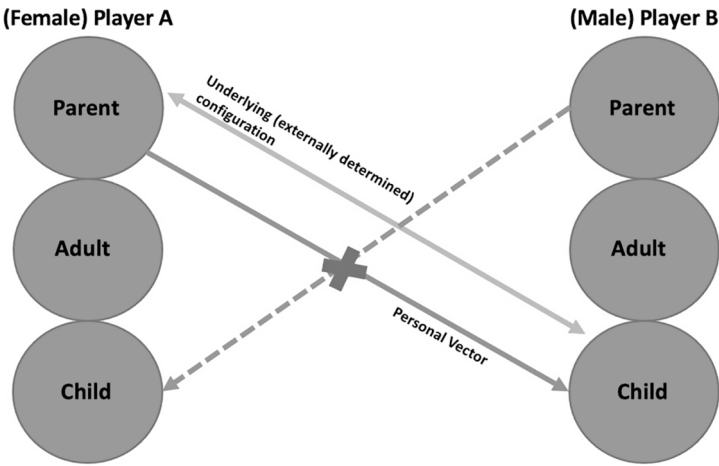


Figure 11: The second conflictive progression of the Reverse Macbeth game



As long as the RM game is ongoing, both conflictive progressions culminate in crossed transactions and thus a transactional stalemate in the RM game, which intensifies the respective conflict. In popular narrative practice, the escalation of a round of the RM game (to the point of transactional stalemate) is usually followed by a temporary interruption of the interaction and a scene change. It often manifests in the common motif of a character dramatically turning away from a dispute and leaving the room after

landing a final jab, followed by a hard editorial cut. In ongoing series with a fixed character configuration, the crossed transactional stalemate will most often be 'resolved' by an eventual reset of the game that restores its initial Parent (*her*)-Child (*him*) configuration allowing for the game to begin anew.

Conventionally, the RM game indicates a struggle caused by a perceived imbalance between a player set's configuration and patriarchal binary gender norms. A classic example of a dominant RM game is the central relationship in *THE CROWN*'s first two seasons between the shy Queen Elizabeth II (female player A), taking an initially involuntary dominant frontstage position, and her patriarchally confident husband Philip (male player B), feeling unduly marginalised in his subordinate role as consort (see chapter 4). Following the configuration of the RM, Philip, relegated to the backstage, with his patriarchal pride insulted by his wife's superior formal position, carries the inferior state of his institutional role into his personal relationship with the Queen. This configuration leads him to cause scenes, continuously mope and complain, and commit childish, often hurtful antics. Attempts on Elizabeth's side to treat her husband as an equal on the personal vector (Adult-Adult), while retaining the inevitably imbalanced underlying configuration of their overall RM configuration, remain just as unsuccessful as Philip's frequent attempts to dominate his wife in secondary Parent (*him*)-Child (*her*) side-battles.

The established narrative convention to draw conflict from the binary gender dynamic of the RM game seems to indicate that the configuration of *frontstage-woman: backstage-man* still appears as a curiosity worthy of (narrative) attention. By using its superficially anti-patriarchal configuration as a reliable source for narrative conflict, the RM game thus often implicitly reintroduces patriarchal gender norms.

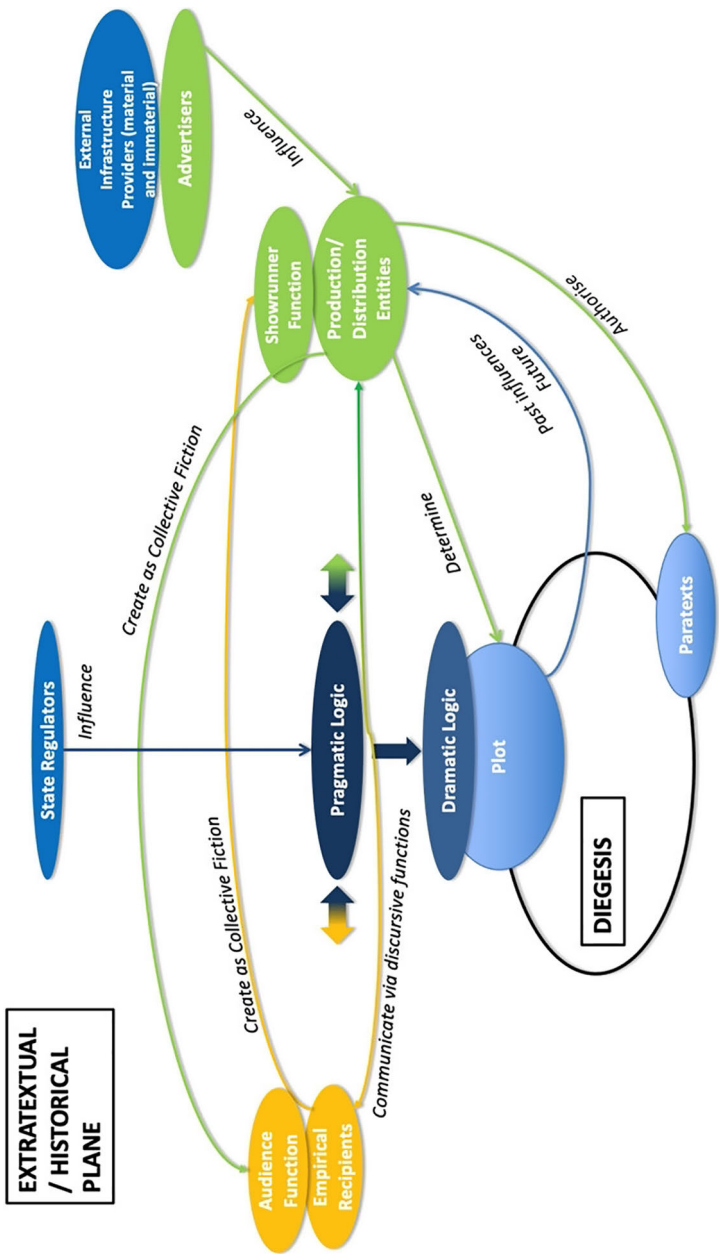
All the games noted above are prevalent structural tropes throughout the series in this study and will feature heavily in my analyses. There are several additional games, particularly those specific to fictional politics and gender dynamics (like the hierarchical *King's Two Bodies* game and the transgressive *Patronage for Pleasure* game), that I will discuss as they arise.

3.6.3 The Historical Actors

The historical or extratextual actors comprise all micro and macro actors – individuals, institutions, and discursive functions – that participate in the interdependent collective actions of a TV series' creation, circulation, and reception (see figure 12). The historical actors' network determines a series' emergent pragmatic logic through their collective activity. In this decentralised determination, as I have discussed before, the historical actors are theoretically free to make any choice they wish as long as they are able to implement it. However, they are practically always influenced by the narrative past through the "recursive progression" of a series.¹⁹⁵

195 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 16.

Figure 12: The Historical Network



It should be noted here that there is a natural incompleteness of any model concerning the historical actors. This is primarily due to their almost infinite complexity and, to a lesser degree, a lack of tangible information. Contemporary portals' viewer data and details on algorithmic selection criteria have, e.g., famously remained well-kept trade secrets. However, there are enough structural regularities and revelatory breakout events

that allow observers to gain insight into how historical actors determine their respective network.

Likewise, it is often impossible to precisely discern individual actors' contributions in the emergent, multi-agential network of a TV series. Recipients, for example, take part in the production and proliferation of a text as "prosumers" and "producers".¹⁹⁶ Through what Virginia Crisp, for film, calls "informal" distribution,¹⁹⁷ they can likewise extend a series' distribution to unauthorized avenues. Similarly, channels (in the past, most notably HBO), portals (currently most notably Netflix), and – though to a lesser extent – platforms

often act as both producers and distributors of content.

Acknowledging this difficulty, I will – for the purpose of textual analysis – distinguish the historical actors according to the discursive roles the network itself produces in order to categorize its dispersed historical actors. While they require further discussion, the historical actors roughly comprise:

- (1) The production entities. They consist of (i) the "human capital"¹⁹⁸ of individuals fulfilling specific roles as micro actors within the network, such as showrunners, writers, directors, production executives, screen actors, cutters, camera people and other staff and crew. They (ii) comprise the institutional macro actors that organise these individuals into functional collectives like studios, channels, and portals. Furthermore, they are (iii) the discursively created functions of 'authors', 'showrunners', and 'stars' which I will discuss in more detail shortly.
- (2) The almost exclusively institutional macro actors of distribution. There is often an overlap with production entities. In classic linear content distribution and non-linear Advertising-Video-on-Demand (AVoD) models, advertisers also influence the shape of a narrative. I leave out, for now, actors operating in unauthorised "guerrilla networks", that is, the unauthorised, emergent "transmedia distribution"¹⁹⁹ of content through audience channels and activity that, as Elizabeth Evans notes, often predated similar activities of official entities.²⁰⁰
- (3) The institutionalised providers of (i) material infrastructure on which TV series depend for distribution and (ii) the regulatory framework to which they must adhere. The most influential macro actors are governments and other administrative bodies. An example are the various mercantilist quotas that prescribe the production and

196 Axel Bruns, "Producersage", *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition (C&C '07)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York (June 13, 2007), 101. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1254960.1254975>.

197 Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age: Pirates and Professionals* (New York/London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 6.

198 John B. Thompson, *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in The Twenty-First Century* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 6.

199 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 43f.

200 Evans, *Transmedia Television*, 44.

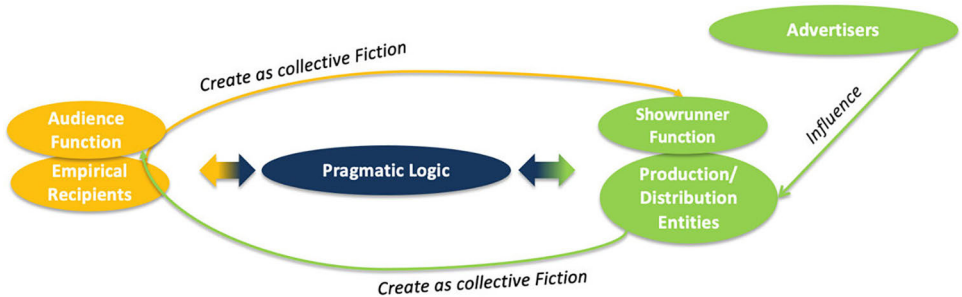
distribution of European content within the EU.²⁰¹ Another, more fundamental one is the provision of enforceable intellectual property laws. The line between infrastructure providers, distributors, and producers is, once again, a blurred one. Netflix, for example, has spent significant resources developing its physical content distribution network “Open Connect” to support digital data transmission in critical strategic areas.²⁰²

- (4) The human persons, macro-agential entities, and discursive functions involved with a series’ reception. These are (i) individual recipients, (ii) fan groups and other organised non-governmental recipient collectives such as civil rights organisations and (iii) the discursively created ‘audiences’.

My model considers the historical Actors only insofar as their interactions with the overall network of a TV series are insightful for textual analysis.

The complexity of a TV series’ emergent multi-agential network not only poses a problem for scholarly observation and analysis but for the network’s actors themselves. How can interactions between an almost limitless number of fragmented actors in a rhizomatic multi-sided structure be managed? In order to facilitate its otherwise impossible intra-network interactions, a TV series’ network reduces complexity by creating discursive macro actors (see figure 13).

Figure 13: *The Discursive Macro Actors*



201 Laid down, e.g., in the EU Commission’s “Audiovisual Media Services Directive”. For latest adjustments with regards to the local production quotas for VOD services operating in Europe see European Commission, “Communication from the Commission Guidelines pursuant to Article 13(7) of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive on the calculation of the share of European works in on-demand catalogues and on the definition of low audience and low turnover 2020/C 223/03”, *EUR-Lex*, July 7. 2020. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_2020.223.01.0010.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2020:223:TOC.

202 See Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 94–100.

The first intra-network model is an authorial function that I want to call the *showrunner function*,²⁰³ following Mittells similar concept of the “*inferred author function*”.²⁰⁴ The network creates this function to allow individual actors (especially audiences) to (1) make sense of the complex collective process of a TV series’ creation and (2) enable interaction with the dispersed production collective as a discursive macro actor.

The second model allows actors to make sense of and interact with the fragmented individual viewers by collecting them into the conceptual macro actor I propose to call the *audience function*. It holds particular relevance for production actors.

Both models serve to more or less satisfactorily answer the respective questions ‘Who is responsible for a TV series?’ and ‘Who is watching a TV series?’ As products of the network itself, both models are emergent discursive creations that come into being through – and adapt to – the network’s activity. Both significantly impact the shape of a narrative text and are, therefore, critical historical factors in any contextualising textual analysis.

3.6.3.1 The Showrunner Function – Operationalising Industrial Authorship

Since the introduction of industrial means of cultural production, the question of authorship has been much contested; TV series are no exception. Jason Mittell, taking up Michel Foucault’s theory of authorship, describes the “*inferred author function*”²⁰⁵ as a way for viewers to produce a unified model of otherwise dispersed authorial agency.²⁰⁶ However, it is essential to note that a discursive authorial function not only serves audiences’ needs. Instead, it provides all actors within a series’ network with an authorial reference point – with far-reaching consequences.

Derek Kompare remarks that a TV series’ authorship has increasingly been attributed to the function of the *showrunner*,²⁰⁷ which coincides with the emerging prominence of the material position of showrunners in many contemporary TV productions. Institutionally, the term denotes a somewhat vaguely defined position with a host of creative and management responsibilities that usually refers to a human actor with a leading creative position, often the head writer, who originated the series’ premise and is “managing

203 See also Foucault’s concept of the author “as a function of discourse” in Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 124. See also Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 31.

204 See Mittell’s reception-centred author concept, which owes much to Foucault (see above). In: Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 107. Original emphasis.

205 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 107.

206 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 107.

207 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 98.

the entire project and keeping it on the right editorial track.”²⁰⁸ Unlike the pre-industrial ideal of a singular creative genius, showrunners possess, as Mittell remarks, “*authorship by responsibility*”²⁰⁹ and “*authorship by management*”.²¹⁰

It has been noted that the discursive function and the material position of a ‘showrunner’ are originally US-American. Lothar Mikos, e.g., remarks that, in France, following a more cinematic tradition, the director has traditionally been credited with providing a series’ creative direction as the series’ “auteur” while the scriptwriter often does not participate in the production.²¹¹ In the changing German TV landscape, the adjusted version of the originally foreign (US) concept of a showrunner is more akin to a head author or executive producer (the latter remaining an essential function in German TV)²¹² and a, at times, lamented disregard for screenwriters’ contributions to a series’ collective production. With an increase in transnational productions, especially following localisation efforts by portals such as Netflix, the managerial showrunner position has become more pervasive, with transnational productions increasingly causing European industry to approach the American model.²¹³ However, given different traditions of authorship that derive from varying literary and cinematic traditions, there remain some questions about whether the discursive attribution of TV authorship can be generalised in the first place.²¹⁴ As most examples of contemporary popular seriality follow the showrunner model in some way, I will assume the *showrunner function* to stand for any discursively created central source of authorial authority and agency within a TV series’ network.

The showrunner function’s purpose is (1) to serve as a substitute for a series’ missing ‘author’, (2) as a point of address for direct communication, and (3) as a ‘brand’ and marker of contextualising identification.²¹⁵

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- 208 Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 18.
- 209 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 88 and 90. Original emphasis.
- 210 Mittell, *Complex TV*, 88. Original emphasis.
- 211 Hélène Monnet-Cantagrel, “The strategy of “quality TV”: Branding, creating, and producing at Canal+”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 119f.
- 212 Lothar Mikos, “TV Drama series production in Germany and the digital television landscape”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 183.
- 213 See, e.g., Mikos, “TV Drama series production in Germany”, 183.
- 214 See, e.g., François Jost’s similar question regarding French and US TV authorship: François Jost, “What is a quality French series? Reflections on *The Bureau*”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 130.
- 215 See Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York City: NYU Press, 2015), 111–112; Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 18f.

As the source of authorship, the network endows the showrunner function with creative authority or, as Foucault puts it, the “sovereignty of the author”.²¹⁶ Mark Wolf remarks, “for a work to be canonical requires that it be declared as such by someone with the authority to do so”.²¹⁷ Given the host of creative activity that usually surrounds a popular TV series’ supersystem, the showrunner function serves the essential purpose of solving textual “*authorization conflicts*”²¹⁸ by determining which content becomes part of the ‘official’ text and which does not.

The publicised figurations of a showrunner function (usually a series’ actual showrunner such as THE CROWN’s Peter Morgan or key stars endowed with authorial authority such as Kevin Spacey before his dismissal from HoC) provide a universe of paratexts surrounding a television series’ text across various media. They promote and interpret²¹⁹ the series through their activity, provide relevant background information, and thus extend the narrative’s canonical material.

As an authorial function, the *showrunner*, together with other discursive creations (e.g., ‘stars’), serves as a brand “crafted for fans’ consumption”.²²⁰ Brands, as Timothy Havens notes, “inhabit an entire symbolic ecosystem designed to give products and services emotional and intellectual meanings for consumers”.²²¹ This is true for the showrunner function as well. Like most notions of authorship, it invokes a false vision of creation that is “freed from economic and industrial constraints, in the name of an ideology of genius”²²² and thus harkens back to a pre-industrial ideal of *literary* creativity.

216 Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, transl. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 126.

217 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 271. See also Jessica Aldred, “Authorship”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 220.

218 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”. In *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 19. Original emphasis. See also Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein’s discussion of the practices of authorization in serial narration: Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein, “Autorisierungspraktiken seriellen Erzählens: Zur Gattungsentwicklung von Superheldencomics”, in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 259–290. <https://doi.org/10.1515/transcript.9783839421413>.

219 See Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, “The grounds for a renaissance in European fiction: Transnational writing, production and distribution approaches, and strategies”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 18f.

220 Derek Kompare, “More ‘Moments of Television’: Online Cult Television Authorship”, in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne et al. (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 102.

221 Timothy Havens, “Netflix: Streaming Channel brands as Global meaning Systems”, in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson (New York/London: Routledge, 2018), 322.

222 Hélène Monnet-Cantagrel, “The strategy of “quality TV”: Branding, creating, and producing at Canal+”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*. Ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 125.

The notion of an auteur's singular creative vision thus increases a series' cultural capital. As Matt Hills notes: "Auteurism brings with it an ideology of quality".²²³

At least since the rise of HBO and the successful association of the company with the somewhat ill-termed "Quality TV"²²⁴ in the 1990s, channels and portals alike have attempted to transfer the cultural capital traditionally accorded to an author figure onto their own brand identity by creating an "authorship operating at institutional level".²²⁵ John T. Caldwell states:

In the age of multiplatformed media content, corporate media brands do regularly function as both auteurs (who choreograph and organize the televisual spectacle) and critical analysts (who ably mine the backstory, behind-the-camera, and presentational secrets for their content – *as content*).²²⁶

More recently, nonlinear portals, too, have undertaken great marketing efforts to position themselves as a reliable source for "prized content",²²⁷ e.g., by emphasising their ability to provide each user with an algorithmically, in the case of Netflix, or, in the case of Mubi, analogously curated experience.²²⁸

As a brand, a distribution/production service creates an interpretative frame for the reception of a TV series' text. Marketing texts, as Caldwell notes, "can achieve the status of prefabricated *master codes*"²²⁹ that, in turn, influence how audiences view a TV series. A Netflix or HBO production with its brand connotations of 'quality', innovation, and artistic value is viewed differently than a show on, say, a private or public broadcaster.

223 Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, e-library ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 99.

224 See, e.g., Catherine Johnson, "Tele-Branding in TVIII", *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no.1 (March 2007): 8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400300601140126>. See also Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television* (New York: Routledge, 2012) for a discussion of the emergence and practices of TV branding in the US and the UK.

225 Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media and Daily Life* (New York/London: Routledge, 2011), 33. She notes this with reference to the section "The Studio as Auteur" (III) in *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*, ed. Robert J. Thompson and Gary Burns (New York: Praeger, 1990), 93–144.

226 John T. Caldwell, "Critical Industrial Practice: Branding, repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts", *Television and New Media* 7, no. 2 (May 2006): 103.

227 Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York/ London: New York University Press, 2014), 12. She defines it as "programming that *people seek out and specifically desire*". Original emphasis.

228 For Netflix's discursive branding use of its algorithms see Benjamin Burroughs, "House of Netflix: Streaming Media and Digital Lore", *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (February 2019): 11. doi 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948. See also Lotz's discussion of the curation-based Netflix brand in Amanda Lotz, "Portals: A Treatise in Internet-Distributed-Television", open access ed. *Maize Books: Michigan Publishing*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, published 2017, last accessed September 9, 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/maize/mpub9699689/1:4/--portals-a-treatise-on-internet-distributed-television?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>. For a discussion of Mubi see Matthias Frey, *MUBI and the Curation Model of Video on Demand* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

229 Caldwell, "Critical Industrial Practice", 120. Original emphasis.

Thus, the anthropomorphic macro actor of an authorial distribution/production entity becomes itself a paratext that shapes the reception of the narrative.

As primary sources for the textual analysis of many TV series, the activities of authorial showrunner functions that shape a text are vital as they often provide the only tangible expressions of the highly fragmented production actors. However, while considering their influence, it is essential to bear in mind both their discursive nature and their various pragmatic purposes.

3.6.3.2 The Audience Function

For a commodified TV series, the fragmented individual empirical recipients, that is, the discrete human persons and organised groups and institutions who engage with a TV series, are a vital factor. Manfred Pfister's remark that in drama, there exists a "causal connection between the structure of the intended audience and the structure of the designated dramatic text"²³⁰ is even more true for contemporary TV. As evolving narratives and datafied, contingent commodities, television series are especially susceptible to their viewership. As Kelleter states, a "series can observe its own effects in reactivated or 'engaged' consumers while the narrative proceeds".²³¹ Series, therefore, "can register their reception and involve it in the act of (dispersed) storytelling itself".²³² Recipients' activities significantly influence the commercially oriented historical parts of any series' network in more than one way. With regards to Netflix's efforts at globalising their service (in part, by localising it), Ramon Lobato has pointed out, "Just as Netflix is changing, users are changing Netflix. The platform learns from its new global audiences, tracking tastes and viewing habits".²³³

However, given the unmanageable mass and complexity of fragmented individuals and interest groups that engage with a series, the question remains how empirical recipients can form a functional (and legible) part of a series' network. How do invested actors determine with whom to interact on the reception side and whose preferences to regard and disregard when making decisions about a series' continuation?

The fragmented individual empirical recipients, who engage with a TV series, become de facto (micro or macro) actors in the network of that TV series, above all else, as consumers who participate in the capitalist market environment. Generally speaking, the choice to watch or not to watch a series is already an action that resonates within the TV series' network.²³⁴ To a lesser extent, empirical recipients participate in the network's activities by engaging in direct or indirect interaction with the production entities or – in the case of interactive texts – by interaction with elements of the text itself. The

230 Manfred Pfister, *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*, 11th ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001), 56. My translation: "Bedingungszusammenhang zwischen der Struktur des intendierten Publikums und der Struktur der dafür bestimmten dramatischen Texte".

231 Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 14.

232 Kelleter, "Five Ways", 14.

233 Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 14.

234 As remarked, e.g., in Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 13.

former can be conscious or unconscious, intended or unintended. To date, the latter, including experimental productions like Netflix's BANDERSNATCH (UK, 2018), remains a secondary phenomenon in the popular TV landscape.²³⁵

In order to contend with the unmanageable mass of discrete empirical individuals and groups that engage with a series in a multitude of ways, its network usually performs an operation similar to the creation of its authorial showrunner function: it constructs collective fictions, which I propose to call a series' *audience functions*. Like the showrunner function, the *audience function* is a simplified discursive macro actor created by the series network to make sense of the complex mass of actual empirical recipients. In many ways, the audience function is akin to what literary theory has called the "archireader"²³⁶ or "authorial audience".²³⁷ It is a conceptual entity to whom a specific set of similar attributes and preferences is attributed by a micro or macro actor with authorial responsibility.

The creation of a functional model of *audiences* is a prerequisite for the network's overall sustainable functioning. Its formation is – with very few exceptions – a prerequisite to any meaningful interaction taking place between the recipients as actors in a series' network and between the recipient side and the remaining actors of that network.

The audience functions of a TV series become visible through the network's more or less accurate and more or less extensive measurement and interpretation of empirical recipients' activities pertaining to a serial text and its network. Given that popular TV series act as cultural commodities, these data measurements and their subsequent interpretation leading to the creation of 'audiences' as "representations of markets" is usually (but not exclusively) carried out by what Donoghue, Havens, and McDonald call a "market intelligence".²³⁸ It comprises those micro and macro actors in a series' network interested in mining recipients' resources for commercial or political gain.

With the establishment of digital circulation, increasingly advanced means of algorithmic gathering and interpretation of users' digital data have become an important tool to "manage uncertainty"²³⁹ about a series' fragmented empirical recipients leading

235 For a discussion of interactivity in Bandersnatch see, e.g., Lobke Kolhoff and Frank Nack, "How Relevant Is Your Choice?", in *Interactive Storytelling: ICIDS 2019, Lecture Notes in Computer Science* 11869, ed. Rogelio E. Cardona-Rivera, Anne Sullivan, R. Michael Young (Cham: Springer, 2019), 73–85. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33894-7_9.

236 Michael Riffaterre, *Strukturelle Stilistik*, transl. Wilhelm Bolle (Munich: List, 1973), 44–47.

237 The "hypothetical audience" of a novel as imagined by its creator(s): Peter J. Rabinowitz, "Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences," *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 1 (1977): 126, original emphasis. See also the similar concept of "intended audience" in William E. Tolhurst, William, "On what a Text is and how it Means," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 19, no. 1 (1979): 12. See Marcus Willand, "Isers impliziter Leser im praxeologischen Belastungstest: Ein literaturwissenschaftliches Konzept zwischen Theorie und Methode", in *Theorien, Methoden und Praktiken des Interpretierens*, ed. Andrea Albrecht, Lutz Danneberg, Olav Krämer and Carlos Spoerhase (Berlin/Munich/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 239.

238 Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Timothy Havens, and Paul McDonald, "Introduction: Media Distribution Today", in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, ed. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 5.

239 Benjamin Burroughs, "House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore, *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (February 2019): 9. doi 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948.

to the discursive creation of datafied audience functions or, as Benjamin Burroughs calls them, “algorithmic audiences”.²⁴⁰

Datafication and computer-based processing have arguably increased the variety and accuracy of audience formation. Netflix, for example, uses more than 2000 “taste communities” to approach its fragmented subscriber base.²⁴¹ The resulting “algorithmic logic”, as Poell and Nieborg termed it, increasingly dominates the “production and circulation strategies” of content developers²⁴² as they try to determine who their audiences are and with what content they are most likely to engage.

Algorithmic audience formation significantly impacts the serial text and the overall network. The accuracy of a portal’s prediction of audiences’ preferences often serves to legitimise the activities of circulation services as well as the shape of the series themselves. Due to the assumed accuracy of algorithmic predictions, the offered content, audiences learn, is just what they had wished for in the first place.²⁴³ However, while nonlinear services are arguably better at discerning and accommodating varying recipient tastes, their creation of audiences ultimately remains a simplifying discursive operation.

It should be noted that the established mass media practice of audience formation through gathering and evaluating recipients’ data to maximise the success of a series is not at all new to the process of popular storytelling (nor is it limited to the digital realm). While writing and publishing his novels as a newspaper series, Charles Dickens famously went on walks trying to gather information about his readers’ attitudes towards his stories to adjust future instalments to their taste.²⁴⁴ Thus, as Iser states, Dicken’s readers “became his ‘co-authors’”;²⁴⁵ or rather, Dicken’s *perception* of his readers did. Discursive audience functions thus become essential, albeit notoriously unstable actors in a series’ network.

3.7 Conclusion: Expanding the Possibilities for (Con)Textual Analysis

The model outlined in this chapter describes popular TV series as complex, emergent agential networks. As a liminal network, a TV series performs various complex operations across various micro and macro agential relationships and ontological planes. As this chapter pointed out, the actors of a TV series comprise (1) fictional characters who become actors within the network as discursive functions actualised by historical actors. As such, characters gain agential agency within the diegesis while simultaneously retaining their status as compositional elements. (2) Following assumptions of popular seriality

240 Burroughs, “House of Netflix”, 10.

241 Jane Shattuc, “Netflix, Inc. and Online Television”, in *A Companion to Television*, 2nd ed, ed. Janet Wasko and Eileen R. Meehan (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2020), 150.

242 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, “The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity”, *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (April 25, 2018): 4280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>

243 Burroughs, “House of Netflix”, 11.

244 Wolfgang Iser, *Die Appellstruktur der Texte: Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, in *Rezeptionsästhetik: Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Rainer Warning (Munich: Fink, 1988), 236.

245 Iser, “Appellstruktur”, 237. My translation: “Seine Leser wurden ihm zu ‘Mitautoren’”.

research, I considered the text of a series itself to constitute a systemic actor within the network due to its ability to influence and determine activities within the network (e.g., by forcing it to contend with established narrative past). (3) The historical actors comprised of micro and macro entities involved in the production, circulation, and reception of a TV series' text, as well as the discursive functions created by those entities to allow for the reduction of intra-network complexity and thus enable its functionality, such as authorial showrunner functions or the simplified conceptual audience functions.

To reflect the distinct liminal status of a TV series' network and discern the various interdependent and often contradictory influences and considerations that ultimately determine its activity – and thus final shape – for the analysis, I introduced what I called the *triple logic* of a series' network. It consists of:

- (1) *pragmatic logic*, the various extratextual factors that influence a series' network, such as economic considerations, requirements of historical actors, and evolving historical events. The much-discussed tendency of series to delay their resolution or changes of cast (e.g., through introducing a more diverse ensemble or replacing an unruly former star) find themselves here.
- (2) *dramatic logic*, that is, the various contingent principles and conventions of aesthetic textual and formal composition serving to create an engaging plot and audio-visual setup. The narrative arc, narrative over-coherence, classic linear TV's continuity editing or the often more formally innovative audio-visual composition of prestige TV, which I termed *editorial presence* following this model's agential focus, are examples of this.
- (3) *Intradiegetic logic*, which denotes the working principles of the fictional world itself. It constitutes a decisive factor in the creation of narrative continuity (as well as the determination of the previously mentioned textual agency within the network).

As an example of the workings of the triple logic and serving as a crucial analytic distinction, I proposed to differentiate between two types of narrative evolution: *development* and *recalibration*. The former denotes a narrative evolution primarily contingent on intradiegetic logic, and the latter describes a narrative evolution determined mainly by pragmatic logic. It is either notably at odds with intradiegetic logic (*hard* recalibration) or attempts to make concessions to intradiegetic logic (*soft* recalibration). Given the implicit (albeit asymmetrical) power struggle between the various historical actors that usually pervade a popular TV series' network, engaged audiences often reject hard recalibrations as an 'executive overreach' on the part of production entities. A soft recalibration thus minimises disruption, retains continuity, and acknowledges engaged audiences' rights as actors within the network.

With recourse to the significant descriptive properties of psychological Transaction Analysis, this chapter proposed to model the actions of fictional characters as *games*, that is, as regular, rule-based transactions between various interactional roles taken on by the respective *players* of that game. As I pointed out, in the demonstrative dramatic medium of serial TV, characters' actions (and interactions) are a critical factor in determining the plot and expressing interior development. Illustrative examples for popular games were (1) the *Zero-Sum* game, which intensifies agonal narratives by introducing personal

stakes for the characters (by making their gains and losses proportional); (2) the *Coming of Age* game, which serves to demonstrate a character's development by demonstrating his*her changing position in continued intrapersonal relationships, (3) the *Macbeth* game, which introduces a character constellation typical for intrigue-driven plotlines in which (gender coded) allied players face a highly agonal secondary game; (4) the *Reverse Macbeth* game, which cues a conflict rich, often gender-coded interpersonal relationship in which a frontstage and backstage player struggle for dominance.

This thesis presents a new approach that integrates the distinct properties of a series' fictional serial universes, its audio-visual and narrative structure, and its extratextual ecology into one structured approach. The novel approach laid out in this chapter will enable textual analyses to more precisely discern the complex interactional logics that govern the various elements of a popular TV series. While previous analytical approaches have often considered including extratextual factors in the textual analysis, few have provided a structured methodology for describing the complex interplay of historical, dramatic, and intradiegetic factors in a comprehensible (albeit not comprehensive) way.

The model outlined in this chapter provides an integrated approach to textual and historical criticism of popular TV series and a vocabulary for distinguishing narrative patterns and their origins across ontological planes. It will contribute to shining a light on crucial and contested questions of television criticism by helping to discern the actual influence of sociocultural, sociotechnical, political, or aesthetic factors. The model will, furthermore, allow us to identify and compare distinct logics and narrative patterns across series from different cultural and production contexts and thus provide an improved structured approach to comparative textual and contextual analysis.

Not all aspects of this model are equally relevant to every analytical question regarding different series. However, it provides a valuable vantage point for a host of textual and historical inquiries regarding serial television fiction and its complex ecologies. In their analyses of contemporary polit-fiction, the coming chapters rely heavily on the model established here and will demonstrate its applicability to a variety of analytical challenges. Furthermore, they will provide illustrations of already established games and describe additional games that pervade contemporary, popular (polit-)fiction. The examination of *THE CROWN* and its presentation of the making of monarchy in the following chapter, e.g., will demonstrate the narrative applications of the RM game and identify several structurally complex games pertinent to the description and analysis of contemporary (postmodern) polit-fiction that will resurface time and again in other contemporary polit-series throughout this thesis.

4. Royal Performance and the Queen's Three Bodies

The Making of the British Monarchy in the Netflix Series THE CROWN

With its double appeal of being the “biggest drama commission in British television history”¹ and the first fictional TV series to break the taboo of featuring a living British sovereign as its protagonist, *THE CROWN* (UK) has garnered significant attention from media critics and scholars. First released in 2016 on the streaming portal Netflix as an original production, the series provides a fictionalised account of the lives of the British queen Elizabeth II and her family as they struggle to navigate the demands of royal life. Starting shortly before her ascension to the throne in 1952, the series’ plot has, as of summer 2022, reached season four and the early 1990s. *THE CROWN* is the latest culmination of a fascination that fictional accounts of the British monarchy (and their historical role models) continue to exert on global audiences. This phenomenon requires some examination in a mediated and commodified postmodern era that is allegedly defined by an “incredulity towards metanarratives”.² What is more, the series exemplifies a number of motifs that are central to the construction of popular polit-series and will reappear throughout this thesis.

As Will Abbiss claims, *THE CROWN* is a narrative “investigation into the monarchy’s position in the modern era”.³ This chapter will show that, with its elaborate discussions of the mechanisms of monarchy, the series provides an extensive meta-commentary on the precarious postmodern predicament of a fictionalised institution founded on the divine right of kings and largely obsolete notions of national (imperial) self-aggrandisement. However, how does *THE CROWN* turn a complex, controversial, and – by some accounts – archaic historical phenomenon like the British monarchy into an operational

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- 1 Gillian Doyle, “Television Production, Funding Models and Exploitation of Content”, *Icono* 14, no. 2 (July 2016): 88. <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v14i1.991>.
 - 2 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), XXIV.
 - 3 Will Abbiss, “Proposing a Post-heritage Critical Framework: The Crown, Ambiguity, and Media Self-consciousness”, *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (August 2019): 828, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419866427>.

and commercially successful serial narrative? Which properties make this show a compelling watch for Netflix's global 21st-century audiences with varying degrees of attachment to the historical British monarchy?

Following the assumption that *THE CROWN*'s plot hinges on the royal family's struggle to consolidate personal needs with the juxtaposed demands of public duty,⁴ this chapter will show that, underneath its exceptional production values, *THE CROWN* applies well-established fictional conventions and a relatively limited set of narrative interactional patterns, which primarily take the shape of *Coming-of-Age* (CoA) Games and *Reverse Macbeth* (RM) Games described previously in the previous chapter.

It will illustrate that what G.W.F. Hegel describes as "one of the most common and suitable collisions for the novel": "the conflict between the heart's poetry and the opposing prose of reality's conditions",⁵ re-emerges in *THE CROWN* as a central identity diffusion caused by a struggle between what Ernst H. Kantorowicz famously called "The King's Two Bodies". It is a motif which Andrew Higson – with recourse to Kantorowicz – has justly pointed out as a recurring theme of monarchy fiction⁶ and which reappears, in one form or another, throughout polit-fiction. Accordingly, I will discuss how *THE CROWN*, following this narrative convention, constructs its plot primarily around the conflict that arises from the dichotomy between the fictional Queen's "body politic", the conceptual, ceremonial body of the sovereign, and her "body natural", the physical person that wears the crown.⁷

Examining the structural reasons for the predominance of the formulaic *King's two bodies* (K2B) trope in both fictional and historical imaginaries of monarchy, this chapter will argue that the motif serves to (1) condense the complex construct of the British monarchy into an operational narrative and (2) to make a relatable fictional character out of a figure in objectively unrelatable circumstances.

Further structural analysis will demonstrate that *THE CROWN* operationalises the K2B formula in a variety of narrative games that turn an abstract Elizabethan concept of monarchy into tangible narrative action. As I will discuss, in creating its plot, the series largely relies on a *zero-sum* CoA game between a ceremonially superior *Monarch* actant and an inferior co-player, which, at times, takes the shape of a highly agonal RM game.

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- 4 Paolo Braga, "Narrative Rhetoric in Representing the British Aristocracy: Julian Fellowes and Peter Morgan", in *The British Aristocracy in Popular Culture: Essays on 200 Years of Representations*, ed. Stefania Michelucci, Ian Duncan, and Luisa Villa (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 230; Ib Bondebjerg, *Screening Twentieth-Century Europe: Television, History, Memory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2020), 127; Thom F. Cavalli, "For the Love of God and Country, the Making of a President", *Jung Journal* 12, no.1 (February 2018): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19342039.2018.1403259>.
 - 5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: "Eine der gewöhnlichsten und für den Roman passendsten Kollisionen ist deshalb der Konflikt zwischen der Poesie des Herzens und der entgegenstehenden Prosa der Verhältnisse [...]".
 - 6 Andrew Higson, "From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 353.
 - 7 For both terms see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7f.

Analysing these interactional patterns, this chapter will show that *THE CROWN*'s relatively limited structural repertoire nonetheless undergoes some notable recalibrations in its presentation of the monarchy. The first occurs through an age-related cast change following its season 2 finale. The second follows the introduction of the character of Diana Spencer in the series' fourth season and disrupts the royal games' previous *cooperative* nature. I will show that this structural shift significantly increases the ambivalence of the series' portrayal of the monarchy. This recalibration coincides with a tangible change in perception of the historical monarchy following a series of highly publicised scandals.

Furthermore, this chapter will illustrate that *THE CROWN*, exploring how a union between Elizabeth II's body politic and body natural can occur under postmodern circumstances, expands the relatively conventional K2B trope. Referencing Louis Marin's concept of the monarch's third, mediatised body,⁸ I will demonstrate that, in *THE CROWN*, the imaginary construct of *Queen Elizabeth* can come into existence only through performative acts which serve to unify the individual that wears the crown (body natural) and the concept of the monarch (body politic) in the public's interpretative imagination. The series thus presents the *Queen* as a discursive postmodern myth that relies on the continued participation of her subjects.⁹

It will become apparent that the perpetuation of the myth of monarchy under favourable terms is the central motivation for the fictional Elizabeth II. In her dealings with her family, 'her' Prime Ministers, and the public, *THE CROWN* portrays the Queen and other protagonists as more or less savvy political operators in a highly politicised game. It is crucial to note that this structural outline emerges in one way or another throughout polit-fiction. Its discussion will thus provide a foundation for much of this study going forward.

This chapter will ultimately provide a thorough structural understanding of one of the most prominent and expensive series of the global North's current mainstream TV landscape. Moreover, examining *THE CROWN*'s fictional portrayal of the British monarchy provides a revealing example of how the postmodern 'incredulity' reshapes prevailing national imaginaries like the British royal family. These are valuable insights in a time where uncontested metanarratives are rare.

In the current era of mass entertainment, fictional commodities like *THE CROWN* will arguably be one of the primary sources from which many audiences learn about the British monarchy. Evidence suggests that the series has already become a powerful macro actor in creating the British monarchy's image. As Laura Saxton shows, the series has increased international audiences' awareness of and interest in the royal family.¹⁰ After the release of *THE CROWN*'s third season in 2019, for example, the historical

8 See Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, transl. Martha M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 13–15.

9 Following classic fictional concepts of royal dominance such as "the emperor's new clothes", as discussed in Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002).

10 Laura Saxton, "A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction", *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (March 2020): 134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>

role model for the heavily featured fictional breakout character Princess Anne enjoyed a surge in popularity.¹¹ Similarly, the para-historical biopic *THE QUEEN* (Stephen Frears: UK/ France/ Italy, 2006) – attributed mainly to *THE CROWN*'s showrunner function Peter Morgan – is said to have been “the most sophisticated public relations boost HRH had had in 20 years”.¹² Examining how *THE CROWN* portrays the monarchy thus contributes to understanding how many audiences in the UK and around the globe will perceive the history of the British royal family and thus of one of the UK's last remaining national imaginaries.

4.1 Anxious About History and Breaking Taboos

Regarding its international success, it is no wonder that scholars and critics alike have paid significant attention to *THE CROWN*. Roberta Pearson, for example, examines the series' considerable impact on the changing British TV landscape.¹³ She lays out how Netflix's economic superiority contributes to the erosion (or “disruption”) of the public service broadcasting system, e.g., by raising production costs and luring talent and younger viewers away from the classic PSB system¹⁴ while moving into the globally successful market niche of costume drama, which had previously been serviced mainly by the PSB.¹⁵ Echoing long-standing concerns of cultural and economic hegemony surrounding the reliance of British TV on the US market (particularly with regards to the successful yet controversial Heritage genre¹⁶), she notes how high-profile interpretations of British history through external production actors (such as Netflix) and for non-native, global audiences risks creating a distorted version of the nation's past and identity, e.g., by focussing on glamorised presentations of the upper echelons of a rigid class system.¹⁷

- 11 Chloe Foussaines, “Princess Anne is getting a Popularity Boost, Thanks to The Crown – but she's always been great”, *Town And Country Magazine*, November 14, 2020. <https://www.townandcountymag.com/leisure/arts-and-culture/a29849136/princess-anne-the-crown-popularity-boost/>; *The Guardian*, “Hard work and horses: why Princess Anne is having a moment”, December 4, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/shortcuts/2019/dec/04/princess-anne-is-having-a-moment>.
- 12 David Thomson, “Stephen Frears”, *The Guardian*, September 2, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/sep/02/stephen-frears-david-thomson>.
- 13 Roberta Pearson “The biggest drama commission in British television history: Netflix, *The Crown*, and the UK television ecosystem”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. By Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge), 86–100.
- 14 Roberta Pearson “The biggest drama commission in British television history: Netflix, *The Crown*, and the UK television ecosystem”, in *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. By Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge), 87.
- 15 Pearson, “The biggest drama commission in British television history”, 95.
- 16 Coined by Andrew Higson (originally in 1993) in “Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film”, in *Fires were started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, 2nd ed., ed. by Lester D. Friedman (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 91–109.
- 17 Pearson, “The biggest drama commission in British television history”, 95–97. See also Matt Hills, “*Black Mirror* as a Netflix Original: Program Brand “Overflow” and the Multidiscursive Forms

The originally cinematic Heritage genre, together with the costume and period genre, encompasses, as Belén Vidal puts it, a set of fictional narratives that place “its characters in a recognisable moment of the past, enhanced by the mise-en-scène of historical reconstruction”¹⁸. Heritage fiction has frequently received criticism for conveying smoothed-over, selective visions of Britishness as upper-class, white *Englishness* to satisfy international and especially US-American audiences.¹⁹ However, Will Abbiss proposes a “post-heritage” reading for *THE CROWN*, pointing out the series’ supposed ambiguity towards the monarchy and its prevalent self-consciousness.²⁰

While comparatively little attention has been paid to the actual dramatic and formal properties of *THE CROWN* as a fictional TV narrative, scholarly examination and media criticism often concern themselves with more or less implicit questions of historical accuracy. The novelty of the series’ breaking the waning taboo of portraying a living UK sovereign and the prominence of the historical British royal family seems to provide a strong presence with which both *THE CROWN* and its critics must contend. Martin Kramer, e.g., discusses the series’ portrayal of the Suez crisis.²¹ Likewise, popular volumes like “*The Crown Dissected*” promise to inform readers about “What really happened and what certainly did not happen”.²² Even *THE CROWN*’s historical consultant, Robert Lacey, contributed an “official history behind the Hit Netflix series”.²³ This historical focus is unsurprising, as Saxton notes: “Truth has consistently been a contested concept in discourse surrounding historical fiction”, in which “critics often regard accuracy as a marker of merit”.²⁴

The critical evaluation of *THE CROWN*’s historical accuracy has come to different conclusions. Media critic Simon Jenkins calls the series “reality hijacked as propaganda,

of Transatlantic TV Fandom”, in *Transatlantic Television Drama: Industries, Programs, and Fans*, ed. Michele Hilmes, Roberta Pearson, and Matt Hills (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 219.

- 18 Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2012), 1.
- 19 Higson, “Re-presenting the National Past”, e.g., 91–96. For the (US) commodification of fictional projections of Britishness see also Thomas Elsaesser, “Images for Sale: The ‘New’ British Cinema”, in *Fires were started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, 2nd ed., ed. Lester D. Friedman (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), e.g., 49–57.
- 20 Will Abbiss, “Proposing a Post-heritage Critical Framework: The Crown, Ambiguity, and Media Self-consciousness”. *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (August 2019): 837, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419866427>.
- 21 Martin Kramer, “How true is ‘The Crown’ on the Suez Cover-Up?”, *Mosaic Magazine*, March 1, 2018. <https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/israel-zionism/2018/03/how-true-is-the-crown-on-the-suez-cover-up/>.
- 22 Hugo Vickers, *The Crown Dissected: An Analysis of the Netflix Series The Crown Seasons 1, 2, and 3*. (Richmond Hill: Firefly Books Ltd, 2020). For quote see the book’s editorial note: *Firefly Books*, <https://www.fireflybooks.com/catalogue/adult-books/health-beauty/product/13963-the-crown-dissected-an-analysis-of-the-netflix-series-the-crown-seasons-1-2-and-3>.
- 23 Robert Lacey, *Crown: The Official History Behind the Hit NETFLIX Series: Political Scandal, Personal Struggle and the Years that Defined Elizabeth II 1956–1977* (London: Blink Publishing, 2019).
- 24 Laura Saxton, “A true Story: Defining Accuracy and Authenticity in Historical Fiction”, *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (March 2020): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

and a cowardly abuse of artistic license".²⁵ David Sims refers to it as a "Sweeping, Sumptuous History Lesson".²⁶ Evelyn Toynton claims that the series 'actually provides a fairly good primer on the history of the period'.²⁷ Harry Leslie Smith, once again echoing critical readings of the Heritage genre, accuses *THE CROWN* of joining "a long line of period dramas that ignore lives of ordinary men and women", choosing to "anaesthetise viewers from the unpleasantness of our past with idolatry for the aristocracy and the monarchy".²⁸

As a commercial product, *THE CROWN*'s main selling point is arguably its promise to provide a glance behind the ever-drawn net curtains of Buckingham Palace. As a scholar of narrative, however, it is crucial not to blindly follow the series down this curiously alluring path by giving in to the temptation of reducing the analysis to a historicising roman à clef-type search for historical traces.

There is no doubt that, through their continuous media presence, the historical royal family become involuntary, discursive macro actors in *THE CROWN*'s overall network. However, the series' historical background is most relevant not because of its influence on the fictional text but because of its purpose to aid *THE CROWN*'s marketing as a commercial product. Tangible historical references enable the series to capitalise on the significant global profile of the royal family. The Windsors' fame, together with an increase in the renown of *THE CROWN*'s cast, has created a "merging of two cults of celebrity":²⁹ that of the British royal family with that of the famous screen-actors*. As this article will show, the series' narrative composition remains relatively conventional if regarded on its own merit. It is thus through the prominence of its historical reference that *THE CROWN* has managed to attain its status as a 'prized' entertainment commodity.

Despite its historical frame of reference, one should resist the temptation of according 'realism' or historical accuracy to *THE CROWN*. While the series features historical people and events (e.g., the Suez crisis in 1956, the Great Smog of London in 1952, or Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953), these motifs are adapted, distorted, and simplified to fit the *pragmatic logic* of a serialised entertainment commodity and the *dramatic logic* of a fictional serial text. Nonetheless, fiction doubtlessly exerts considerable influence on the perception of historical facts. According to Steven Fielding:

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- 25 Simon Jenkins, "The Crown's fake history is as corrosive as fake news", *The Guardian*, November 16, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/16/the-crown-fake-history-news-tv-series-royal-family-artistic-licence>.
 - 26 David Sims, "*The Crown* Is a Sweeping, Sumptuous History Lesson", *The Atlantic*, November 4, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/the-crown-netflix-review/506522/>.
 - 27 Evelyn Toynton, "Happy and Glorious: The Crown", *Salmagundi* no. 195 (Summer, 2017): 259.
 - 28 Harry Leslie Smith, "The Crown's portrayal of history is an insult to my generation's struggles", *The Guardian*, November 8, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/nov/08/the-crown-portrayal-of-history-insult-to-my-generations-struggles>.
 - 29 Andrew Higson, "From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 359.

Research indicates that even audiences primed with the facts are likely to believe the most blatantly erroneous screen renderings of real events. This is also true of those who possess first-hand knowledge of the subject depicted.³⁰

Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter have shown how “retrovisions”, that is, fictionalised renderings of history, can prompt new interpretations creating “a subversive countermyth about the past”.³¹ Sylke Satjukow and Rainer Gries propose a similar concept they call “para-history”.³² For them, fictional narrative texts that explicitly reference historical events create a new, changed vision of history in a cooperative process between production entities and recipients.³³ As Giselle Bastin states, the fictionalisation of a real historical source is delicate, particularly when dealing with a subject as emotionally charged as the British royal family.³⁴ According to her, biopics about the Windsors find themselves in a “double-bind”:³⁵ audiences will (1) be quickly disappointed if the text’s presentation does not reflect their own imaginary of the royal family; (2) the myth of the historical royal family is, in part, infringed upon through the fictional presentation of their backstage lives, confronting audiences with “an ‘aura’ [...] that is eroded twice over in the adaption process”.³⁶

In fictionalising not only a present-day historical royal family but a living monarch, *THE CROWN* marks a break from several established (albeit waning) conventions. As Bastin notes:

until comparatively recently, it was deemed improper to present a living sovereign on stage or in film in dramatic form at all. This belief is tied to the notion that the Monarch is somehow sacred – un-filmable, even.³⁷

Indeed, the historical royal family have been conscious of “negotiat[ing] their place in the popular imagination on their own terms”.³⁸ Accordingly, fictionalisations of the British

30 Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British politics on Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 15.

31 Deborah Cartmell and I.Q. Hunter, “Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature”, in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto, 2001), 2.

32 Sylke Satjukow and Rainer Gries, “Hybride Geschichte und Para-Historie: Geschichtsaneignung in der Mediengesellschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 19, 2016): 13f. My translation: “Para-Historie”.

33 Sylke Satjukow and Rainer Gries, “Hybride Geschichte und Para-Historie: Geschichtsaneignung in der Mediengesellschaft des 21. Jahrhunderts”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 19, 2016): 14f.

34 Giselle Bastin, “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family”, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 35f, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2009.10846787>.

35 Bastin, “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family”, 36.

36 Bastin, “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family”, 36.

37 Bastin, “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family”, 34.

38 Bastin, “Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family”, 34.

monarchy have traditionally been hagiographies of long-deceased monarchs, most often Victoria and Elizabeth I.³⁹

It has been argued that breaking the taboo to fictionally portray a living monarch and the royal family's private lives is the result of a long process of the royal family's conscious instrumentalization of the media. It arguably begins with Victoria and Albert embracing the emerging medium of photography (and encouraging the dissemination of royal portraits) and later film⁴⁰ and includes milestones such as televising Elizabeth II's coronation, the publicised wedding of Diana and Charles, and Diana's equally televised funeral.⁴¹ The couple's heavy instrumentalization of the press in promoting (1) their 'fairy-tale marriage' and (2) their subsequent divorce dealings has been regarded to have contributed to a further decline in media deference towards the royal family. As Bastin argues, "the Waleses' collusion with the media gave the filmmakers tacit approval to do whatever they wished with the story".⁴²

Bastin notes that "the start of the 'Age of Diana' shifted the ground on what was allowable in filmed versions of the Royals' lives".⁴³ Fictional on-screen portrayals of the contemporary monarchy started in the US with movie adaptations of the Diana-and-Charles story (pre- and post-divorce). Bastin locates the release of the first two Diana-and-Charles biopics in September 1981.⁴⁴ However, there remained, as Mandy Merck notes, a "comparative reluctance of British producers to portray living members of the royal family in dramatic works until recently".⁴⁵ Many formulaic Diana-and-Charles films came with the explicit understanding that they would not be shown in the UK.⁴⁶ The feature film *THE QUEEN* (UK) became the "first full-length cinematic representation of a reigning British sovereign"⁴⁷ as late as 2006 (it is no coincidence that its auteur function, Peter Morgan, likewise serves as *THE CROWN*'s showrunner and personifies, as I have noted in chapter 3, the series' discursive showrunner function).

Having been produced for the macro actor Netflix, the US-American affiliation of *THE CROWN*'s network and its aim at Netflix's international, largely non-British audiences (another macro actor) arguably contributed to the series' comparatively lax attitude towards royal sacrosanctity. *THE CROWN* presumes to show not only members of the royal family but the Queen herself in an ambivalent and, at times, unflattering light.

39 See Mandy Merck, "Introduction", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 6–10.

40 Merck, "Introduction", 3 and 5f; Ian Christie, "A very wonderful process: Queen Victoria, Photography and Film at the Fin de Siècle", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, 23–46.

41 Merck, "Introduction", 4.

42 Ciselle Bastin, "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family", *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2009.10846787>

43 Bastin, "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family", 40.

44 Bastin, "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family", 40.

45 Mandy Merck, "Introduction", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 4. See also Mark Lawsons overview of evolving representational practices concerning British fictionalisations of the royal family in the UK: Mark Lawson, "One is ready for one's close-up", *The Guardian*, September 8, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/sep/08/3>.

46 Bastin, "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family", 40.

47 Merck, "Introduction", 4.

It even portrays the monarch's bathroom routine, complete with her sitting on the toilet before her 25th jubilee.⁴⁸ However, whether the series is genuinely critical of the institution remains doubtful, as I will discuss shortly.

THE CROWN arguably influenced the further serial treatment of the British monarch. By comparison, the hyperreal UK-satire THE WINDSORS (2016-present) shows the royal family in a much more explicitly satirical light, Elizabeth II. herself, however, does not appear in the series' otherwise irreverent portrayals. With a much more nationally limited target audience, the UK production THE WINDSORS, despite its often-savage mockery of the monarchy, shies away from breaking the taboo of fictionalising the monarch. The HBO-Max Production THE PRINCE (USA, 2021-present), on the other hand, features satirical cartoon versions of all current members of the royal family (including Elizabeth II) and is an example of how far the possibilities of fictionalising a living monarch have evolved in recent years.

The anxiety about THE CROWN's portrayal of the monarchy, its historical accuracy, and its influence on audiences has not only afflicted critics, scholars, and conservative politicians.⁴⁹ Interviewers have even seized the opportunity to approach Elizabeth II's grandson, Prince Harry, for commentary shortly after his heavily mediated 'resignation' from the royal family in 2020. Harry went on record stating about THE CROWN:

Of course, it's not strictly accurate, but loosely, it gives you a rough idea about what that lifestyle, what the pressures of putting duty and service above family and everything else, what can come from that.⁵⁰

With the prince's recent attempts to establish a public persona independent of the Windsor family, his comments should be taken cum grano salis as part of the continuum of the 'royal soap opera'. Thus, Harry's quote is interesting not for its affirmation of the series' presumed historical accuracy but for another reason: By referring to the "pressures of putting duty and service above family and everything else", he inadvertently mentions the central dichotomy that underlies most narrative renderings of monarchy, including THE CROWN.

4.2 The Queen's Two Bodies: How to Dramatize a Monarchy

THE CROWN's focus on the central narrative dichotomy of *responsibility vs personal need* has been frequently remarked upon, e.g., by Ib Bondebjerg, who calls the series a "classic

48 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, "Cri de Coeur", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859>, 53.07".

49 See my previous mention of former UK culture secretary Oliver Dowden's request for a historical disclaimer: Lanre Bakare, "UK culture secretary to ask Netflix for 'health warning' that The Crown is fictional", *The Guardian*, November 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/nov/29/the-crown-netflix-health-warning-fictional-oliver-dowden>.

50 BBC, "Prince Harry on Life in California and what he thinks about The Crown", February 26, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-56208342>.

story of duty and freedom".⁵¹ Thom Cavalli, likewise, describes how, in the series, "public persona must take precedence over individuality".⁵² Furthermore, Paolo Braga notes:

Every episode of the show follows a clear format which explores, in different circumstances, the irreconcilable conflict between Elizabeth the wife, mother, and sister and Elizabeth the Queen.⁵³

However, it should be noted here that Braga's claim of THE CROWN being a "progressive study of only one character"⁵⁴ underestimates the series. Indeed, while Elizabeth II is THE CROWN's protagonist, many members of her family, e.g., her husband Philip, her sister Margaret, and her children Charles and Anne, feature in their own plotlines and face their version of the struggle of having to reconcile diverging public and personal requirements.

For the fictional Elizabeth II and her family and following intradiegetic logic, the constant incongruence between personal desire and royal duty creates what psychologist E. Tory Higgins has called a "self-discrepancy", that is, for our purposes here, an incongruence between the three "basic domains of the self".⁵⁵ They are the "*actual* self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually possess", the "*ideal* self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess",⁵⁶ and the "*ought* self, which is your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess".⁵⁷ Higgins notably points out that the particular incongruity between the ideal self and the ought self describes the "classic literary example of the conflict between a hero's 'personal wishes' and his or her 'sense of duty'".⁵⁸

As I have noted with regard to Hegel, the *poetry vs prose* dichotomy is a well-established narrative motif in fiction of all types. It constitutes a fundamental principle of the dramatic logic of monarchy fiction. Abbiss, while underestimating the actual reach of the trope, e.g., points out that THE CROWN's character's struggle to consolidate personal and ceremonial identity innovates on a theme going back to Shakespeare.⁵⁹ It is ultimately the central struggle at the heart of every coming-of-age story. Accordingly,

51 Ib Bondebjerg, *Screening Twentieth-Century Europe: Television, History, Memory* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan/Springer, 2020), 127.

52 Thom F. Cavalli, "For the Love of God and Country, the Making of a President", *Jung Journal* 12, no.1 (February 2018): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19342039.2018.1403259>.

53 Paolo Braga, "Narrative Rhetoric in Representing the British Aristocracy: Julian Fellowes and Peter Morgan", in *The British Aristocracy in Popular Culture: Essays on 200 Years of Representations*, ed. Stefania Michelucci, Ian Duncan, and Luisa Villa (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 230.

54 Braga, "Narrative Rhetoric", 221.

55 E. Tory Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect", *Psychological Review* 94, no.3 (1987): 320f.

56 Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy", 320.

57 Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy", 321.

58 Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy", 321.

59 Will Abbiss, "Proposing a Post-heritage Critical Framework: The Crown, Ambiguity, and Media Self-consciousness", *Television & New Media* 21, no. 8 (August 2019): 832, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419866427>.

Braga, regarding *THE CROWN*, states, “The narrative macro frame structuring the show is that of the educational path”, presenting “the apprenticeship of a queen”.⁶⁰

THE CROWN, however, presents a monarchy-specific variation of the dichotomic *poetry vs prose* motif. As a fundamental structure of its plot-driving conflicts, the series evokes the aforementioned pre-enlightened doctrine of “The King's Two Bodies” that Ernst H. Kantorowicz described in his influential study of the same name. Formulated in Elizabethan times, this concept of monarchy sees the sovereign as a dual being in possession of, on the one hand, a mortal, physical body natural and, on the other hand, a ceremonial, immortal, and transferrable “superbody or body politic”⁶¹ constituted by the impersonal concept of the King*Queen. In *THE CROWN*, this motif takes the shape of an identity diffusion caused by the demonstrative conflict between the body politic and body natural of Elizabeth II and – to a lesser extent – her family.

The trope of the Queen's two bodies is omnipresent in *THE CROWN*. Upon Elizabeth's ascension to the throne, her grandmother, Queen Mary, lays out the ground rules for the series' future conflicts – arguably much more for the *dramatic* purpose of orienting the audience than *intradiegetic* necessity –, stating:

while you mourn your father, you must also mourn someone else: Elizabeth Mountbatten. For she has now been replaced by another person: Elizabeth Regina. The two Elizabeths will frequently be in conflict with one another [...].⁶²

Mary's remarks express *THE CROWN*'s central theme and establish the specific nature of the predominant conflict the protagonist will face as queen. The very title of the series reflects the central position that Elizabeth's struggle with the mythical concept of monarchy and ‘the crown’ holds within its narrative. According to the K2B doctrine, the crown, historically, “was distinct from both *rex* and *regnum*”.⁶³ Kantorowicz writes:

the crown by its perpetuity was superior to the physical *rex* as it was superior to the geographical *regnum* while, at the same time, it was on par with the continuity of the dynasty and the sempiternity of the body politic.⁶⁴

Accordingly, in the series' diegesis, ‘the crown’ is repeatedly and explicitly treated as a separate mythical entity, at times, almost as an individual. Elizabeth's uncle, the abdicated King Edward (née David) e.g., claims that the crown “always finds its way to the right

60 Paolo Braga, “Narrative Rhetoric in Representing the British Aristocracy: Julian Fellowes and Peter Morgan”, in *The British Aristocracy in Popular Culture: Essays on 200 Years of Representations*, ed. Stefania Michelucci, Ian Duncan, and Luisa Villa (Jefferson: McFarland, 2020), 230.

61 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

62 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 2, “Hyde Park Corner”, directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025758?trackId=255824129,52.52>.

63 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 341. Original emphasis.

64 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 342. Original emphasis.

head".⁶⁵ In the scene, glimpses of a mythical, supernatural notion of medieval monarchy briefly replace the postmodern, democratic sensibility according to which a sovereign is chosen by a mixture of luck and public accord rather than an act of God. The idea of 'the crown' as an individual body politic that is separate from the human head that wears it is suggested not only by the series' title and diegetic comments but also by its intro. It shows not people but a growing golden crown, taking shape almost organically to the tunes of the series' at once grandiose and sinister Hans Zimmer-theme song.

In *THE CROWN*'s variation of the *poetry vs prose* motif, the conflict between the juxtaposed requirements of the royals' body politic and body natural requires uncompromising submission to a game with rigid pre-existing rules. A royal's coming-of-age does not involve the development of moral, intellectual, and social maturity but total conformity. As Elizabeth learns from her grandmother in one of the series' defining scenes: wherever the demands of royalty and personal needs do not align, "the crown must win, must always win".⁶⁶

The "implicit renegotiation" of the K2B doctrine is, as Andrew Higson points out, a common trope in contemporary monarchy fiction.⁶⁷ Kantorowicz himself remarks that while the K2B doctrine has vanished "from modern constitutional thought [it] still has a very real and human meaning today".⁶⁸ For Kantorowicz, this narrative prominence is due to Shakespeare, who, in plays like *Richard II*, "eternalized that metaphor".⁶⁹ Accordingly, the general motif of a narrative identity diffusion caused by the K2B predicament is present in many fictional accounts of monarchy.⁷⁰ Sheri Chinen Biesen accordingly notes:

65 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 8, "Dangling Man", directed by Sam Donovan, written by David Hancock and Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215738?trackId=200257859>, 37.14".

66 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 2, "Hyde Park Corner", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025758?trackId=255824129>, 53.15".

67 Andrew Higson, "From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 353.

68 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 26.

69 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 26.

70 See, e.g., mentions to that effect in Giselle Bastin, "Filming the Ineffable: Biopics of the British Royal Family", *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2009.10846787>; Mandy Merck, "Introduction", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 4f; Nicola Rehling, "When Words Fail. The King's Speech as Melodram", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, 384f. The motif is likewise the implicit object of extensive fictional exploration in Thomas Mann's 1909 novel "Königliche Hoheit" [*Royal Highness*].

The Crown evokes other feature films, documentaries, BBC historical period drama biopics, royal history programs, and television mini-series on the royal family, Queen Elizabeth and Winston Churchill, including *The King's Speech* and *The Darkest Hour*.⁷¹

It is fascinating to observe how the K2B trope has become an implicit motif for all kinds of narratives featuring royalty, both fictional and historical. Remembering the historical Prince Harry's affirmation of the strain of royal "duty and service",⁷² it is remarkable that the K2B motif is present even in the historical British royal family's official self-conception. What is the cause for this widespread application?

Following the requirements of dramatic logic (and largely ignoring historical fact), the K2B's prominence is partly due to the fact that it constitutes a convenient way to adapt the complex historical phenomenon of monarchy into the established narrative formula of the *poetry vs prose* dichotomy. As a time-tested pattern that is easily recognisable to audiences across various levels of cultural literacy, it serves to condense a complex and ambivalent concept like the British monarchy into an easily understandable, non-threatening, and (commercially) successful narrative.

The widespread use of this narrative trope is a reaction to the difficulty of turning a monarch into a protagonist that is, if not likeable, at least relatable. Outside the fictional identity diffusion of the narrative K2B trope, a monarch's uniquely privileged position and the profoundly aleatory nature of monarchy itself pose a problem for popular dramatic logic's requirements for creating relatable characters. As Roger Caillois points out, a monarch is a result of an accident of birth which

enthrones a being that is distinguished in nothing – apart from this lucky coincidence – from the masses over which it is called upon to rule by a blind act of fate.⁷³

For him, this "pure judgement of an absolute *alea*"⁷⁴ creates an unbridgeable divide between the monarch and his*her subjects. According to Caillois, a monarch's continued existence encourages the persistent wish among subjects to make him*her part of their common frame of reference. The result is the familiar narrative of a monarch burdened by the crown and the privileges heaped upon him*her, a monarch lacking liberty and human warmth.⁷⁵ Caillois writes:

71 Sheri Chinen Biesen, "Binge watching the Past: Netflix's Changing Cinematic Nostalgia from Classic Films to Long-Form Original Programs", in *Netflix Nostalgia: Streaming the Past on Demand*, ed. Kathryn Pallister (London: Lexington, 2019), 50.

72 BBC, "Prince Harry on Life in California and what he thinks about The Crown", February 26, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-56208342>.

73 Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 155. My translation: "[...] inthronisiert ein Wesen, das sich – abgesehen von dieser glücklichen Fügung – in nichts von der Masse derer unterscheidet, über die es auf Grund eines blinden Schicksalsspruches zu herrschen berufen ist".

74 Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen*, 155. My translation: "reines Urteil eines absoluten *alea*". Original emphasis.

75 Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch*, transl. Peter Geble (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 155.

One wishes him [the monarch] to be simple, soulful, and, above all, crushed by the splendour and the honours to which he is condemned. In order to have to envy him less, one mourns him.⁷⁶

The “bizarre mixture of envy and pity” surrounding the monarch⁷⁷ expresses itself in the narrative transformation of the K2B doctrine into the *poetry vs prose* motif. At least for popular dramatic logic, it remains the most suitable way to turn an otherwise infinitely remote figure into a relatable, easily legible, and even likeable fictional character. Unsurprisingly, historical monarchs have often sought to evoke this trope in creating their own mediated representations. However, it is by no means a reflection of historical accuracy.

4.3 Some Notes on Typecasting and THE CROWN's Season Divide

A general recalibration occurs after THE CROWN's first two seasons. It is most notable in the complete change of cast with, e.g., Olivia Coleman (Elizabeth), Helena Bonham-Carter (Margaret), Tobias Menzies (Philip) and Charles Dance (Louis Mountbatten) replacing the younger actors Claire Foy, Vanessa Kirby, Matt Smith and Greg Wise in their respective roles. This recasting is remarkable for several reasons. It (1) significantly increased the cast's overall international profile, particularly with Coleman and Bonham-Carter being famous actresses in the Western world, and thus THE CROWN's standing as a cultural commodity.

However, this change of cast (2) corresponds to the series' recalibration as a more ambivalent (if by no means critical) portrayal of the royal family themselves. The reshuffle arguably constitutes a notable act of typecasting, allowing the series to profit from its stars' particular profiles to create its narrative's meaning, thus turning them into discursive, macro actantial *functions* within the series' network. Olivia Coleman, e.g., rose to international fame, not least, through her Academy Award-winning performance as a slightly dull, tragicomic Queen Anne in the 2018 feature film THE FAVOURITE (Giorgos Lanthimos: UK/Ireland/USA). Charles Dance became known as the ruthless Machiavellian patriarch Tywin Lannister in HBO's serial-blockbuster GAME OF THRONES (USA/UK, 2011–2019). Helena Bonham-Carter starred as a young Queen Elizabeth (“Queen Mum”) in the monarchy film THE KING'S SPEECH (Tom Hooper: UK/USA/Australia, 2010). She primarily gained international renown for her rendition of unhinged characters, e.g., her part as crazed villain Bellatrix Lestrange in the HARRY POTTER franchise (2001–2011) or her role as the unstable Marla Singer in the 1999 cult movie FIGHT CLUB (David Fincher: USA). This typecasting visibly corresponds to (and supports) the evolving presentation of the respective characters in THE CROWN. The performance of Coleman, e.g., adds an

76 Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen*, 155. My translation: “Man wünscht ihn sich einfach, gefühlvoll und vor allem erdrückt vom Prunk und den Ehren, zu denen er verurteilt ist. Um ihn weniger beneiden zu müssen, beklagt man ihn”.

77 Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen*, 155. My translation: “Eine bizarre Mischung aus Neid und Mitleid umgibt so das höchste Amt [...]”.

ambivalent note to the Queen's character. Bonham-Carter's rendition of Princess Anne comes with expected notions of eccentricity and mental instability. Charles Dance's Louis Mountbatten is a somewhat sinister, patriarchal figure that evokes his former breakout role.

The change of cast also brings with it a change in the series' plot structure. *THE CROWN*'s first two seasons often revolve around games involving Elizabeth II's coming-of-age and her coming to terms with her new position as queen. It is a narrative structure befitting a relatively young cast whose international profile was, in part, sharpened by their roles in *THE CROWN* (although Claire Foye, at least to a British audience, was already somewhat royally typecast through her part as Anne Boleyn in the *BBC Two* mini-series *WOLF HALL* (UK, 2015)).

However, after the change of cast and with the beginning of the third season, the series features a middle-aged queen Elizabeth (Coleman), who has generally managed to settle in her role as monarch through persistence, patience, and passage of time. Thus, the earlier seasons' central coming-of-age element is replaced by more diversified plot-lines that prominently feature the struggles of individual members of the royal family, e.g., Elizabeth's son Charles in season three and his wife, Diana, in season four. The increasingly populated network of a fictional family serves an essential *pragmatic* and *dramatic* need of serial television: it provides a large pool of interconnected characters with virtually unlimited structural potential for conflict-rich games.

4.4 The Monarch's Two Bodies Game

Being situated in the primarily demonstrative, dramatic medium of television, *THE CROWN*, like most popular TV series, presents its plot as well as most of its characters' internal developments through tangible, external interactions with other characters. *THE CROWN* operationalises its dominant K2B trope in a recurring narrative transactional pattern that I want to call the *Monarch's two Bodies* game (M2B game). Understanding this game is crucial for the structural analysis of fictional politics because it reoccurs, in one form or another, throughout most dramatizations of institutionalised power structures and their inhabitants.⁷⁸ It can appear as a central plot driving force, as in *THE CROWN*, or as a secondary game meant to establish hierarchies, e.g., through rigid insistence on forms of address of officials with elevated ceremonial status. As later chapters will illustrate, the latter example is particularly pertinent in US-American dramatizations of the US presidency.

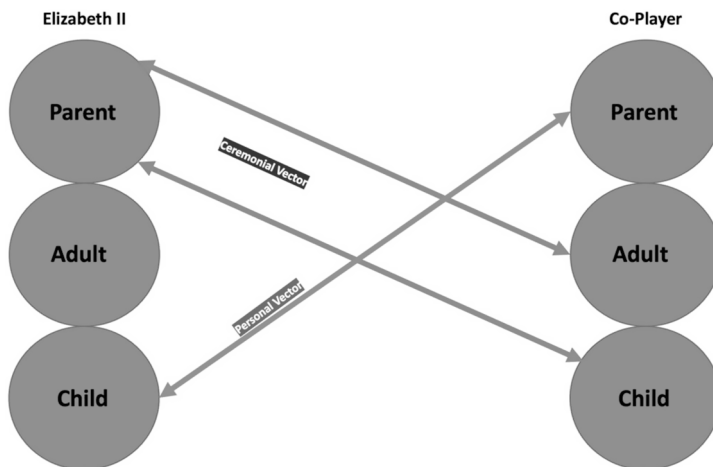
With its reference to the well-known narrative K2B motif, the M2B game is easily recognisable for most audiences, so much so that it has established a certain self-evidence in how it structures the presentation of fictional monarchies. As a narrative motif, the M2B game is so common that it tends to evoke notions of realism for audiences that

78 Friedrich Balke, e.g., remarks on the field of tension between the presidential body politic and body natural in *THE WEST WING*: Friedrich Balke, "Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in *The West Wing*", in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein and Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2015), 85.

hide its true origin in a series' dramatic logic. In *THE CROWN*, the M2B game is the central source of conflict for the series' plot-driving games.

The M2B game consists of two central actants: One is a ceremonially elevated individual, which I want to call the *Monarch* (in *THE CROWN*, this is usually Elizabeth II or members of the royal family when interacting with lower-ranking individuals). The other is a ceremonially inferior Co-Player (e.g., other family members, government officials, secretaries, servants). In a configuration where it serves to create conflict, the M2B game features an ulterior transactional structure that structurally mimics the body politic–body natural dichotomy of the K2B trope. All transactions with the *Monarch* take place on two distinct vectors: an ostensible ceremonial and an ulterior personal one (see figure 14).

Figure 14: *The Monarch's two Bodies game – Example: Young Elizabeth II with undefined co-player*



Transactions on the ceremonial vector usually follow a prescribed Parent (*Monarch*)-Child (*co-player*) structure that is guided by ritualised protocol. However, the ulterior personal vector depends on the two players' individual qualities and the nature of their relationship. Where both vectors do not align, the M2B game becomes a source of conflict, either because it causes the two players to clash or because it causes the *Monarch* player to struggle with his*her own inability to consolidate the two vectors.

Following intradiegetic logic, the ceremonial vector acts as an aid in the navigation of the sovereign's tricky double nature. By providing a fixed set of rules for all games involving royalty (rigid forms of address such as “your majesty”, “mam”, “your royal highness”, bows and curtsies, to mention just a few), it serves to allow the sovereign to incorporate his*her body politic and hide his*her body natural, depending on the co-player's willingness to focus on the former and overlook the latter.

The *Monarch* is an *adjusted* player who makes no changes to the overall game and functions as arbiter and guarantor of the game and its rules. In *THE CROWN*, Elizabeth II's

unquestioned ceremonial precedence thus turns the ongoing royal interactions into *co-operative* games where rules can be enforced and transgressions punished.

In *THE CROWN*, all players play a double-game with, on the one hand, Elizabeth Windsor as a wife/sister/daughter/mother/friend and, on the other hand, Elizabeth II. as the Queen. In order to create suitable narrative conflict, there exists a dramatic rule that ensures that the interests of these two roles and the game's two transactional vectors seldomly align. This rule, which results exclusively from dramatic logic, serves to create tension between the private Elizabeth Windsor and Queen Elizabeth II as well as her co-players. To a lesser extent, this rule applies to all members of the royal family.

In the first two seasons, the M2B game serves to operationalise Elizabeth's coming-of-age as queen narratively. As the game's *Monarch*, Elizabeth Regina and her co-players communicate in highly ritualised complementary Parent (her)-Child (them) transactions on the ceremonial vector. In the case of respected and experienced players such as Tommy Lascelles, the Queen's long-serving private secretary, or Winston Churchill, the aged prime minister and (albeit diminishing) "father of the nation",⁷⁹ they occur in a slight variation as complementary Parent (Queen)-Adult (co-player) transactions. However, as an individual who is – as Elizabeth herself frequently states – relatively uneducated, inexperienced, and shy, the ulterior personal vector looks different. In the series' first two seasons, a young Elizabeth (Claire Foy) often tends to engage in transactions on the personal vector following the reverse Child (her)-Parent (co-player) pattern she was used to as a princess, thus emphasising the incongruity between her two roles. In the series' third and fourth seasons, an experienced full-fledged Queen Elizabeth almost exclusively engages in complementary Parent (her)-Child (co-player) or Parent (her)-Adult (co-player) transactions on both vectors, having consolidated her personal needs and the demands of her office.

In the narrative structure of *THE CROWN*, the M2B game fulfils a central function. The opposing configuration of the game's two configurations, which Elizabeth must integrate into all games of which she is a part, creates constant tension not only within herself as she battles to unify these roles but also between her and her co-players.

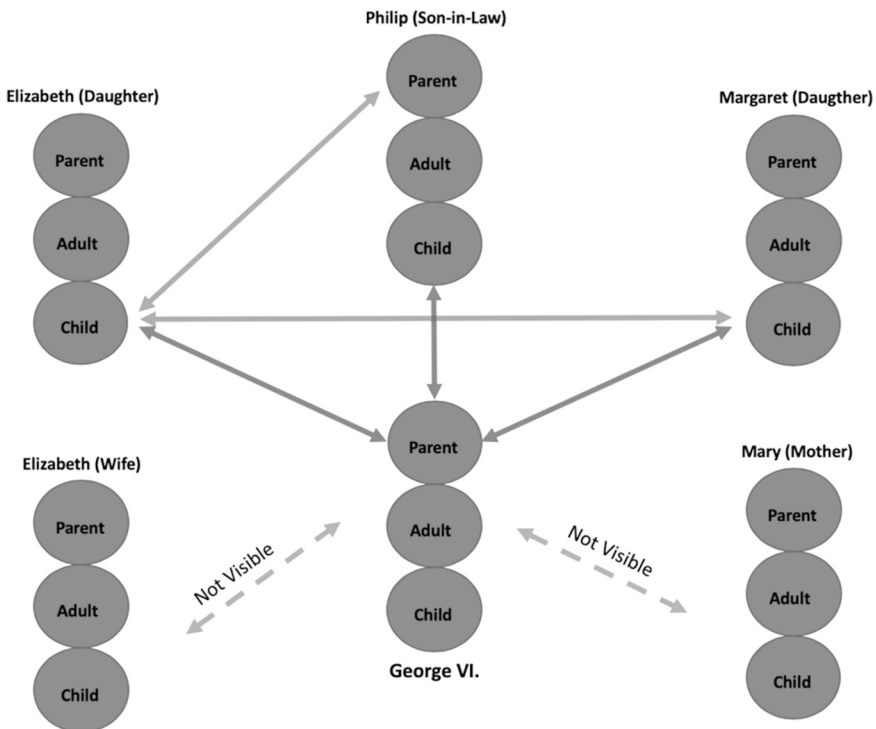
The pragmatic and dramatic logics of serial perpetuity and innovation and repetition become visible here, too: After Elizabeth's successful completion of her royal apprenticeship (and that of her husband and sister, which occur in seasons 2 and 3, respectively), the coming-of-age arc within the conflictive configuration of the M2B game is transposed onto Charles (from season 3) and his siblings and wife Diana (in season 4). It primarily plays out as a (direct or indirect) conflict between Charles and his mother/ the Queen and in marital games between Charles and Diana. Some examples will demonstrate the progression of the M2B game in *THE CROWN*.

79 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 1, "Wolferton Splash", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025757?trackId=200257859,10.48>".

4.4.1 General Configuration and Coming-of-Age Arcs

At *THE CROWN*'s outset, the royal family appears very much as a functioning harmonious unit in which everybody knows their place. Serving an expositional function, the initial episodes introduce a harmonious, patriarchal version of the M2B game featuring a *Monarch*, Elizabeth's father, George VI, who has long since completed the consolidation of his bodies natural and politic. Regarding George, the notion of relatable struggle that accompanies the narrative K2B trope is only introduced explicitly after the king's death in the first season's second episode, e.g., when his mother alludes to the burden of the crown in her letter to Elizabeth. In the third episode, she repeats this trope when she implies the burden of the crown having killed her son.⁸⁰ At the series' outset, King George is the stabilising centre of all transactions involving the royal family, consisting of himself, his wife Elizabeth (Bowes-Lyon), his mother, Queen Mary, the adult daughters Margaret and Elizabeth (the future Queen) and his son-in-law Philip (Elizabeth's husband) – see figure 15.

Figure 15: Expositional configuration of *THE CROWN*'s royal family



80 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 3, "Windsor", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025759?trackId=200257859, 08.55>.

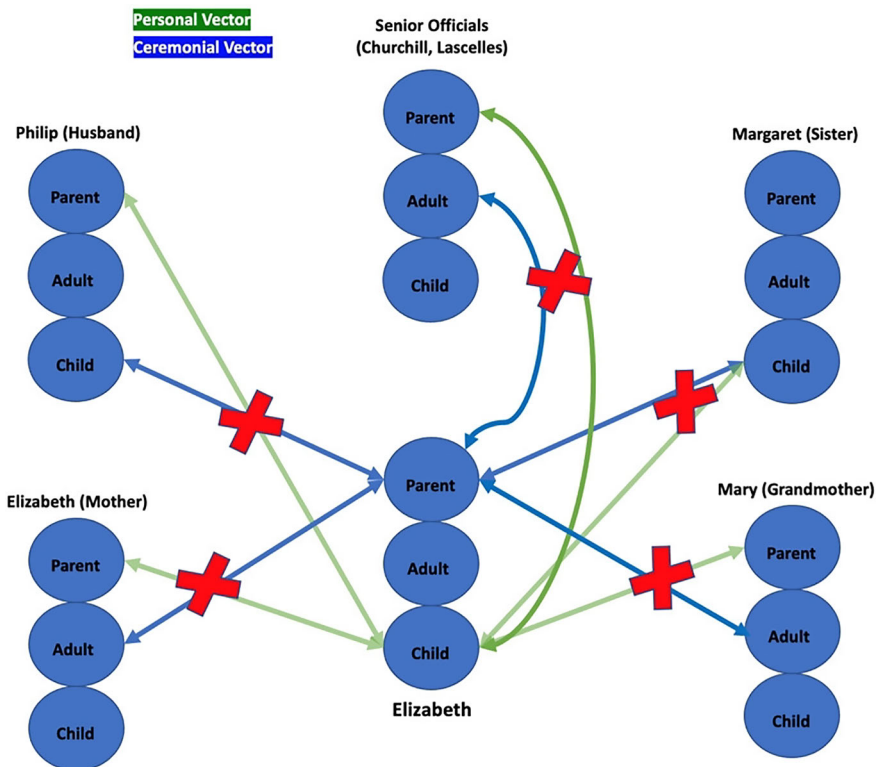
Narratively, this configuration creates little to no conflict because George appears only in interactions in which his ceremonial role as King and his private role as a respected parental father figure align. He and his family members exclusively engage in games that take the form of simple complementary Parent (George)-Child (family) transactions. The children's relationship (Elizabeth and Margaret) with their father is one of adoration and respect. Philip fears and respects his father-in-law and adheres to ceremonial precedence at all costs, even if it means standing up naked in the King's presence.⁸¹ Other games involving the King may – purely following intradiegetic logic – feature a different division of roles, such as those he might be playing with his wife or mother. However, following the configuration's expository purpose, they remain in the hyperdiegesis and are not part of the series' visible plot. Thus, the King appears as the orienting and stabilizing core of the royal family's initial game.

With the death of George VI. in the series' second episode,⁸² the initial, harmonious configuration of the Windsor family's game dissolves, thus allowing for engaging narrative conflict to arise. The king's death marks the destruction of the royal family's expository Eden-like equilibrium. Due to the hierarchical nature of primogeniture, Elizabeth, taking over as queen and thus figurating the family game's *Monarch* actant, becomes the new centre of the overall family unit. However, while ceremonially undisputed, her personal position is initially far less consolidated than her father's. Elizabeth's previous personal configurations from her time as a princess (usually Child (her)-Parent (co-player) transactions) now clash with the M2B game's ceremonial vector's additional requirements, thus demonstrating (and emphasising) her identity diffusion and creating the potential for (narratively engaging) conflictive crossed transactions (see figure 16). I will discuss those in more detail in the coming sections. Her figurating the *Monarch* actant likewise introduces a new set of ulterior transactions with a host of experienced and confident senior officials who pay tribute to Elizabeth Regina's ceremonial role while playing to Elizabeth Windsor's personal weaknesses (Child (her)-Parent (co-player)). This evolution transforms the hitherto static configuration of the consolidated M2B game into a dynamic and conflictive structure, which sets off the games that constitute the first two seasons' coming-of-age arc.

81 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 1, "Wolferton Splash", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025757?trackId=200257859,50.08>.

82 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 2, "Hyde Park Corner", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025758?trackId=255824129>.

Figure 16: Conflictive configuration after Elizabeth's figuration of the Monarch actant



4.4.2 The Price of Monarchy

Throughout its first four seasons, *THE CROWN* elaborates both on the price of successful participation in the M2B game and the consequences of an unsuccessful one. In a cruel over-the-top interpretation of Hegel's dictum, facing the *prose of reality* in the successful completion of the royal apprenticeship seems to include eradicating all *poetry of the heart*. In *THE CROWN*, Elizabeth's coming-of-age as queen in the M2B configuration equals the struggle of becoming the embodiment of the sovereign by approaching as closely as possible the body politic of Elizabeth Regina at the cost of her human body natural. In a photo session that marks the end of season one's finale, she is revealingly told:

That's it, there. [...] Not moving, not breathing. Our very own goddess. Glorious Gloriana. Forgetting Elizabeth Windsor now. Now only Elizabeth Regina.⁸³

Transactionally speaking, Elizabeth increasingly loses the ability to access the M2B game's personal vector as her monarchical development progresses. Her coming-of-age appears as the slow death of her human side in favour of perceived duty. As a player of

83 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 10, "Gloriana", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025766?trackId=200257859>, 52.42".

the M2B game, this manifests in Elizabeth taking increasingly cold and detached Parent or (with respected co-players) Adult positions in personal transactions that mirror her ceremonial status. The older Elizabeth's self-admitted emotional coldness and detachment as a wife, mother, and sister, e.g., are regarded – and almost universally accepted – as the direct and unavoidable result of her being “mother to the nation”.⁸⁴ An unsolicited hug from an emotionally desperate Diana leaves the middle-aged Queen so puzzled that she silently leaves the room (various personal and ceremonial transactional vectors cross here).⁸⁵ She later affirms Anne's baffled response to the event, who exclaims, “I feel sick”.⁸⁶ Following a devastating mining accident, the experienced Queen likewise appears emotionally and intellectually unable to grasp the size of the catastrophe and her part in mitigating it. Denying her PM's request to visit the disaster site, the Queen engages Harold Wilson in the following exchange:

Elizabeth: What precisely would you have me do?

Wilson: Well ... comfort people.

Elizabeth: Put on a show? The Crown doesn't do that.

Wilson: I didn't say put on a show. I said, comfort people.⁸⁷

Throughout the series, Elizabeth largely succeeds in sacrificing her personality to approach her monarchical “superbody”.⁸⁸ Her family members fare less well. After the termination of Elizabeth's royal apprenticeship in season 2, her son Charles carries on the coming-of-age plotline in season 3, following repetitive serial continuity. His struggle with the M2B predicament primarily plays out in direct and indirect conflicts with his mother as the arbiter of the cooperative M2B game. However, unlike his mother, he remains unsuccessful in consolidating the opposing demands of personal poetry and royal prose.

A heated exchange about her son's failure to comply with the demands of the royal predicament has Elizabeth lay out the ground rules once more (following the pragmatic logic of keeping audiences oriented in long-running series, she does so frequently to ensure viewers' awareness of the series' fundamental principles):

Elizabeth: Not having a voice is something all of us have to live with. We have all made sacrifices and suppressed who we are. Some portion of our natural selves is always lost.

84 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 4, “Favourites”, directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215491?trackId=200257859>, 53.08”.

85 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, “Terra Nullius”, directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859>, 49.14”.

86 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, “Terra Nullius”, directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859>, 50.05”.

87 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 3, “Aberfan”, directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215733?trackId=200257859>, 22.26”.

88 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

[...]

To be impartial is not natural; it's not human. People will always want us to smile, or agree, or frown, or speak. And the minute that we do, we will have declared a position, a point of view. And that is the one thing, as a royal family, we are not entitled to do. Which is why we have to hide those feelings, keep them to ourselves. Because the less we do, the less we say or speak or agree or...

Charles: Think. Or breathe, or feel or exist ...

Elizabeth: ... the better.

Charles: Well, doing that is perhaps not as easy for me as it is for you.

Elizabeth: Why?

Charles: Because I have a beating heart. A character, a mind and a will of my own. I am not just a symbol; I can lead not just by wearing a uniform or by cutting a ribbon but by showing people who I am. Mommy, I have a voice!

Elizabeth: Let me let you into a secret: no one wants to hear it.

Charles: Are you talking about the country or my own family?

Elizabeth: No one.⁸⁹

In this exchange, Elizabeth once more acknowledges the need to sacrifice one's humanity to the royal cause with Charles, acknowledging his unwillingness or inability to fulfil these demands.

A royal's advance in the M2B game ultimately requires his*her adaption of a cold, impersonal Adult vector in all things personal while deferring to the monarch's Parental precedence. However, throughout the series, Charles' transactions with his mother betray his constant craving for adult approval, e.g. when he scolds her for not thanking him enough after completing an investiture tour through Wales.⁹⁰ Unable to emancipate from his mother's ceremonial Parental precedence and simultaneously unable to fulfil her expectations in sacrificing his personal needs (particularly his 'unsuitable' mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles), Charles remains trapped in a perpetual personal Child state in all interactions with his family and thus a barely tolerated and largely unsuccessful participant of the M2B game (see figure 17). Elizabeth, who, by season 4, considers her adult son to be "lost",⁹¹ e.g., scolds him saying, "If one day you expect to be king [...] then might I suggest you start to behave like one!".⁹² Even the palace's servants treat Charles more as a prop (a factor without individual agency) than an actual player, e.g., running past

89 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 6, "Tywysog Cymru", directed by Christian Schwochow, written by James Graham and Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215736?trackId=200257859>, 48.40".

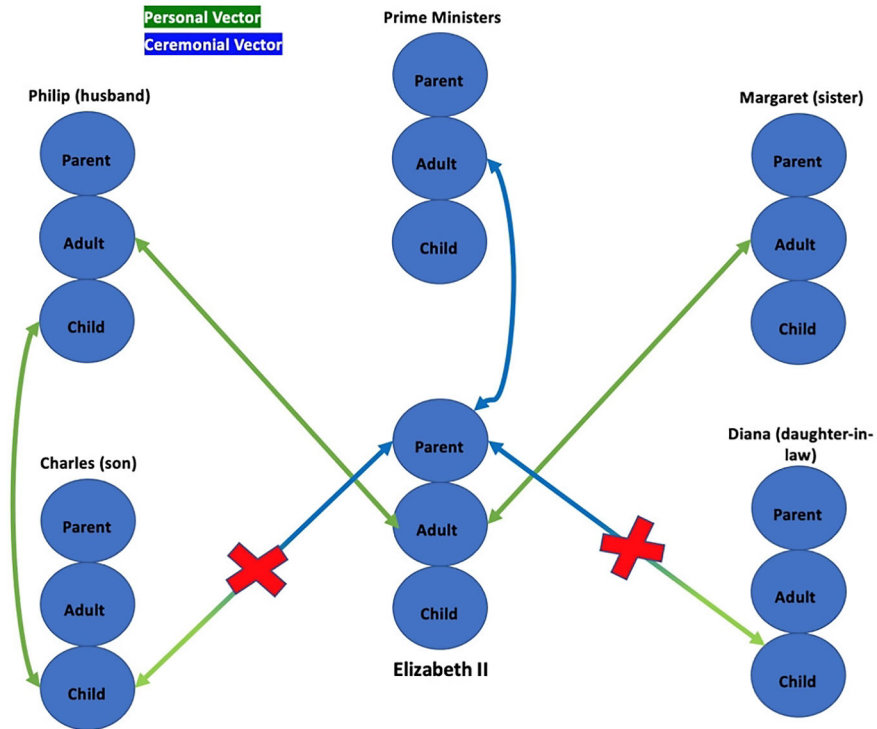
90 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 6, "Tywysog Cymru", directed by Christian Schwochow, written by James Graham and Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215736?trackId=200257859>, 47.15".

91 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 4, "Favourites", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215491?trackId=200257859>, 52.08"

92 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859>, 43.58".

him with little more than a quick obligatory “excuse me, Sir”, while he is forced to wait in front of his mother’s office door awkwardly.⁹³

Figure 17: Configuration of the M2B game with the post-coming-of-age Queen



In a blatant meta-commentary on Charles’ position within the M2B game, *THE CROWN* shows the desperate prince starring in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* and delivering a section of the play’s central monologue, which reads:

Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence. Throw away respect,
 Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty.
 For you have but mistook me all this while:
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus,
 How can you say to me, I am a king?⁹⁴

93 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 9, “Imbroglia”, directed by Sam Donovan, written by Peter Morgan, November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215739?trackId=200257859>, 28.12”.

94 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 6, “Tywysog Cymru”, directed by Christian Schwochow, written by James Graham and Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215736?trackId=200257859>, 52.05”.

The dramatic *poetry vs prose* configuration of the K2B doctrine central to this scene (how can a king incorporate the sovereign's body politic and *feel* at the same time?) is so essential to Shakespeare's play about an ill-equipped king that Kantorowicz dedicated an entire chapter of his study to *Richard II*.⁹⁵

In *THE CROWN*, Charles, unable to sacrifice his personal needs as thoroughly as his mother to the demands of the royal body politic and thus attain a secondary but respected Adult transactional position, ultimately remains trapped in his adolescent identity diffusion. Instead of becoming a competent and respected – albeit personally reduced – player of the M2B game, he resorts to turning his county house into a dream-like hide-away, his “own little Shangri-La”.⁹⁶ His progression through the royal apprenticeship remains, like that of Richard II, ill-fated and ultimately unsuccessful throughout the series, leaving him at odds with himself, his mother, the family and, indeed, most of the country. In an argument with Diana, Charles, responding to his wife's threat to start to “properly loathe” him, accordingly yells: “What took you so long? The rest of us have been there for quite some time!”⁹⁷

The M2B game is a mercilessly *cooperative* game requiring participants to submit to the *Monarch* and the rigid system she represents or remain marginalised and defeated – to “bend” or “break”,⁹⁸ as Elizabeth's mother, ‘Queen Mum’, puts it. This configuration turns the series' interactional patterns into highly agonal zero-sum games, thus creating dramatically engaging conflict. For the family, admission to superficial Adult status is only possible after completing their respective coming-of-age processes and submitting to the uncompromising game's cooperative nature (as achieved by Philip after season 2 and Margaret after season 3).

4.4.3 The Queen's CoA games: Prime Ministers and Other Officials

Some of the most central games in *THE CROWN* are those between the Queen and ‘her’ various prime ministers and other close associates and employees, such as the successive private secretaries Tommy Lascelles, Martin Adeane, and Martin Charteris. Adhering to the dramatic logic of repetition and innovation, these games always include the same actants and follow the same progression while featuring different players. In seasons 1 and 2, they operationalize Elizabeth's coming-of-age. In seasons 3 and 4, they serve to create tangible narrative action.

According to the M2B configuration, Elizabeth's games with her PMs and other associates take place in the shape of covert ulterior transactions, containing an ostensible cer-

95 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 24–41.

96 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 4, “Favourites”, directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215491?trackId=200257859,46.05>”.

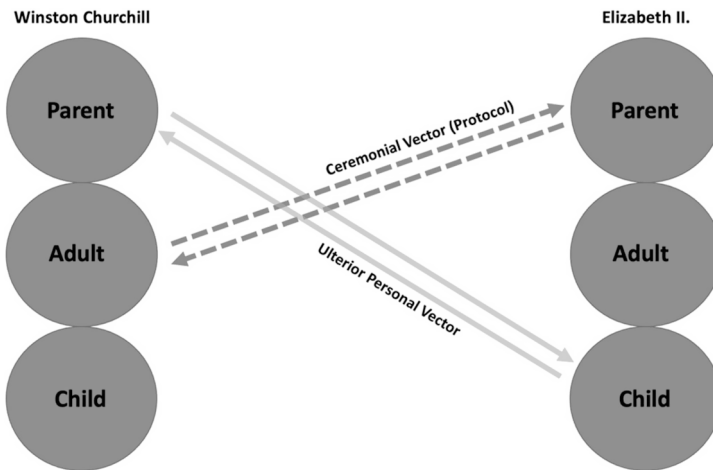
97 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 9, “Avalanche”, directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215496?trackId=200257859,05.56>”.

98 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, “Terra Nullius”, directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859,50.47>”.

emonial vector and an ulterior social vector. Following the overall M2B configuration, all royal CoA games require Elizabeth to adjust her personal interactions to the ceremonial vector. Her CoA *Mentor-Student* game with Winston Churchill illustrates this progression particularly well.

Winston Churchill, the first PM of Elizabeth II.'s reign, insists on the rigorous up-keep of the ceremonial vector, even refusing to sit down while in an audience with the Queen.⁹⁹ However, he simultaneously attempts to dominate the royal family's life, sees himself as a mentor to the young Elizabeth – claiming on various occasions that “she needs me”¹⁰⁰ – and even lectures her on the proper way to hold her audiences with him.¹⁰¹ Initially, Churchill's interactions with the Queen, therefore, take the shape of covert duplex transactions in which the ceremonial vector (Churchill: Adult – Queen: Parent) and the ulterior personal vector (Churchill: Parent – Queen: Child) diverge (see figure 18).

Figure 18: Initial configuration Mentor-Student game Churchill-Elizabeth II



As a skilled and experienced political operator and a democratically elected leader, Churchill possesses a high level of confidence and an established systemic and symbolic legitimation for his dominance over the inexperienced Queen.

The interactions between Churchill and Elizabeth take the shape of a *zero-sum* CoA game, in which one player's gain has to be balanced with the other player's loss. Churchill's ability as a player decreases proportionally to the Queen's rise in experience.

99 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 3, “Windsor”, directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025759?trackId=200257859>, 19.16”.

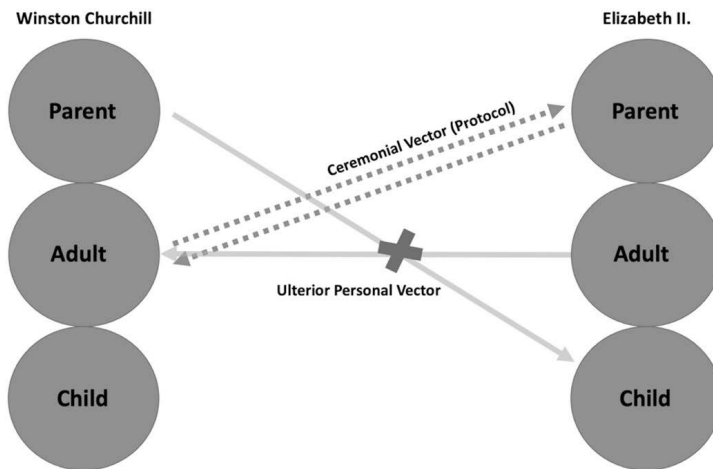
100 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 1, “Wolferton Splash”, directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025757?trackId=200257859>, 33.28”.

101 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 3, “Windsor”, directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025759?trackId=200257859>, 19.16”.

While the two processes are by no means linked by intradiegetic causality, this proportional decline fulfils the *dramatic* function of emphasising Elizabeth's coming-of-age.

Churchill's ability starts to deteriorate as the season progresses. He misjudges political crises like the London smog¹⁰² and suffers several strokes.¹⁰³ As the plot continues and Elizabeth grows in confidence and experience, the games between Churchill and the Queen notably change. There are frequent moments when Elizabeth is no longer willing to take a Child position in the transactions with her previous mentor and, instead, initiates Adult-Adult transactions. Initially, the self-confident Churchill refuses to engage in these attempts and continues to interact with the Queen in the ulterior Parent-Child configuration of the *Mentor-Student* game. This leads the duo's interactions to end in crossed transactions and abrupt termination of the interaction (see figure 19). One example of this is Churchill's overreaction to the news of Philip taking flying lessons. Elizabeth's attempt to initiate a reasonable exchange on equal footing about the matter prompts Churchill to abandon all but the thinnest layer of ceremonial reverence, eventually storming out of the room, angrily beating the wall with his walking stick.¹⁰⁴

Figure 19: Winston – Elizabeth mid-coming-of-age



The turning point in the duo's dynamic comes when Churchill withholds information about his frail health from the Queen. It leads to Elizabeth scolding her PM in a simple complementary Parent (her)-Child (him) transaction aptly named by her tutor: "a good

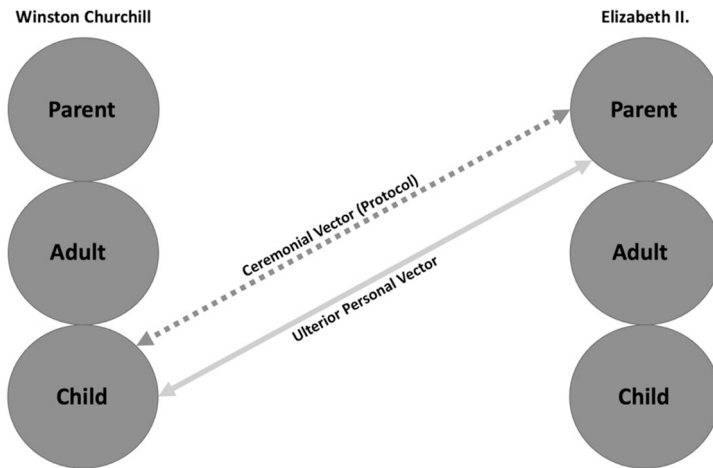
102 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 4, "Act of God", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025760?trackId=200257859>.

103 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 7, "Scientia Potentia Est", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=200257859>.

104 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 4, "Act of God", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025760?trackId=200257859>, 30.44".

dressing down from nanny",¹⁰⁵ to which the seasoned politician – already diminished as a player of the zero-sum CoA game – willingly submits. For the first time, the scene sees the M2B game's ceremonial and ulterior personal vectors align for the Queen.

Figure 20: Winston – Elizabeth post-coming-of-age



Churchill's deterioration eventually leads him to retire (season 1, episode 9: "Assassins"), leaving him an honoured but ultimately weary and powerless old man. His last audience takes the shape of a rite-of-passage for the Queen and marks the 'successful' completion of their *Mentor-Student* game (see figure 20). An emotional Churchill declares Elizabeth's maturity as queen and even kisses her on the forehead in a final gesture of parental blessing.¹⁰⁶ Subsequently, the duo's social transactions occur between a now much more confident adult Elizabeth and a much weakened "Winston", as the Queen calls the PM. Their dynamic on the personal vector is, at this point, permanently reversed, featuring complementary Parent (her)-Child (him) transactions. At a dinner in his honour at 10 Downing Street, a moved Churchill tears up during the Queen's toast.¹⁰⁷ It is a finale with diverging subjective intensity, marking the irreversible end of Churchill's political life (3rd degree) while meaning significantly less to Elizabeth, who arranges it after a suggestion from her mother.¹⁰⁸ By the start of season three, Churchill, like the Queen's other early advisors, no longer serves a function in the narrative's coming-of-age con-

105 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 7, "Scientia Potentia Est", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=200257859,45.21>.

106 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 9, "Assassins", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025765?trackId=200257859,50.19>.

107 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 9, "Assassins", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025765?trackId=200257859,57.37>.

108 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 9, "Assassins", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025765?trackId=200257859,52.04>.

figuration and, therefore, dies – in polite accordance with dramatic logic – right at the start of the season.¹⁰⁹

Elizabeth's games with later PMs mimic this initial *Mentor-Student* game's progression throughout without serving the same illustrative coming-of-age purpose. In order to create a dynamic interactional plot, they usually start by showing the Queen at a transactional disadvantage, e.g., due to her cluelessness about a particular political matter, thus causing an incongruence between her Parental superiority on the ceremonial vector and the Child (Queen)-Parent (PM) transactions on the personal vector. The situation usually develops in a way that leads Elizabeth to attempt to assert her transactional dominance leading to crossed transactional vectors on the social vector and thus conflict. It ends in a final consolidation in which the respective resigning PM reverts to a complementary Child state, ultimately allowing Elizabeth to express her benevolence in a now consolidated ceremonial and personal Parent (her)-Child (PM) transaction. The game's *dramatically* motivated zero-sum progression, e.g., causes the socialist and monarchy-sceptic Harold Wilson to develop Alzheimer's and end up highly moved by the Queen's offer to honour him with a dinner after his resignation.¹¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, having been ousted both by her party and the Queen's refusal to dissolve parliament, is similarly brought to the edge of tears after the monarch benevolently presents her with the order of merit.¹¹¹

However, as Elizabeth is largely adjusted to her royal role after completing the *Mentor-Student* game with Churchill and seeing that her ministerial co-players are equally stable in their respective identities, the game's progression usually remains superficial and does not indicate further character development. In the series, it essentially serves to structure action-based conflict surrounding the series background political events (e.g., the Falkland war,¹¹² a Cabinet reshuffle,¹¹³ or commonwealth (in)action against apartheid).¹¹⁴

Following the series' *dramatic* need for repetition, the intensity of these action-based conflicts is usually limited. More radical PMs like Wilson (left) or Thatcher (neoliberal) threaten reform but ultimately do not take tangible steps that would affect the series' core configuration (e.g., a republican revolution). Despite being an old-school socialist,

109 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 1, "Olding", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215731?trackId=200257859>.

110 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, "Cri de Coeur", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859>, 43.14".

111 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859>, 34.35".

112 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 4, "Favourites", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215491?trackId=200257859>; and *The Crown*, season 4, episode 5, "Fagan", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Jonathan D. Wilson and Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215492?trackId=200257859>.

113 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 2, "The Balmoral Test", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215489?trackId=200257859>.

114 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 8, "48:1", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215495?trackId=200257859>.

Wilson ultimately does not attempt to “rough you lot up”, as he puts it.¹¹⁵ And Thatcher, who appears as Elizabeth's rival throughout season 4 (following a common but largely unfounded perception of the two women's relationship), ultimately makes no attempt at reforming the country “from top to bottom” as she initially threatens after an ill-fated weekend-getaway with the Windsors.¹¹⁶ In fact, as part of the *cooperative* M2B game and following dramatic serial logic, all PMs and other officials in *THE CROWN* unquestioningly accept the Queen's ceremonial dominance, thus limiting intensity, leaving the series' basic configuration intact and allowing its games to repeat in subsequent episodes and with different players.

4.4.4 The Windsors' Reverse *Macbeth* Games

In *THE CROWN*, much of the plot's conflict derives from the conflictive games between the Queen and those members of her family who undergo a similar coming-of-age process in the M2B configuration (her husband Philip in seasons 1 and 2, her sister Margaret in seasons 1–3, her son Charles in season 3 and 4, Diana in season 4). These games often take on the shape of an RM game in which the unequal division of power is aggravated either by their contradiction of patriarchal gender dynamics (in the case of Philip and Charles) or by their contradiction of a more assertive personality (in the case of Margaret and Diana) and thus serves to emphasise engaging narrative conflict.

A central example is Elizabeth's games with her husband, Philip. The dynamic of their marriage before her ascension to the throne seems to follow the patriarchal layout of their generation and class, in which a dominant husband demands respect and obedience from his wife. Initially, Philip's unequal concept of matrimony seems to complement Elizabeth's desires. This is suggested not only by the fact that the couple's marriage appears happy before Elizabeth's ascension to the throne. Her pronounced insistence on keeping the promise to “obey” her husband in their marital vows is a further indication of this.¹¹⁷ The couple's initial private dynamic thus plays out in the form of simple complementary Parent (him)-Child (her) transactions (see figure 21).

However, with Elizabeth becoming queen, the dynamic of the M2B game takes over their relationship. Elizabeth's role as queen is now always a factor in the couple's marital games. This situation is complicated further by Philip's initial lack of a corresponding ceremonial/professional position. Indeed, his public role as a navy officer is taken away from him upon the ascension of his wife.¹¹⁸

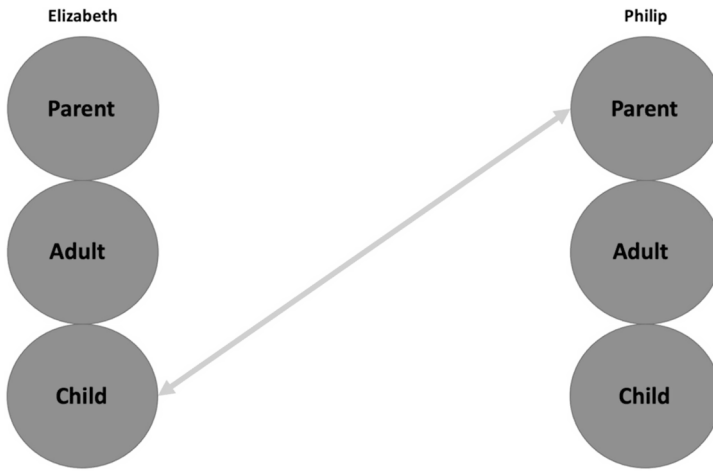
115 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, “Cri de Coeur”, directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859,44.58>”.

116 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 2, “The Balmoral Test”, directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215489?trackId=200257859,29.37>”.

117 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 1, “Wolferton Splash”, directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired, November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025757?trackId=200257859,14.30>”.

118 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 2, “Hyde Park Corner”, directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025758?trackId=255824129>.

Figure 21: Initial configuration Elizabeth-Philip



While Philip must give in on all official matters, the couple initially agrees that he is to retain his patriarchal status in private affairs.¹¹⁹ However, faithful to the dramatic logic of the conflictive M2B game, there ultimately exists no division between private life and the royal role, leading to constant conflict between the couple.

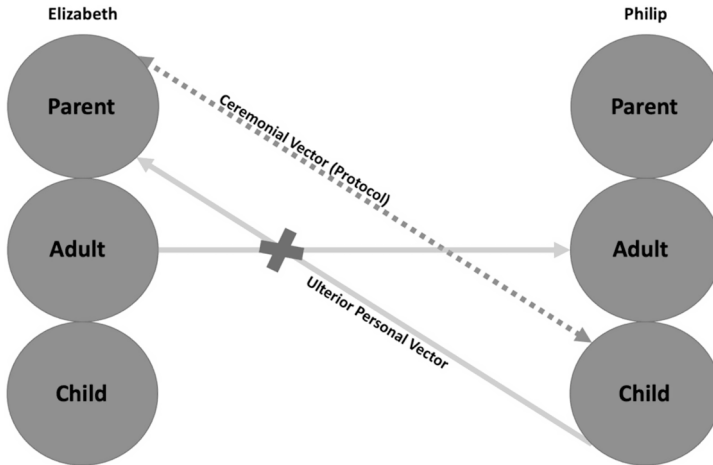
The pattern of progression for Elizabeth and Philip's RM game looks as follows: An apologetic Elizabeth sees herself forced to go against her husband's wishes in order to accommodate a demand of the crown. She will usually start a request as a wife in the couple's private patriarchal configuration in order to sway her husband (Child (her)-Parent (him), see figure 12). Philip will deny this request, asserting his dominance on a social vector by engaging his wife in complementary Parent (him)-Child (her) transactions. The failure of her request will lead Elizabeth to repeat her demand as Queen, thus reversing the couple's initial dynamic to a Parent (her)-Child (him) transaction. In turn, Philip usually accommodates this reversal by assuming the required complementary Child state. However, while this enables the continuation of the communication, it intensifies the conflict. An attempt by Elizabeth to dissolve the tension by initiating an Adult-Adult transaction on the personal vector will usually remain unsuccessful, leading to crossed transactional vectors and thus a termination of the communication (see figure 22).

Without the establishment of a stable complementary transactional pattern, the Queen's ceremonial precedence becomes the decisive factor in the argument rather than the arrival at a mutual, 'adult' agreement. Unable to refuse the Queen's request but unwilling to admit defeat, Philip will usually concede by withdrawing from the match (thus presenting a common popular motif of a character dramatically leaving a scene). As the story progresses, Philip will increasingly avoid his seemingly inevitable defeat in the marital RM games by avoiding playing altogether. Thus, the couple's relationship becomes increasingly hostile and distant. Philip's withdrawal serves a dramatic function,

119 See, e.g., *The Crown*, season 2, episode 9, "Paterfamilias", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Tom Edge and Peter Morgan, December 8, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149013?trackId=200257859>, 24.30".

too: It facilitates the deferred resolution of the conflicts central to the plot (indeed, the couple's RM game is only resolved at the end of season 2).¹²⁰

Figure 22: Conflictive termination of the Reverse Macbeth game



An excellent example of the martial RM games' structure is the couple's conflict over what name their family, and thus the royal dynasty, should take (Philip's: Mountbatten, or Elizabeth's: Windsor) and where the family should live: Clarence House (his preference) or Buckingham Palace (the Queen's choice).¹²¹

Elizabeth: I need to talk to you

Elizabeth initiates a Child (her)-Parent (him) transaction on the personal vector.

Philip: About what

Elizabeth: They'd rather we didn't keep the name... Mountbatten.

Philip: Who's they?

Elizabeth: Cabinet.

Philip: It's none of their business.

Philip tries to assert his dominance in a complementary Parent (him)-Child (her) transaction on the personal vector.

Elizabeth: I think you'll find it's very much their business.

120 *The Crown*, season 2, episode 10, "Mystery Man", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan aired December 8, 2017 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149014?trackId=200257859, 45.49>".

121 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 3, "Windsor", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025759?trackId=200257859, 53.54>".

Elizabeth abandons her Child-stance and asserts her underlying dominance by initiating a Parent (her)- Child (him) transaction on the personal vector.

Philip: You're my wife. Taking... taking my name is the law.

Elizabeth: It's the custom, not the law.

Philip: A custom practised so universally it might as well be the law. You can't do this. Am I to be the only man in the country whose wife and children don't take his name? You can't do this to Dickie [his uncle, Louis Mountbatten], it will devastate him. You know that. You know how important it is to him. I've told him the royal house Mountbatten is in the bag.

Philip shifts into a complementary Child position on the personal vector, thus enabling the communication to continue.

Elizabeth: That was a mistake. It's not. The name has to be Windsor. For stability. – There's more. Clarence House ...

Philip: Our home. What about it?

Elizabeth: We have to give it up. The home of the sovereign of the United Kingdom is Buckingham Palace.

Philip: Says who?

Elizabeth: Me.

Philip: I thought you hated that place?

Elizabeth: I do. We all do.

Philip: Then why go along with it?

Elizabeth. Because that's the overwhelming advice.

Philip: That's the point, Elizabeth. It's just advice. It doesn't mean that you have to act on it.

Elizabeth: When it comes from the government, you do.

Elizabeth initiates an Adult-Adult transaction on the social vector.

Philip: What kind of marriage is this? What kind of family? You've taken my career from me, you've taken my home, you've taken my name. I thought we were in this together.

Philipp remains in the Child mode, thus creating a crossed transaction.

He gets up and leaves. (Season 1, Episode 3: "Windsor")

The communication falters.

It is not always the case that Elizabeth and Philip's conflict is this outspoken or even concentrated in one scene. However, their marital games usually follow this pattern.

Diegetically, the RM game is conserved in this configuration because the couple is (in their shared opinion) unable to divorce or make other significant 3rd-degree changes

to their external situation.¹²² Elizabeth and Philip seem ultimately unable to renegotiate the dynamics of their relationship without questioning fundamental assumptions about the M2B game (e.g., the monarch's precedence, primogeniture, or the pertinence of the royal cause), which neither of them is willing to do. Indeed, even if their intradiegetic character development suggested such a move, the *pragmatic* need to retain a series' basic configuration would arguably prevent them from taking any 3rd-degree steps. In the couple's unhappiness and simultaneous inability to make significant changes, their conflicts are neither resolved nor able to escalate beyond a certain point. Their game remains within a 2nd-degree intensity, thus likewise complying with the dramatic logic of limited escalation that enables the serial repetition of established conflicts.

Philip's temporary boycott of the game will usually be swayed by an increasingly desperate Queen making some concessions for him "to be in, not out"¹²³ (e.g., granting him the title of Prince).¹²⁴ In doing so, she facilitates the escalated games' necessary reset to a lower intensity, thus, 'buying' another round.

Following intradiegetic logic, the couple's continuously escalating game will finally become too much for Elizabeth to bear, leading her to the unprecedented move of withdrawing herself from the game and thus forcing Philip to follow and engage her.¹²⁵ This unusual move changes the configuration of the couple's marital game and leads to a dramatically well-timed complementary Adult-Adult transaction in the finale of season 2. Their conversation results in an arrangement that allows Philip certain privileges (e.g., concerning extramarital affairs). However, it also results in him accepting the basic M2B configuration of his life with Elizabeth, including their status as ultimately non-coequal players and his wife's precedence as queen.

The dissolution of the conflictive RM game in the season 2 finale marks the completion of a couple's joint coming-of-age, a settling-into the realities of their life together. Following the game's peaceful resolution, the couple primarily engages in amicable Adult-Adult (on the personal vector) transactions throughout seasons 3 and 4. They even appear able to joke about previous difficulties, with Elizabeth mockingly alluding to Philip's affair with a Ballerina¹²⁶ and Philip leaving a confidential meeting with little more than a shrug and the commentary, "That's our cue: queens only".¹²⁷ However, with the resolution of the RM configuration, the couple's marital game loses much

122 *The Crown*, season 2, episode 3, "Lisbon", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired December 8, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149007?trackId=200257859>, 44.30".

123 *The Crown*, season 2, episode 3, "Lisbon", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired December 8, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149007?trackId=200257859>, 45.35".

124 *The Crown*, season 2, episode 3, "Lisbon", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired December 8, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149007?trackId=200257859>, 47.10".

125 *The Crown*, season 2, episode 10, "Mystery Man", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired December 8, 2017 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80149014?trackId=200257859>, 42.10".

126 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 9, "Avalanche", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215496?trackId=200257859>, 06.53".

127 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 9, "Imbroglio", directed by Sam Donovan, written by Peter Morgan, November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215739?trackId=200257859>, 35.22".

of its potential for the creation of engaging conflict. Therefore, Elizabeth and Philip's relationship occupies a minor role in the plot going forward.

The RM game possesses a highly pertinent zero-sum structure in which one player's dominance is proportional to the other's submission. It, therefore, serves to introduce a highly agonal component into the couple's relationship that makes for dramatically engaging conflict.

Following the dramatic rule of innovation and repetition, all other coming-of-age games involving the Queen and her relatives follow a similar progression. In a second central RM game, Elizabeth's younger sister Margaret figurates Elizabeth's co-player. Unlike Philip, Margaret's futile claim to superiority does not derive from patriarchal gender norms but her status as their father's original favourite child¹²⁸ and her more sparkling personality. As children in the Windsor family's initial idyllic configuration, Elizabeth and Margaret had sworn to always look out for one another.¹²⁹ Before Elizabeth's coronation, this rule had been the foundation of the sisters' games, leading to close intimacy between the siblings. However, with Elizabeth's ascension to the throne and the intrusion of the dynamic of the M2B game, the personal vector no longer matters, as both Elizabeth and her sister frequently discover, e.g. in Margaret's foiled attempt to marry an 'unsuitable' lover.¹³⁰ Accordingly, Margaret, who, like her brother-in-law, lacks a defined public role to add as a counterweight in her games with the Queen, finds herself relegated to the background where she used to occupy the frontstage.

Following the configuration of the RM game, Margaret's attempts to regain lost dominance on the social vector usually lead to the assertion of the Queen's Parental ceremonial authority and Margaret's subsequent relegation to a desperately impotent Child position. Throughout the series, the crown's precedence forces Margaret to apologize for frivolous behaviour,¹³¹ give up her fiancé, Peter Townsend,¹³² return from a vacation with a younger lover,¹³³ and even give up some of her royal functions.¹³⁴

128 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 8, "Pride and Joy", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025764?trackId=200257859>, 53.37".

129 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 10, "Gloriana", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025766?trackId=200257859>, 02.50".

130 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 6: "Gelinite", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025762?trackId=200257859>. And *The Crown*, season 1, episode 10, "Gloriana", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025766?trackId=200257859>, 2016.

131 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 8, "Pride and Joy", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025764?trackId=200257859>, 55.49".

132 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 10, "Gloriana", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025766?trackId=200257859>.

133 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, "Cri de Coeur", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859>, 36.30".

134 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 7, "The Hereditary Principle", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215494?trackId=200257859>, 16.03".

Bound to the cooperative structure of the M2B game by her *intradiegetic* unwillingness to give up her social and financial privileges, the *pragmatic* need for serial perpetuity and the resulting *dramatic* need for repetitive serial continuity, Margaret (like Philip) is generally unable to resort to more drastic steps of defiance. With every defeat, Margaret, like her brother-in-law, withdraws a little more from the personal side of the game that ties her to her sister, resulting in loosening the siblings' initially close bond.

Following the game's *dramatic* zero-sum structure, Margaret grows ever more erratic as Elizabeth grows into her role as queen. Indeed, like Charles after her, Margaret's overall status in the Windsors' configuration is precarious. The Princess's inability to adjust to the rules of the M2B game (submission, restraint, duty, sacrifice, representational attitude), in turn, reduces her standing as a player. By season 3, her inaptness as a royal player leaves Margaret with nothing to contribute or withhold but her volatile affections. A 'cry for help'-type suicide attempt appears as the final extension of this last remaining ammunition. The unsuccessful "cri de coeur"¹³⁵ marks the finale of season 3, the end of Margaret's struggle against the M2B game and the termination of her own royal apprenticeship. Having survived in accordance with serially repetitive limited intensity, she resigns herself to her fate, even accepting her family's cruel disposal of disabled relatives to preserve the reputation of the 'blood line'.¹³⁶ Like Philip, Margaret's coming-of-age results in largely stable (social) Adult-Adult transactions with her immediate surroundings. As a character, she thus loses her role as a prime source for narrative conflict throughout much of season 4.

4.4.5 Changing the Rules: Charles and Diana

Given the prominence of their historical role models, it is unsurprising that the dysfunctional marital games between Charles and Diana take the centre stage in the second half of *THE CROWN*'s season 4. In the spirit of serial repetition, the series once more employs the RM game (albeit in a slight variation) to evoke the well-known *fairytale-gone-wrong* trope that usually surrounds fictional and historical accounts of the Wales' marriage. In presenting the couple's "grotesque misalliance",¹³⁷ as Charles terms their relationship, the RM configuration cues an easily legible conflict based on traditional associations with hurt male (and aristocratic) privilege. The series introduces a second area of conflict, Charles' ongoing affair with Camilla Parker-Bowles. However, as Diana has no agency in this game (the relationship continues throughout season 4 without much development in any direction), their RM configuration serves the dramatic purpose of providing her and Charles with a common interactional template to create narratively dynamic conflict.

135 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, "Cri de Coeur", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859, 47.00>.

136 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 7, "The Hereditary Principle", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215494?trackId=200257859>.

137 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859, 38.19>.

Diana's frontstage position in the RM game comes not from her ceremonial superiority (as is the case with Elizabeth) but from her personal qualities: her perceived "beauty", "charm", and her ostensibly emotional "motherhood".¹³⁸ As a public personality, she continuously outshines Charles, whose awkward, unevenly developed personality relegates him to the backstage, even causing audiences to boo when he appears without his wife.¹³⁹ Due to his presumed precedence as Diana's senior (in age, gender privilege, and title), Charles follows the RM game's impotent progression from an attempted assertion of dominance to a perpetual Child state which he expresses in constant jealous reproaches against his wife. He, e.g., accuses her of engaging in "grotesque mortifying display[s]", "exquisite selfishness", and reproaches her for the alleged "calculated vulgarity of the antics"¹⁴⁰ with which she publicly outshines him. Locked in the broader cooperative M2B game (with the Queen as the game's arbiter refusing to intervene), the couple remains in this escalating pattern until the season 4 finale.

Nonetheless, as a player, Diana introduces a new dynamic into the royal family's previously cooperative M2B dynamic. She, too, struggles to consolidate public duty and personal needs. However, in her case, the consolidation process is reversed. Initially, Diana appears to have a natural talent for royal life, as the ostensibly "perfect princess"¹⁴¹, passing the family's 'Balmoral test' with "flying colours"¹⁴² and easily managing to appeal to masses from New York¹⁴³ to Australia.¹⁴⁴ Initially, she is likewise eager to accept both Charles' and the Queen's various claims of Parental superiority.

However, Diana frequently shuns the ceremonial vector in favour of personal Child (her)-Parent (co-player) stimuli, e.g., when she insists on calling the Queen "Mama".¹⁴⁵ As the Queen (and much of her family) are, at this stage, largely unable to access the personal vector beyond superficial Adult transactions due to their advanced progression in the M2B game, this usually leads to irritation and rejection.

138 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, "Terra Nullius", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859,36.34>".

139 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, "Terra Nullius", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859,37.20>".

140 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859,37.03>".

141 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, "Terra Nullius", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859,43.05>".

142 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 2, "The Balmoral Test", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215489?trackId=200257859,42.28>".

143 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859,28.03>".

144 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 6, "Terra Nullius", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215493?trackId=200257859,42.58>".

145 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859,41.32>".

Diana's difficulties are not the result of overwhelming royal demands but personal mistreatment (by Charles and the Queen). Accordingly, her coming-of-age takes the form of a growing rejection of the official demands of the monarchy (and the, by then, static player that upholds them: the Queen) in favour of her personal needs. The development is seemingly completed in the season 4 finale when she rejects the usual Child-Parent dynamic and defiantly engages Philip in an Adult-Adult transaction, stating:

And if he [Charles]... if this family can't give me the love and security that I feel I deserve, then I believe I have no option but to break away... officially... and find it myself.¹⁴⁶

The season 4 climax at a Christmas gathering at Balmoral Castle is tellingly underlaid with the soundtrack of "Baby it's Cold Outside", a song that, due to its coercive message of not accepting a date's wish to leave, had been at the centre of a highly publicised controversy in 2020.¹⁴⁷

Diana marks a change in *THE CROWN*'s general configuration and its presentation of the monarchy. Her disregard for the M2B game's iron-clad rules – which all royal players in *THE CROWN* had until then obeyed – makes Diana the series' very first *creative player* and thus a nuisance in a narrative and intradiegetic system built on rigid continuity. After brushing off Diana's frequent attempt at a heart-to-heart, the Queen instructs Charles that he will not be allowed to "separate, or divorce or let the side down in any way".¹⁴⁸ In the previous M2B games involving the Queen, this usually led to her co-players' lamenting submission to the games' inevitable cooperative character. With Diana being a creative player, however, as most audiences know from history, this progression will likely change in the seasons to come.

It should be noted that this change in *THE CROWN*'s structure significantly alters the series' presentation of the royal family. Throughout her coming of age, the Queen's, at times, morally ambivalent actions retained an involuntary character appearing almost dictated by the crown itself. However, in the series' fourth season, Elizabeth's emotional unavailability increasingly appears as a personal deficit which becomes most visible in her continued rejection of the otherwise highly functional new royal Diana. Diana's difficult position in the M2B game thus ultimately appears as a result of the royal family's personal deficits, not of her inability to adjust to the system's demands. This changed configuration serves an important dramatic function.

Following her well-known historical persona as a royal breakaway and 'Queen of Hearts', most audiences will expect a fictional Diana to appear both as a generally positive character and eventual antagonist to the Windsor family. For there to be a legitimate and easily legible conflict, however, dramatic logic demands that the previously high

146 *The Crown*, season 4, episode, 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859>, 47.03".

147 *The Crown*, season 4, episode, 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859>, 39.39".

148 *The Crown*, season 4, episode, 10, "War", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215497?trackId=200257859>, 43.53".

moral standing of the fictional Queen be reduced (a move that had been prepared by typecasting character actress Olivia Coleman for seasons 3 and 4).

It should be mentioned here that the production of *THE CROWN*'s season 4 and the increasing ambivalence of the series' normative evaluation of the royal family coincides with several high-profile scandals that arguably changed the historical monarchy's reception, at least among global, progressive 'prestige' audiences. Since 2019, the Queen's second son, Prince Andrew, has been at the centre of allegations of sexual assault¹⁴⁹ (the series' alludes to this by portraying a young Andrew as a sleazy show-off with transgressive sexual tendencies).¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, at the start of 2020, the historical royal family had to contend with the highly publicised departure of Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan. It was a controversial move that the couple has since followed up with further highly publicised criticism of the monarchy, e.g., by alleging racism within the Windsor family.¹⁵¹ In addition, general discursive developments such as the global rise of post-colonial and anti-racist movements in 2020 have arguably changed the perception of an institution that is, by its very nature, linked to imperial exploitation and white privilege. While the timely introduction of Diana as the royal family's first legitimate and narratively sustainable antagonist might be a coincidence, the series' overall change in its attitude towards the royal family almost seems like a tangible – albeit hesitant – reaction to incorporate these historical developments surrounding the British monarchy without changing too much of its basic configuration. This, by no means, implies that *THE CROWN* has, so far, contended with the numerous dark sides of the historical monarchy (from its role as a past profiteer and legitimating force of imperialism and slavery to its conservative embodiment of rigid, racist class structures). Whether the series is willing and able to contend with these factors in the future remains to be seen.

4.5 The Royal Panopticon and the Queen's Third Body

THE CROWN expands its narrative exploration of the K2B trope beyond the *poetry vs prose* motif. One of the series' main concerns is how the making of monarchy and the sovereign can be achieved in the democratic, commodified, and mediatised postmodern age. As Spencer Dew notes, *THE CROWN* pays significant "attention to how said sovereign negotiates modern media technology and the rumblings of discontent at the edges of her empire".¹⁵²

149 A civil lawsuit was settled in early 2022. See Mary O'Connor, "Prince Andrew settles US civil sex assault case with Virginia Guiffre", *BBC*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-60393843>.

150 *The Crown*, season 4, episode 4, "Favourites", directed by Paul Whittington, written by Peter Morgan, November 15, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215491?trackId=200257859>, 33.11".

151 In an interview with Oprah Winfrey first aired in the US on CBS on March 7, 2021. See, e.g., Christen Jones and Caroline Linton, "Harry and Meghan detail royal struggles, from Baby's Skin tone to suicidal thoughts", *CBS*, March 8, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/oprah-winfrey-interviews-meghan-markle-prince-harry/>.

152 Spencer Dew, "The Crown", *Religious Studies Review* 43, no.2 (June 2017): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rsr.12935>.

In a time that is said to suffer from the “postmodern condition”, which is, as Jean-Francois Lyotard writes, characterised by a belief in the “obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation”,¹⁵³ simple recourse to the divine right of kings is of little use when creating a feasible monarchical imaginary. On a dramatic plane, the K2B trope by itself is arguably not enough to provide a significantly strong motivation for the characters to endure the alleged sacrifices necessary to succeed in the agonal M2B game over an extended period of serial narrative time. Under such circumstances, how does THE CROWN propose one to make “a goddess” out of an “ordinary young woman of modest ability”, as Elizabeth's abdicated uncle David summarises monarchy in THE CROWN?¹⁵⁴

4.5.1 The Royal Panopticon

There is a scene that stands out among THE CROWN's continuous meta-commentaries on the postmodern condition of monarchy. During a meeting with the PM, the fictional Elizabeth II reveals the sovereign trade secrets by explaining the purpose of royal pageantry. Lamenting the difficulty of being (and remaining) a monarch, the exasperated Queen states:

The best we've come up with so far is ritual and mystery. Because it keeps us hidden while still in plain sight. The smoke and the mirrors, the mystery and the protocol, it's not there to keep us apart; it is there to keep us alive.¹⁵⁵

The scene is remarkable because it has a fictional sovereign acknowledge that her status as Queen rests on nothing but the protective and creative powers of well-curated imaginaries.

In THE CROWN, the royal family lives under constant observation and control through the media and rigid palace officials. It is a state reminiscent of Michel Foucault's concept of “Panopticism”¹⁵⁶ and his exegesis of Jeremy Bentham's homonymous concept of the panopticon.¹⁵⁷ As inhabitants of a metaphorical panopticon, the royal family are constantly aware of being potentially watched by a critical, incredulous public. This obliges the Windsors to incessantly self-observe, self-evaluate, and adjust their behaviour according to their potential observers' imagined and unverifiable demands. The panopticon's original context as part of Bentham's homonymous prison concept

153 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), XXIV.

154 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 5, “Smoke and Mirrors”, directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025761?trackId=200257859,48.59>.”

155 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 4, “Bubbikins”, directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215734?trackId=200257859,40.45>.”

156 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edition, transl. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995), 195ff.

157 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200ff.

applies aptly to the 'golden cage' imagery *THE CROWN* evokes when illustrating this royal predicament.

It is important to note that the ever-watchful public in *THE CROWN*'s royal panopticon is a collective fiction constructed by the royal family's internal discourse. To the Windsors, the public remains the Other, a haunting spectre, faceless and vague throughout the series, taking on the intangibility and potential omnipresence (and omnipotence) of Foucault's conceptual prison guard.

Remarkably, while *THE CROWN* is full of references to the potential dangers of the royal family's panoptic existence,¹⁵⁸ there is little concrete diegetic evidence to demonstrate the diegetic reality of this unfortunate predicament. Indeed, the panopticon's most likely proponent, the media, appears largely meek and reverent in *THE CROWN*. The fictional BBC, e.g., suppresses the announcement of the king's death until Elizabeth can be told.¹⁵⁹ The precarity of the royal family's panoptic existence is evoked almost exclusively in the palace's internal discourse and rarely supported by actual diegetic events. Its frequent mention serves to create the largely unverified assumption, both among the fictional Windsors and among *THE CROWN*'s audiences, that the monarchy is in constant peril, with every misstep potentially being the last. Primarily following dramatic logic, it thus evokes a potential 3rd-degree intensity for the narrative that serves to create high stakes for otherwise relatively contained conflicts and thus facilitate an engaging plot. The lack of actual escalation of this implied 3rd-degree intensity follows dramatic serial logic as well: where would *THE CROWN* and its basic narrative configuration be if the panoptic spectre of the public were to assert its imagined power, e.g., by getting rid of the monarchy?

Dramatically, the panoptic predicament may primarily serve to raise the stakes and, thus, create narrative suspense. Diegetically, it has significant consequences for the process of making the monarchy. In the postmodern panopticon, the anthropomorphic public and not the royal family ultimately set the standards for what the monarchy – and by extension, the monarch's body politic – should be. This corresponds to the paradox of all dominance described, e.g., by Thomas Frank et al., according to which "dominance depends on the *accord* of the dominated".¹⁶⁰ To the royal family in *THE CROWN*, the standard by which this accord is granted seems arbitrary. Elizabeth makes this clear when she

158 Barely an episode goes by without mention of the fragility of the institution of monarchy.

159 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 2, "Hyde Park Corner", directed by Stephen Daldry, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025758?trackId=255824129,27.30>". Mirroring a historical practice by the BBC, as Erin Bell and Ann Gray note: Bell and Gray, "Television's Royal Familia: Continuity and Change", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 305.

160 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73. My translation: "[...] dass Herrschaft der Zustimmung der Beherrschten bedarf". Original emphasis.

exclaims, after facing public criticism, "Well, what do they [the public] want? Tell me! It's all any of us want to know!"¹⁶¹

Accordingly, the gaze of the public in the royal panopticon must constantly be diverted by the "smoke and mirrors" (likewise the episode-title of *THE CROWN* 2016. 1:5) of ritual and ceremony, or – as Walter Bagehot calls it in his famous reflections on the British constitution – by "pretty events".¹⁶²

If power, as Foucault demands, must be both "visible and unverifiable",¹⁶³ so too is it only through performance that the monarchy can uphold the pretence of its purposeful pre-eminence. It is the pretty events that, as Elizabeth claims, "keep us [the monarchy] alive".¹⁶⁴ She thus echoes Bagehot, who states, "When a monarch can bless, it is best that he should not be touched".¹⁶⁵

THE CROWN's panoptic structure exposes, as Frank et al. write in their study of the similar theme in narratives of the "emperor's new clothes", "the dependence of authority on fiction", emphasising the "empty ground of political dominance" and thus "problematiz[ing] the relationship between art and politics and, in turn, [its] own status".¹⁶⁶

4.5.2 The Queen's Third Body

THE CROWN elaborately demonstrates how the process of making a monarch occurs within the royals' postmodern panoptic predicament. In the series, the success of creating a functional royal imaginary hinges on the successful unification of Elizabeth II's bodies politic and natural in the eyes of the supposedly all-seeing public. By elaborating on the vital importance of royal mimicry, *THE CROWN* implies the creation of what Marin calls the king's mediated third body. For Marin, the king (or in this case, the queen) "is only truly king, that is monarch, in images. They are his *real presence*".¹⁶⁷ It is only after Elizabeth has visibly presented herself in the physical and discursive trappings that signify the sovereign's conceptual body politic (ritual and regalia) and only in the process of a co-creative actualisation of these royal performances through her diegetic au-

161 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 4, "Bubbikins", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215734?trackId=200257859,40.07>.

162 Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.

163 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd edition, transl. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995), 201.

164 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 4, "Bubbikins", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215734?trackId=200257859,41.07>.

165 Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, 41.

166 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 9. My translation: "die Angewiesenheit der Autorität auf Fiktionen", "geben den leeren Grund politischer Herrschaft frei", "problematisieren also das Verhältnis von Kunst und Politik und damit auch ihren eigenen Status".

167 Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, transl. Martha M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 8. Original emphasis.

dience that her two bodies unite to form the ephemeral third body of *Elizabeth Regina*. As Frank et al. point out, "The political body of the king is not visible; it comes into existence only in the imagination of his followers and subjects".¹⁶⁸

In *THE CROWN*, the pretty events of ceremony and ritual thus do more than keep the monarch "alive", as Elizabeth claims. It is only through her acts of performative media-tization and the benevolent reception of these acts by the public that Elizabeth becomes *the Queen* at all. For this purpose of negotiating the distribution of power in favour of the monarchy, the performative K2B trope gains a highly political dimension. It is a motif that reappears, in one form or another, throughout polit-fiction and is, thus, central to this study.

Historically, presentations of ceremonial performance that unify an official's bodies natural and politic in the public's imagination serve a vital function in the creation and preservation of legitimacy. As Clemens Porschlegel writes:

The legitimacy rests [...] in an unimaginably mythical place of a social Third, which is only accessible in the mode of representation and from where the sense of the entire existing order with its social, juridical, and economic circumstances becomes plausible and believable, and from where it seems justified.¹⁶⁹

In historical politics, the mimetic, performative element does not imply the erosion of a 'real' political process. On the contrary: it is part of and even necessary to constitute it.¹⁷⁰ However, the fictional diegetic monarchy in *THE CROWN* is a different matter. As a representative office without any political power, the fictional Queen's role is by its very nature reduced to performance. Here, the opulence and splendour of the performative signifier of monarchical dominance (ritual and ceremony) have remained unchanged while its significate (actual political power) has all but vanished. The royal mimicry, in *THE CROWN*, thus, "degenerates to a dereferenced act of performance which only produces insubstantial forms of public visibility, that is, images that deceive".¹⁷¹

168 Frank et al., *Des Kaisers neue Kleider*, 8. My translation: "Den politischen Körper des Königs kann man nicht sehen; er wird allein im Imaginären seiner Gefolgsleute und Untertanen gegenwärtig".

169 Clemens Porschlegel, "Die Grimasse der Macht: Zur Theatralität des Politischen", in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka Klein and Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015), 275. My translation: "Die Legitimität ruht vielmehr einem unvordenklich mythischen, nur im Modus der Repräsentation zugänglichen Ort eines sozialen Dritten auf, von dem aus der Sinn der gesamten bestehenden Ordnung, ihrer sozialen, juristischen und ökonomischen Verhältnisse plausibel und glaubwürdig wird und von dem aus sie gerechtfertigt erscheint".

170 See Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 61f.

171 Celikates and Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter", 67. My translation: "[...] degeneriert hier zu einem dereferenzialisierten Darstellungshandeln, das lediglich substanzlose Formen öffentlicher Sichtbarkeit, also Bilder, die täuschen, herstellt". They write this with regards to classic Hollywood polit-films but it applies aptly in this study's context as well.

Through the smoke and mirrors of monarchical performance, THE CROWN's royal family, in their panoptic predicament, creates a simulacrum of royalty. For Jean Baudrillard, referencing Ecclesiastes, "The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true".¹⁷² With its exaggerated pageantry that conserves the appearance of a long-vanished dominance, the Queen's mediatised body in THE CROWN is, to say it with Baudrillard, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal".¹⁷³

4.6 Questions of Purpose: Why do they do it?

In THE CROWN, the royal simulacrum results from a co-creative effort of both the producers (royals) and the recipients of a performance (the public). As a hyperreal myth, the monarchy begins and ends, almost disappears in its presentation.¹⁷⁴ Following Roland Barthes, a myth's function is to endow human-made convention with "a natural and eternal justification", to give "them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact".¹⁷⁵ In THE CROWN, the performative monarchy accordingly turns the historical, discursive construct of a human king or queen into a nebulous yet self-evident law of nature.

In its highly postmodern meta-commentaries – e.g., the frequent allusion to the fairytale character of monarchic presentations – THE CROWN makes it clear, however, that the diegetic public is generally aware and indeed supportive of the monarchy's reduced performative nature. Why then do royals, politicians, palace officials and the public, in THE CROWN, collectively and without exception, indulge in this deceptive fiction? What is the purpose of the monarchy, according to the series?

For Marin, "The effect of representation – the simulacrum – operates only because it gives pleasure".¹⁷⁶ In THE CROWN, the monarchy's mediatised simulacra accordingly appear as an escapist mass media production, as "the world's longest continually running soap opera"¹⁷⁷ ready for the diegetic public's consumption. Within THE CROWN's diegesis, the royal family serves as an ongoing entertainment commodity to be consumed like – and competing with – other commodified imaginaries.

172 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1. Baudrillard's rendition of a quote from Ecclesiastes.

173 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

174 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 45.

175 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, transl. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press/ Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 143.

176 Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, transl. Martha M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 65f.

177 Roberta Pearson, "The biggest drama commission in British television history: Netflix, *The Crown*, and the UK television ecosystem", *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation*, ed. Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni (New York: Routledge, 2021), 92.

This commodification of the monarchy turns the public into willing second-order accomplices of their own deception. As Theodor Adorno puts it with regards to the engaging powers of consumerism:

People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification, they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them.¹⁷⁸

As far as concrete narrative evidence goes, the series stays notably ambivalent about the higher purpose of the royal simulacra beyond the evident self-interest of a dynasty that wishes to retain its privileged position. Instead, it provides countless allusions to established historical assumptions about the British monarchy's function. One sees the Queen as an "unthreatening and stabilising influence" on British society.¹⁷⁹ Another is Bagehot's somewhat elitist idea of monarchy being politics' "comprehensible element for the vacant many".¹⁸⁰ A third has Elizabeth II be "a unifying symbol of permanence and national community" in the face of encroaching modernity.¹⁸¹ In *THE CROWN*, the monarchy's only expressly stated purpose is to elate and distract a weary public. The series' fictional princess Margaret, like her sister in search of the monarchy's larger meaning, mirrors this latter assumption, stating:

It [the country] has only fallen apart if we say it has. That's the thing about the monarchy, we paper over the cracks. And if what we do is loud and grand and confident enough, no one will notice that all around us it's fallen apart. That's the point of us. Not us... of you.¹⁸²

The monarchy's undeniable potential to provide emotional diversion has, at times, been regarded as a legitimate function of the historical institution. Toynton, e.g., states in her assessment of *THE CROWN*:

[...] these avatars of slightly dippy good will, figureheads with no direct political power, not only hold steady the ship of state: they soothe the spirit, they serve as an antidote to despair.¹⁸³

178 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry Reconsidered", in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), 103.

179 Matthew Glencross, Judith Rowbotham, Michael D. Kandiah, "Introduction", in *The Windsor Dynasty 1910 to the Present: 'Long to Reign Over US'?*, ed. Matthew Glencross, Judith Rowbotham, Michael D. Kandiah (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 9.

180 Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.

181 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition, c. 1820–1977'", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 122.

182 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 10, "Cri de Coeur", directed by Jessica Hobbs, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215740?trackId=200257859,54.08>.

183 Evelyn Toynton, "Happy and Glorious: The Crown", *Salmagundi* no. 195 (2017), 262.

In the series, the co-creative making of monarchy becomes a collective response to post-modernity's "decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation".¹⁸⁴ For Baudrillard, the postmodern recession of definite history leaves a

[...] panoply of events, ideologies, retro-fashions – no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was history [...] Anything serves to escape this void, this leukaemia of history and of politics, this haemorrhage of values [...].¹⁸⁵

Here, in the middle of the void of postmodern incredulity, the larger purpose of THE CROWN's royal protagonists appears. Both the pseudo-archaic pageantry of royal ceremony and the series' frequent mentions of the monarchy's ability to simulate notions of a vaguely defined lost national 'greatness' attest to this.

It is an unfortunate stage on which the Windsor family find themselves in THE CROWN. They face an audience that is, at once, fundamentally incredulous and desperate to become the accomplice of its own escapist deception. However, while the series reflects upon the (self-)deceptive, co-creative process of the making of monarchy, royal performance, even in its disenchanting state, appears able to effectively gloss over existing societal struggles and cultural chasms (or as Elizabeth euphemistically calls it: "heal divisions").¹⁸⁶

Mirroring its historical role model, the fictional monarchy in THE CROWN thus appears as a powerful agent in creating something akin to what Marcuse calls "Affirmative Culture" (albeit without adopting the concept's critical stance). For Marcuse, the term denotes the separation and elevation of a spiritual, intellectual realm from and above burdensome material circumstances.¹⁸⁷ It affirms "and disguise[s] the new social conditions of [modern] life".¹⁸⁸

Similarly, the royal family in THE CROWN becomes – and perceives itself as – an instrument to simulate the existence of an elevated realm beyond the hardships of material reality. Characters in THE CROWN extensively reflect upon the monarchy's function of separating the ideal and material world. A young Elizabeth, e.g., learns, with explicit recourse to Bagehot, that the monarchy represents "the dignified" element of the state while the government, the seat of actual political power, is its "efficient" element.¹⁸⁹ This

184 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 43.

185 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 44.

186 *The Crown*, season 3, episode 6, "Tywysog Cymru", directed by Christian Schwochow, written by James Graham and Peter Morgan, aired November 17, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80215736?trackId=200257859>, 47.45".

187 Herbert Marcuse, "Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur", in *Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, 20th ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2011), 63.

188 Marcuse, "Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur", 64. My translation: "Die Kultur bejaht und verdeckt die neuen gesellschaftlichen Lebensbedingungen".

189 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 7, "Scientia Potentia Est", directed by Benjamin Caron, written by Peter Morgan, November 4, 2016, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025763?trackId=200257859_01.58".

division is reminiscent of what Marcuse calls Affirmative Culture's "separation of the utilitarian and necessary from the beautiful and enjoyment",¹⁹⁰ creating an idealised, imaginary realm distinct from – and arguably 'superior' to – the harsh material world. In *THE CROWN*, the royals as a mediated commodity thus become an affirmative instrument of creating this division of realms and thus conserving the social status quo in times of threatening historical change. Their express purpose is to, as the fictional Princess Margaret notes, "paper over the cracks" within the existing order. As Judith Williamson states about the historical monarchy, "our acceptance of *their* place tends to carry with it an acceptance of our own".¹⁹¹

THE CROWN thus joins the long fictional Heritage tradition "in which national cinemas turn to the past at different moments in their histories in search of their own foundational myths".¹⁹² With its splendid visuals, celebrity cast, and internationally competitive production value, the series produces notions of historical authenticity and escapism. In a strange mimicry of its own diegetic discourse, it thus performs a function similar to royal ritual. About the latter, Cannadine states:

When watching a great royal occasion, impeccably planned, faultlessly executed, and with a commentary stressing (however mistakenly) the historic continuity with those former days of Britain's greatness, it is almost possible to believe that they have not entirely vanished.¹⁹³

THE CROWN reproduces many established and often legitimising narrative tropes associated with the historic royal family: Their political neutrality and impotence, skilful synthesis of middle-class "private probity" and "public grandeur",¹⁹⁴ their dedication and family spirit, to name just a few. A particularly poignant example is the series' reproduction of the established narrative of the legitimising ancient age of the dynasty and its rituals and traditions. The dowager Queen Mary's elaborations on the special status of the English monarchy show this very clearly:

[...] he [Philip] represents a royal family of carpetbaggers and parvenus that goes back what, 90 years? What would he know of Alfred the Great, who wrote of equity and mercy, Edward the Confessor, William the Conqueror or Henry VIII?¹⁹⁵

190 Herbert Marcuse, "Über den affirmativen Charakter der Kultur", in *Kultur und Gesellschaft I*, 20th ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2011), 57. My translation: "Die Trennung des Zweckmäßigen und Notwendigen vom Schönen und vom Genuß".

191 Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Boyars, 1986), 79. Original emphasis.

192 Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2012), 3.

193 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the Invention of Tradition, c. 1820–1977", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 157.

194 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 139f.

195 *The Crown*, season 1, episode 4, "Act of God", directed by Julian Jarrold, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80025760?trackId=200257859>, 21.26".

Of course, the historic dynasty to which Mary is referring rose to take the English throne only in 1714 as the then-House of Hanover and has no particularly close familial relations to any of the people named by her. By the (fictional) time Mary pronounces these statements, the family's name, 'Windsor', is roughly 36 years old. However, this evocation of notions of long-standing continuity is in keeping with the established practice of the historical British monarchy to enhance and maintain their traditional authority by, as Cannadine examines in his study of the historical development of royal ritual, inventing traditions.¹⁹⁶ "Invented traditions" are, as Eric Hobsbawm states,

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, large parts of the historical royal family's ritualistic presence are, as Cannadine shows, a product of the late 19th and early 20th century, with the period 1877–1914 being the first "heyday of 'invented tradition'".¹⁹⁸ It is at this time that the monarchy's ritualistic repertoire, "hitherto inept, private and of limited appeal, became splendid, public and popular",¹⁹⁹ having turned "positively fairytale"²⁰⁰ in the decades after the first world war.

According to Cannadine, the monarchy's decreasing political power enabled its increased ceremonial presence²⁰¹, which made it into "a unifying symbol of permanence and national community" in the face of the unsettling influences of modernity,²⁰² as well as a way to legitimise and 'sell' the empire to a public in a time when its foundations might have already been much less solid.²⁰³ Thus, the time from 1918 till 1953 became "the period in which the British persuaded themselves that they were good at ceremonial because they always had been".²⁰⁴ It is a notion that *THE CROWN* reflects as well.

One example of these invented traditions that feature prominently in *THE CROWN* is the monarch's Christmas broadcast which, upon its establishment in 1932, had been

196 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the Invention of Tradition, c. 1820–1977", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101–164.

197 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1.

198 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the Invention of Tradition, c. 1820–1977", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 108.

199 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 120.

200 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 142.

201 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 121.

202 David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the Invention of Tradition, c. 1820–1977", in *The Invention of Tradition*, 21st printing, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 122.

203 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 124–126.

204 Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual", 108.

“immediately adopted as ‘traditional’”.²⁰⁵ Another example is the public celebration of royal events, with the example of the ritualised, public “royal wedding” being re-established as late as 1922.²⁰⁶ Corresponding to established historical practice regarding royal spectacle, *THE CROWN* omits this relatively young age of most public royal traditions and affirms the traditional legitimization of the cited invented traditions.

Simplifications and alterations are, of course, a legitimate move in creating a functioning and engaging fictional narrative. Nonetheless, it is remarkable how closely *THE CROWN*’s fictional presentation of royalty mirrors many established narratives that support and legitimise the historical monarchy. This is doubtlessly due to the *pragmatic* attempt of the series’ production actors to appeal to audiences by conforming to certain popular notions of the British monarchy. However, it results in the series contributing a powerful para-history that conforms to how the historical royal family has historically portrayed itself. Where *THE CROWN* presents royal characters or institutions in an unfavourable light, e.g., Philip’s toxic masculinity, racism, and misogyny, Margaret’s spoiled, snobbish and unhinged demeanour, Elizabeth’s emotional coldness or the oppressive rigidity of the royal system itself, these presentations ultimately reproduce well-known images of how the historical monarchy is seen already. Thus, while *THE CROWN* adds fictional details and allusions to established historical narratives, it largely complies with their general impetus.

It must be mentioned here that the notion of past ‘greatness’, referred to time and again in *THE CROWN*, not least through the constant diegetic lamentation of its loss, is itself an embellished and nebulous imaginary. Ultimately it refers to the – historically never quite realised – political and economic preeminence of a Britain still in possession of an intact empire while omitting, at the very least, the racist assumptions, as well as the systematic oppression and violent exploitation of a substantial part of the world’s population that made it possible.

4.7 Conclusion: Fictional Games, Imaginary Bodies, and Narrative Contortions

This chapter showed that *THE CROWN* draws on a time-tested and almost universally legible narrative formula by presenting its characters engaged in a struggle between personal needs and the requirements of their public role. In the series, this *poetry vs prose* motif appears as the narrative adaption of a pre-enlightened concept of monarchy called ‘The King’s two Bodies’. It describes the monarch as a dual being that possesses both a human *body natural* and an immortal, conceptual *body politic* and dramatizes the sovereign as the victim of an identity diffusion caused by his*her two bodies’ opposing demands. As I have shown, the resulting presentation of a monarch burdened and bent by the demands of his*her office is the most common way to turn an otherwise infinitely privileged and highly remote being into a relatable fictional protagonist ready for mainstream consumption.

205 Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual”, 142.

206 Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual”, 151.

This convention has decisive consequences for THE CROWN's normative evaluation of the monarchy. Whether it be the creators' intentions or not, using the K2B trope will always create a general climate of goodwill towards a protagonist so burdened by the idiosyncrasies of his*her life of splendour. No matter how cold, detached, or selfish the fictional Windsors become in THE CROWN, the K2B trope ultimately serves to *dramatically* mitigate and even justify their behaviour by illustrating the central divisive perversion of their condition. Given the impossibility of the challenge, so the K2B construction invariably tells us, a royal has no option but to fail. Thus, the fictional Windsors' many shortcomings are, to a certain extent, excused.

This chapter showed that THE CROWN operationalizes the K2B trope in transactional patterns, which I called the *Monarch's two Bodies* game. It features ulterior transactions on two distinct vectors: the ceremonial one, which allows the monarch to hide his*her humanity behind a ritualised parental facade and the ulterior social vector, on which the players' personal qualities come into play. I showed that the M2B game underlies all other interactions in THE CROWN and provides them with a cooperative and zero-sum structure that (1) allows the repetition of established interactional structures according to serial logic and (2) creates conflict and thus an engaging narrative. I showed that, in THE CROWN, the M2B structure manifested in two fundamental games that drive most of the series plot: (1) *Coming-of-Age* games in which the respective Windsors undergo the painful process of sacrificing their humanity in order to approach their royal body politic, and (2) in *Reverse Macbeth* games, which create narrative conflict by juxtaposing its players' personal entitlement with their institutional or public success.

Analysing the changes in the series' game structure after the introduction of Princess Diana as a fictional character, it became clear that THE CROWN undergoes a recalibration in its fourth season. This happens partly because the series' relatively rigid configuration is unable to accommodate a character like Diana, who, due to her historical role model's fame, has become an established discursive macro actor of her own. With many audiences expecting Diana to be both a positive character and an antagonist to the Windsors, the series had to shift its previously largely sympathetic portrayal of the royal family in order to allow for legitimate conflict to take place. I also showed that the slight change in THE CROWN's portrayals of the fictional monarchy followed a shift in the historical royal family's image as a result of highly mediatised scandals and controversies.

Likewise, this chapter demonstrated that THE CROWN expands the concept of 'The King's two Bodies' to present the monarchy in its postmodern predicament. Thrust centre-stage into a performative production, the fictional Queen and her family have no choice but to contend with a world where a dynamic process of constantly re-adjusting imaginaries replaces objective values and supportive metanarratives. The royals thus find themselves in a panoptic situation that obliges them to adjust to the vaguely defined standards of a potentially omnipresent, watchful public.

In presenting them as constantly engaged in negotiating their position, THE CROWN shows the members of the self-proclaimed unpolitical monarchy engaging in a profoundly political process: In THE CROWN, Elizabeth's status as Queen rests entirely on the accord of her subjects. The painful process of succeeding in the M2B game serves the sole purpose of attaining and preserving this accord. In order to maintain the monarchical imaginary, the gaze of the panoptic public must continuously be diverted

from the Queen's all too human body natural through the 'smoke and mirrors' of royal performance.

Pointing out the nature of royal pageantry as an extravagant signifier of dominance without an equivalent significate, this study has shown that the monarchy in *THE CROWN* appears as a hyperreal simulacrum whose only explicit purpose is the ability to serve as an anaesthetic tool of Affirmative Culture. It emotionally separates a burdensome material world from an elevated, ideal fictional realm, thus conserving and legitimising the social status quo.

Accordingly, while *THE CROWN* breaks a taboo in presenting a living British queen – and a flawed one at that – the series is by no means a critical account of the monarchy. While *THE CROWN* makes plain that the postmodern monarchy is an imaginary resting on a fragile agreement between the sovereign and her subjects, the public's accord is ultimately granted. The fictional Elizabeth's subjects choose almost without exception to engage in the co-creation of the royal simulacrum. The series thus ultimately endows its monarchy with a pseudo-democratic legitimacy.

Indeed, while the series laments the institution's flaws, the monarchy ultimately appears as the only solution against the onslaught of (post)modernity. In what could – with recourse to Mark Fisher's concept of "Capitalist Realism"²⁰⁷ – be called 'Pseudo-Feudal Realism', the series implicitly declares the archaic relic of the monarchy a vital necessity within a democratic system not because of its own virtue but because of an inability to imagine a better alternative. Accordingly, Andrew Higson points out that by portraying the monarchy centre-stage in a high-profile production, "by exploiting a fascination with the British royal families", fictional presentations of the Windsors "play a role in maintaining the monarchy as a contemporary cultural presence", fulfilling this role "almost regardless of whether they represent the royals in a sympathetic manner".²⁰⁸

Considering the historical monarchy's role as providing legitimising metanarratives for (and profiting from) some of the worst excesses of imperialism, nationalism, racism, and social injustice on record, the pop cultural prominence of the royal family is not without risks as they continue to influence and shape the discursive construct that is commonly regarded as a nation's 'history'. As Higson remarks with regards to Heritage film:

While all of these films engage with history, they are also creative products designed to work as profitable entertainment commodities. They are, to that extent, part of the imaginative construct that is heritage.²⁰⁹

This chapter's examination of the central tropes of *THE CROWN* provides a starting point for further text-based analysis. Much more could and should be said about the series. One such topic is its portrayal of frequently under- and misrepresented groups, espe-

207 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009).

208 Andrew Higson, "From political power to the power of the image: contemporary 'British' cinema and the nation's monarchs", in *The British Monarchy on Screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 348.

209 Higson, "From political power to the power of the image", 340.

cially of female protagonists and minorities (respectively, the almost complete lack of the latter).

Likewise, and without suggesting a need for one-to-one historical comparisons, *THE CROWN*'s disturbingly glossy image of both the second half of the 20th century in general and of the former empire, in particular, should be studied further. The historical period covered by *THE CROWN* saw some of the defining key events and discourses of British and world history, to name just one example: the dissolution of the British Empire and the subsequent, often painful, and still incomplete struggles with the violently racist ideological presumptions that made it possible in the first place.

The series' evident aim to succeed as an escapist entertainment commodity results in an almost complete lack of narrative awareness of the atrocities and upheavals of history. This is even more remarkable as the historical empire is inextricably intertwined with the imaginaries and rituals of the real British monarchy that, as I have shown, forms a dominant point of reference in the series' network. To achieve its questionable escapist feat of presenting the pageantry of the British monarchy without portraying its central role in sustaining and legitimising imperial oppression, *THE CROWN*, at times, performs visibly incongruous narrative contortions. This certainly merits a closer look.

Many of the games and motifs examined in this chapter reappear as established conventions throughout (polit-)fiction, reaching from the operationalisation of the K2B trope to the defeatist notions of 'Pseudo-Feudal / Capitalist Realism'. The subsequent chapter will examine their reappearance in the construction of polit-comedy.

5. Overcoming Omnishambles

The Changing Face of Polit-Comedy from VEEP and EICHWALD, MDB to THE POLITICIAN

Throughout the 2010s, polit-comedies have shown a remarkable tendency toward “omnishambles”. The term originates from the British series *THE THICK OF IT* (2005–2012) and describes “a situation, especially in politics, which has been very badly managed, with many mistakes and a great lack of understanding”.¹ It has since become a point of reference to describe contemporary polit-comedies – so much so that Marc Edward Shaw describes “Veep’s Poetics of Omnishambles”² – and indeed seems to serve as a structural principle in many humorous series of the decade, such as *VEEP* (USA, 2012–2019), *EICHWALD, MDB* (Germany, 2015–2019), *HINDAFING* (Germany, 2017–present), or *DAS INSTITUT – DIE OASE DES SCHEITERNS* (Germany, 2017–2019). With the end of the 2010s, however, a shift in the comical presentation of politics has become visible that seemingly marks a turn away from polit-comedy’s previous omnishambolic leitmotif. This chapter will examine three series from the beginning (*VEEP*, 2012–2019), middle (*EICHWALD, MDB*, 2015–2019), and end (*THE POLITICIAN*, 2019–2020) of the century’s second decade to illustrate the changing ways in which contemporary serial comedy has operationalise politics as a humoristic narrative trope.

The selection of the samples is not arbitrary. At the beginning of the 2010s, the HBO series *VEEP* arguably marked a decisive shift in US polit-fiction. The story of the incompetent US Vice President Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) has been the much-discussed successor of the British comedy *THE THICK OF IT* (2005–2012). Both series share not only a showrunner function (Armando Iannucci) but a tendency towards colourful invective and their “grapple with the interrelation between humour and politics and what it

1 “omnishambles”, *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*, accessed Aug 17, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnerdictionaries.com/definition/english/omnishambles>.

2 Marc Edward Shaw, “Veep’s Poetics of Omnishambles”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 137–148; previously discussed by Steven Fielding, *A state of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page: From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 263.

means to approach the political sphere by way of humour".³ VEEP arguably contributed significantly to introducing a previously primarily European brand of pessimistic polit-fiction into the US-American and global mainstream and thus arguably played a role in the cynical turn of recent US polit-fiction (the sinister US-version of HOUSE OF CARDS followed a year after VEEP's release, in 2013).

The German series EICHWALD, MdB (EICHWALD) likewise claims THE THICK OF IT as part of its ancestry.⁴ It follows the German backbench MP Harjo Eichwald (Bernhard Schütz) and his team as they struggle (and fail) to navigate political Berlin.

In a narrative analysis, this chapter will show that, in their hyperbolically negative portrayal of politics, both VEEP and EICHWALD follow what Nicholas Holm names the "three key modes of contemporary humour – discomfort, provocation and absurdity".⁵ Considering the shows' specific *serial* dramatic logic, the chapter will demonstrate how VEEP and EICHWALD manage to sustain their narrative configuration despite their omnishambolic focus on continuous failure and disaster that would otherwise lead to the swift resolution of a conflict. In maintaining the omnishambolic configuration in a fixed character ensemble, the series display a particularly prominent clash of *intradiegetic* and *dramatic* logics that becomes more pronounced as they progress. This chapter will demonstrate how the series' derive a notable absurdist air from the perpetual downward spiral of their characters' failure. Following coherent intradiegetic logic, such continuous deficiency would lead to a character's eventual removal. However, the series perpetuate and stabilise it in accordance with the dramatic logic of retaining (and repeating) a series' basic configuration.

Following a line of comparative enquiry pursued by Holm for THE THICK OF IT and VEEP,⁶ this chapter will analyse the series' strategies for the creation of humour. I follow the assumption⁷ that both VEEP and EICHWALD reference a reduced version of the formal tradition of the mockumentary style with its deliberately unsteady, "verité-style camera-work",⁸ the renunciation of noticeable extradiegetic effects such as a laugh track,⁹ and a metaleptic, colportage-style presentation of diegetic events. This chapter will illustrate the notion that both series create what might be called "uncomfortable humour"¹⁰ that "is premised upon an intentional failure to resolve the humorous incongruity within the bounds of the text and thereby provide immediate interpretative clo-

3 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 75. He notes this with regards to THE THICK OF IT and VEEP but it applies just as well to EICHWALD.

4 Florian Gilberg, Raphael David Moser, Said Rezek, Steffen Schulze, "Eichwald, MdB: Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Swittek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 122.

5 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 16.

6 See Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 75–81.

7 For VEEP, this notion has been put forward by Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 77f.

8 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 77.

9 See Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 77 and 105.

10 See Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 89ff.

sure".¹¹ However, it will become clear that while VEEP relies on the transgressive humour of its "invective spectacle", as Katja Kanzler has shown,¹² EICHWALD focuses more on lingering social awkwardness rather than demonstrative transgression and thus follows in the tradition of earlier mockumentary series like THE OFFICE (UK, 2001–2003).

In its structural analyses, this chapter will illustrate the different ways in which both series create humorous incongruity. Following approaches proposed by both Shaw and Holm, the latter noting the series' tendency "to find comedy in the gap between the ideal of political sphere and its sordid particulars",¹³ I will show that VEEP operationalises a variation of the *King's two bodies* trope, introduced in chapter 4, by demonstrating a multi-layered game based on the difference between an ideal body politic and the flawed reality of the people using it to conceal (and comically ignore) their own humanity. EICHWALD, on the other hand, showing the largely unceremonious failure of its protagonists, only implies this incongruity. Analysing the transactional patterns that constitute both series' plots, I will show that VEEP and EICHWALD rely on *Zero-Sum* games between *static*, *adjusted* players (see the discussion of these characteristics in chapter 3). Therefore, interactions in the series primarily consist of reactions to external events that serve as stimuli to trigger the games' dysfunctional configuration and thus create comedy.

Netflix's THE POLITICIAN (POLITICIAN) represents a double paradigm shift in polit-comedy at the end of the 2010s. The series tells of the struggle of high school student Payton Hobart (Ben Platt) and his friends as they attempt to win an election for student body president and, in season 2, for the state senate of New York. It is (1) arguably the first of the three sample series in this chapter to consider algorithmically created audience functions in the conception of its plot. POLITICIAN (2) ends the decade with a shift from 'uncomfortable' to 'woke' humour that functions without the previous transgression of socially acceptable boundaries. It will become apparent that this paradigm constitutes a decisive change in what has generally been believed to be television's "cultural logic of gentrification".¹⁴

A structural analysis will demonstrate that the narrative patterns in POLITICIAN present a satirical inversion of the conventional coming-of-age progression. Here, a

11 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 114.

12 Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>

13 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 80 [sic!]. See also Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f.

14 For discussion of the 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. See also Katja Kanzler's remarks on the "Characteristic transgressiveness" of prestige TV: Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>; see also Janet McCabe and Kim Akass' discussion of earlier HBO-led, linear 'Quality TV' as "courting controversy": Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 62–76.

politician (Payton Hobart) moves from the stereotypical moral emptiness established in the narrative conventions of earlier polit-fiction to a more balanced personality that includes both personal needs and ideals.

Discussing the series' varying presentation of politics, this chapter argues that VEEP and EICHWALD present politics as a highly agonal, *uncooperative Zero-Sum* game of power politics (see chapter 3). At the same time, POLITICIAN presents politics as a *cooperative* and ultimately constructive game with a limited agonal component. Accordingly, in VEEP and EICHWALD, politics is a largely simulative process that circumvents effective democratic representation. Supported by the pseudo-naturalist mise-en-scène of the mockumentary style, the series present their highly cynical image of politics as a lamentable but unavoidable fact in the reflexively impotent tradition of "Capitalist Realism".¹⁵ Similarly, Joe Conway calls VEEP an example of what he calls the "*political satire vérité*" genre,¹⁶ with its 'end of history'-type "aesthetic of the apparently real".¹⁷

This chapter will demonstrate that POLITICIAN, on the other hand, presents a decidedly optimistic image of realpolitik and representative democracy as a flawed but ultimately effective way to implement meaningful change. The series thus follows a modernised version of a more idealistic fictional tradition that is notably influenced by the progressive discourse of the late 2010s and early 2020 (although the series' execution of a more diverse narrative and ensemble remains somewhat clumsy as compared to more recent (non-polit) Netflix productions such as DIRTY LINES (Netherlands, 2022- present), LES 7 VIES DE LÉA (France, 2022), or DRÔLE (France, 2022-present)).

5.1 Positioning VEEP and EICHWALD, MdB

In the 2010s, some regarded VEEP as the "most poignant television show about twenty-first-century American politics."¹⁸ While this assessment remains questionable, it is unsurprising that the prominent HBO series has been the topic of substantial scholarly commentary. As a comparatively low-budget production of the German public service broadcaster ZDF, EICHWALD has received significantly less attention. Kanzler describes VEEP as "Invective Spectacle".¹⁹ For her, the series "interlaces primarily two types of humor [...]: a humor of awkwardness and a humor that organizes around invective",²⁰ progressing "from embarrassment to insult" and creating "a complex economy of affect, an

15 See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21ff.

16 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: Veep, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: American Satire and the Postmodern Condition (2016): 187. Original emphasis.

17 Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 140.

18 Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

19 Kanzler, "Invective Spectacle", 147–162.

20 Kanzler, "Invective Spectacle", 152.

economy that oscillates between attraction and repulsion.”²¹ Kanzler notes that VEEP’s invective clashes with the series’ political setting that is characterized by “a very deliberate use of language, designed to create electable images for politicians, to advertise their work as sincere efforts to serve the public good, and – above all – to not antagonize any potential voters.”²² The series thus “translates ‘Quality TV’s’ characteristic transgressive-ness into the conventions of comedy.”²³

Following a tradition established since *THE THICK OF IT*, impotence, hyperbolic disaster, and incompetence have often been described as VEEP’s core motifs.²⁴ Holm, e.g., notes that

the humour of each programme focuses upon the role of failure in the political process and makes use of their fictional settings to explore the potential for errors and setbacks that would not usually make it into the news media spotlight.²⁵

Accordingly, for Alexander Stock, VEEP’s central leitmotif is “damage control”²⁶, and Kolja Möller argues that the series illustrates “[h]ow far the political bustle is removed from the conscious creation of strategy, how much dilettantism and clumsiness are at work here”.²⁷ Stock²⁸ and Andreas Dörner, picking up on the failure-motif, have each pointed out that, with its concentration on “grotesque incompetence” and political impotence, the character of Veep is a satirical inversion of figures like *HOUSE OF CARDS*’ protagonist Frank Underwood.²⁹ However, it should be noted that VEEP, having been

21 Kanzler, “Invective Spectacle”, 152.

22 Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

23 Kanzler, “Invective Spectacle”, 149.

24 See, e.g., Alexander Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 285–303; Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>; Joe Conway, “After Politics/After Television: Veep, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government”, *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 197.

25 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 76.

26 Alexander Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 287. My translation: “Schadensbegrenzung”.

27 Kolja Möller, “House of Cards, Veep, Borgen: Was kann man von den neuen Polit-Serien lernen?”, *Prager Frühling: Magazin für Freiheit und Sozialismus*, February 2015, <https://www.prager-fruehling-magazin.de/de/article/1209.house-of-cards-veep-borgen.html>. My Translation: “Wie weit der politische Betrieb von der bewussten Strategiebildung entfernt, wie viel Dilettantismus und Tollpatschigkeit am Werk sind, steht im Mittelpunkt der comedyartigen Serie ‘Veep’”.

28 Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, 285.

29 Andreas Dörner, “Politische TV-Serien und Politische Kultur: Ein Forschungsprogramm und Betrachtungen zu einem deutschen Sonderweg”, in *Politische Kulturforschung Reloaded: Neue Theorien, Methoden und Ergebnisse*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem, Paula Diehl, and Hans J. Lietzmann (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 167, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783839447475-008>.

released in 2012, predates *HOUSE OF CARDS* by a year, making an actual genealogy unlikely.

Incompetence is a common trope in polit-fiction – both comical and non-comical – that precedes the series discussed in this chapter. According to Liesbeth van Zoonen, “[i]ncompetence is one important background against which the political quest can be told, depravity another.”³⁰ In *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, both are present. Niko Switek accordingly states that comical fictional politicians often appear “As clumsy, incompetent and reactive characters [who] try arduously to retain their attained status”³¹ instead of attempting to gain new ground.

Stock lists a variety of stereotypes of polit-fiction that reappear in *VEEP*. He names egotistical politicians, hybris and a sense of omnipotence, incompetence, a “crisis of representation”, the incompatibility of politics and family, the politician as an actor, exclusive focus on political opinion polls, and politics as hard and rough.³² For him, a completely powerless, constantly side-lined Veep and her team engage exclusively in creating mediated “pseudo-events”³³ instead of actual policy.³⁴ Regarding the modern process of mass media ‘making’ – as opposed to ‘gathering’ – news, Daniel J. Boorstin describes pseudo-events as a “synthetic novelty, which has flooded our experience”.³⁵ For him, pseudo-events serve the artificial creation of media-relevant circumstances which are (1) consciously “planned, planted, or incited”; (2) serve primarily “the immediate purpose of being reported”; (3) have an ambiguous relationship with their underlying realities; (4) work as “self-fulfilling prophecy” by turning an underlying reality into the enhanced pseudo-reality of its signifiers.³⁶

Following Dörner’s distinction of fictional politics as either “Idealpolitik, Realpolitik or Machtpolitik” [*ideal politics, realpolitik, or power politics*],³⁷ Stock notes that *VEEP* portrays a type of power politics that is

30 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 113.

31 Niko Switek, “Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 25. My translation: “Als ungeschickte, inkompetente und reaktive Charaktere versuchen Politiker mühsam, ihren erreichten Status zu halten [...]”.

32 Alexander Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, in Switek, *Politik in Fernsehserien*, 298f.

33 Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, 297. Although he does not explicitly reference it, the term, in this context, derives from Daniel J. Boorstin, “From News-Gathering to News-Making: A Flood of Pseudo-Events”, in *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication*, revised ed., ed. Wilbour Schramm and Donald F. Roberts (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 118.

34 See Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, 292.

35 Boorstin, “From News-Gathering to News-Making”, 118.

36 Boorstin, “From News-Gathering to News-Making”, 120.

37 Andreas Dörner, “Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühne der Politik”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016), 7.

used legitimately but not for the realisation of *policies* for the purpose of active Gestaltung but rather as an end to itself and to increase recognition and self-esteem.³⁸

Shaw, examining the “poetics of omnishambles” in VEEP, notes that the series’ plot “relies on the proximity of the austere standing of the united stated presidency meeting the baser, lowly aspects of humanity”.³⁹ In his examination of political humour, Holm accordingly states that polit-comedies like VEEP create “humour out of the demystification of the political sphere” by exploiting a comical incongruency between political ideals and base practical ‘realities’ by pointing out “that, for all its appeals to higher callings, the practice of politics involves the failures of human beings”.⁴⁰ Holm’s critical elaboration on the series’ comical incongruence evokes (although he does not mention it) notions of the K2B trope, e.g., when he states,

Such comedy relies upon the clichéd revelation that abstract symbolisms are also material and physical – the lofty ideas must also live down in the dirt – and in doing so asserts a clear distinction between the two domains aligned against one another.⁴¹

Kanzler accordingly points out that VEEP’s dominant invective is “embedded in the show’s satirical project to critically demystify politics through narratives that lampoon political institutions, processes, and, above all, agents”.⁴² However, for Holm, while ostensibly occupied with politics, this construction of humour is decidedly unpolitical.⁴³ Following Alenka Zupančič’s notion of the uncritical, pseudo-satirical “false, conservative comedies”,⁴⁴ he points out the series’ reliance “upon mockery of indivial failings and the policing of middle-class social mores” doing little to subvert “or critique [...] political institutions and processes, let alone structures of power”.⁴⁵ According to Holm, “the ideal vision of politics” in series such as VEEP “remains inviolate and is even reinforced in its abstract, inhumane perfection: even as we laugh at the humans who fail to perform to its standard”.⁴⁶

38 Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als institutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, 300. My translation: “Macht wird zwar legitim gebraucht, aber nicht für die Realisierung von *policies* und zur aktiven Gestaltung, sondern vielmehr als Selbstzweck und zur Steigerung von Anerkennung und Selbstwertgefühl”. Original emphasis.

39 Marc Edward Shaw, “Veep’s Poetics of Omnishambles”, in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f.

40 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 80.

41 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 82.

42 Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

43 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 82f.

44 Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In* (Cambridge, MA/ London: MIT Press, 2008), 30.

45 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 82.

46 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82f. His assessment closely follows Zupančič, *The Odd One In*, 30f.

In a similar vein, regarding both the series' formal construction and its presentation of politics, Joe Conway has described VEEP as part of what he calls "*political satire vérité*",⁴⁷ a genre that "invites its viewers to watch an 'apparently real' world of insider politics"⁴⁸ thus creating misleading notions of cynical, accuracy-based 'realism'. Drawing on the cultural logic of what Alan Kirby calls "Digimodernism",⁴⁹ which "intensifies postmodern logic insofar as it reinforces and augments antihistorical thinking",⁵⁰ Conway argues that this aesthetic "gestures toward some overly credulous notion of authenticity".⁵¹

EICHWALD follows a similar tradition. Remarking on the series' leitmotif of incompetence and impotence, Gilbert et al., e.g., write that "Eichwald's strongest motivation is limited to ensuring his political survival: *office seeking* becomes the elemental fuel for his political ambitions".⁵² They likewise point out that, in EICHWALD, the "permanent state of emergency" is presented as the "perceived normality".⁵³ In the series', image management and the navigation of media coverage appear to be a politician's central tasks,⁵⁴ and there is a "flowing boundary between politics and tabloid reporting".⁵⁵ In EICHWALD, it is not the productive creation of policy but "[t]he political crisis and dealing with a media scandal [that] serve as central markers of quality in the evaluation of a politician's ability".⁵⁶

5.1.1 Dramatizing Omnishambles: Stabilisation

VEEP and EICHWALD's 'omnishambolic' configuration is first and foremost the result of an extratextual *dramatic* rule that serves to ensure the series' specific humorous incongruity. There are, however, no intradiegetic affordances that would, by themselves,

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- 47 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: Veep, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 182 and 187. Original emphasis.
- 48 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television", 182.
- 49 Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009).
- 50 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television", 185.
- 51 Conway, "After Politics/After Television", 186.
- 52 Florian Gilbert, Raphael David Moser, Said Rezek, Steffen Schulze, "Eichwald, MdB: Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 106. My Translation: "Eichwalds stärkste politische Motivation beschränkt sich in erster Linie darauf, das eigene politische Überleben zu sichern: *Office-Seeking* wird zum elementaren Treibstoff seiner politischen Ambitionen." Original emphasis.
- 53 Gilbert, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", 105. My translation: "Der permanente Ausnahmezustand wird hierbei zur gefühlten Normalität".
- 54 See Bettina Soller and Maria Sulimma, "It's A Great Time To Be A Woman In Politics': Politikerinnen als Protagonistinnen von US-Fernsehserien", *INDEX: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.4 (2014): 87.
- 55 Gilbert, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", 113. My translation: "fließende Grenze zwischen Politik und Boulevardberichterstattung".
- 56 Gilbert, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", 119. My translation: "Die politische Krise und der Umgang mit einem Skandal dienen bei Eichwald, MdB als zentrale Qualitätsmerkmale für die Bewertung der Fähigkeit eines Politikers".

suggest the characters' continuous failure. The dramatic rule of omnishambles dictates that all *visible actions* of the protagonists inevitably result in disaster, no matter the actual diegetic odds.

Within the diegesis, this rule manifests (1) through the characters' staggering incompetence. As *Veep*'s advisor, Amy, points out, "You have two settings: no decision and bad decision",⁵⁷ e.g., leading to a billion dollar increase in military spending due to a mis-handled teleprompter.⁵⁸ Harjo Eichwald likewise accidentally body-shames an influential industrial heiress⁵⁹ and fails to frame a competing MP for corruption by using his own credit card in the scheme.⁶⁰

(2) To ensure the series' omnishambolic configuration, disaster often occurs through developments outside the characters' direct control. They appear (i) in the form of unlucky coincidences and (ii) as the machinations of hostile co-players with a superior position in the ongoing political games. Accordingly, in both *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, politics appears as a sphere so complex, volatile, and unforgiving that it becomes nearly impossible to navigate successfully. *Veep*, e.g., spoils her daughter Catherine's 21st birthday party to successfully negotiate the prevention of a government shutdown.⁶¹ However, the President's deviating plans subsequently foil Meyer's achievement. Ultimately, the VP finds herself taking the blame for the shutdown she had successfully negotiated to prevent. The President's chief of staff, Ben Cafferty, explains this in a manner typical for *VEEP*'s invective: "It has been the job of the VP over the ages to, you know, take it in the ass to save the President."⁶²

However, following intradiegetic logic alone, such an omnishambolic configuration, by itself, is not sustainable in a long-running serial narrative because it leads to an escalation of conflict intensity that ultimately – if left to play out – impedes the series' fundamental ability to repeat established narrative patterns. If left to intradiegetic logic alone, the blundering characters would ultimately have to leave office after a few initial disasters. Therefore, an additional set of dramatic rules is necessary to stabilise the narrative and let *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* function as an ongoing *series* that alternates between innovation and repetition.

To circumvent intradiegetic logic, the dramatic rule of general omnishambles thus (3) extends to characters who appeared exceedingly qualified before entering the narrative

57 *Veep*, season 4, episode 5, "Convention", directed by Stephanie Laing, story by Armando Iannucci, Sean Gray, David Quantick, Teleplay by: Sean Gray & David Quantick, aired May 10, 2015, HBO, 17.43".

58 *Veep*, season 4, episode 1, "Joint Session", directed by Chris Addison, story by Armando Iannucci & Simon Blackwell & Georgia Pritchett, teleplay by Simon Blackwell & Georgia Pritchett, aired April 12, 2015, HBO, 24.09".

59 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 1, "Der Konkurrent", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 18.06".

60 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 1, "Der Konkurrent", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 10.03".

61 *Veep*, season 2, episode 6, "Andrew", directed by Christopher Morris, written by Armando Iannucci and Tony Roche, aired May 19, 2013, HBO, 10.19".

62 *Veep*, season 2, episode 7, "Shutdown", directed by Becky Martin, story by Simon Blackwell, Tony Roche, Armando Iannucci, teleplay by Simon Blackwell & Tony Roche, aired June 2, 2013, HBO, 12.28".

focus. In *VEEP*, e.g., the fabled campaign manager Bill Ericsson, pursued by all who strive for higher office, immediately turns into a consistent failure after he joins Selina Meyer's camp.⁶³ Antagonists, likewise, do not manage to score 3rd-degree victories against the clumsy Veep and her team (which would destroy the narrative's established patterns) because they become themselves incompetent as soon as they take a more central narrative role. This dramatic precaution stabilises the narrative's omnishambolic configuration for future repetitions. The series' portrayal of politics as a messy and corrupt affair thus, in part, results from the dramatic logic of serial narrative itself. It is essential to note this dramatic effect of serial storytelling because its structural influence impedes the series' ability to function as source material for an unfiltered sociocultural reading of the ideological dispositions of audiences or, respectively, their *functions*.⁶⁴

(4) The dramatic rule of general omnishambles determines the structure of the series' *plot*, that is, the causal presentation of intradiegetic events. However, this plot does not represent the overall diegetic situation itself, as it would be unsustainable within intradiegetic logic. Accordingly, in *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, only *visible* interactions lead to failure. There is a large amount of intradiegetic action that ultimately remains successful, e.g., Selina's attempts to retain her office despite countless offences, her two successful ascensions to the presidency,⁶⁵ or Harjo Eichwald's re-election to parliament in the series' second season.⁶⁶ However, in both series, successful actions and events that do not comply with the series' omnishambolic paradigm appear only insofar as they are necessary to create an intradiegetic reason for the characters' remaining in office, thus enabling the retention of the narratives' basic configuration.

(5) To stabilise the series' configuration and enable serial repetition, both *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* follow the dramatic rule of *limiting conflict intensity*. In both series, the *visible* consequences of players' actions usually remain restricted to the circle of responsible protagonists. Likewise, the *visible* conflicts usually do not exceed a 2nd-degree intensity, meaning their consequences cause irritations but are, theoretically, reversible.⁶⁷ The few tangible actions of Harjo Eichwald have little to no effect on anyone but himself and his staff. His unexpected success in saving a factory in his constituency from closing, e.g., is rendered obsolete by external developments outside his control.⁶⁸ The potential consequences of his failure to implement a functioning health score for processed foods, on the other hand, remain out of the narrative's focus.⁶⁹

63 *Veep*, season 4, episode 2, "East Wing", directed by Stephanie Laing, written by Armandia Iannucci, Kevin Cecil & Roger Drew & Andy Riley, aired April 19, 2015, HBO.

64 See chapter 3 for my elaboration of discursive *audience functions*.

65 *Veep*, season 3, episode 10, "New Hampshire", directed by Chris Addison, written by Simon Blackwell, Armando Iannucci, and Tony Roche, aired June 8, 2014, HBO; and *Veep*, season 7, episode 7, "Veep", directed by David Mandel, written by David Mandel, aired May 12, 2019, HBO.

66 *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 2, episode 1, "Männer können alles", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired June 14, 2019, ZDFneo.

67 See my adaption of Eric Berne's concept of intensity for my model in chapter 3.

68 *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 2, "Der Industrielle", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 23, 2015, ZDFneo, 26.23".

69 *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 3, "Die Ampel", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 30, 2015, ZDFneo.

In the few instances where audiences are confronted with 3rd-degree consequences of Veep's blunders, these remain vague and are usually relayed by satirically cynical commentary only. The accidental death of a park visitor whom a bear kills during the government shutdown (an irreversible 3rd-degree event), e.g. appears only as a passing joke between the main characters.⁷⁰ Even when Veep's advisor Bill Ericsson is framed as a scapegoat for their corrupt activities,⁷¹ this 3rd-degree event remains largely without visible consequences for several episodes afterwards. Ericsson even reappears in future episodes, his eventual incarceration never becoming visible.

Both series (6) maintain *their basic character set and general configuration*. In both VEEP and EICHWALD, removing a character from the protagonists' inner circle has little influence on the narrative's overall configuration. It is primarily a dramatically motivated move that creates the opportunity for innovation by introducing new avenues and surroundings for plot development while retaining the narrative's basic configuration.

The core characters in VEEP's larger ensemble often ostensibly change sides, are fired, or scapegoated, yet they usually remain part of the same game patterns involving more or less the same players figuring the same actants. Veep's ruthless advisor Dan Egan, for example, is sacrificed as a scapegoat,⁷² and her chief of staff, Amy Brookheimer, quits/is dismissed after a fight over Meyer's indecision and incompetence.⁷³ However, they subsequently start careers as lobbyists⁷⁴ and, in Dan's case, as a news anchor for the fictional news show *CBS This Morning*⁷⁵ and thus occupy diegetic positions that allow them to continue to feature prominently in Veep's circle of activity. In EICHWALD, office manager Julia goes on maternity leave, only to reappear as a continuous, nervously hovering presence. In what appears as an unconscious meta-commentary on the rigidity of the series' narrative configuration, Julia is even replaced by someone with the same name.⁷⁶

Both VEEP and EICHWALD are action-based narratives. Thus, the series' characters, like the character configuration, remain primarily static. They do not change significantly as the series progresses, and even when they do, their evolution is of no plot-driving importance. Like many series, both VEEP and EICHWALD create an illusion of

70 Veep, season 2, episode 7, "Shutdown", directed by Becky Martin, Story by: Simon Blackwell & Tony Roche & Armando Iannucci, Teleplay by: Simon Blackwell & Tony Roche, aired June 2, 2013, HBO, 11.31".

71 Veep, season 4, episode 9, "Testimony", directed by Armando Iannucci, written by Sean Gray, Armando Iannucci, and Will Smith, aired June 7, 2015, HBO, 26.51".

72 Veep, season 4, episode 3, "Data", directed by Becky Martin, written by Armando Iannucci, Simon Blackwell, Neil Gibbons, and Rob Gibbons, aired April 26, 2015, HBO.

73 Veep, season 4, episode 5, "Convention", directed by Stephanie Laing, story by Armando Iannucci, Sean Gray, David Quantick, teleplay by Sean Gray & David Quantick, aired May 10, 2015, HBO..

74 Veep, season 4, episode 4, "Teheran", directed by Becky Martin, written by Armando Iannucci, Ian Martin & Tony Roche, aired May 3, 2015, HBO; and Veep, season 4, episode 6, "Storms and Pancakes", directed by Chris Addison, written by Armando Iannucci, Georgia Pritchett & Will Smith, aired May 17, 2015, HBO.

75 Veep, season 6, episode 1, "Omaha", directed by David Mandel, written by Lew Morton, aired April 16, 2017, HBO.

76 Eichwald, MdB, season 2, episode 1, "Männer können alles", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired June 14, 2019, ZDFneo.

character development and plot progression through the constant introduction of external events while their dramatic layout remains, in fact, essentially unchanged. Innovation in VEEP and EICHWALD remains limited to introducing external stimuli that trigger known interactional patterns, thus ensuring that the series' distinct omnishambolic games and their humorous appeal to audiences remain intact.

With their 2nd-degree limitation of conflict and their repetition of established patterns, the series illustrate a curious similarity between the structural affordances of comedy and serial narrative. In his famous study on humour, Henri Bergson notes that repetition and reversibility are fundamental requirements of classic comedy.⁷⁷ For Bergson, this limitation of a conflict's visible intensity – to say it with this study's terminology – is necessary to enable an escapist attitude among audiences, a state of “*absence of feeling which usually accompanies laughter*”.⁷⁸ As Bergson writes:

It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell on the surface of a thoroughly calm and unruffled soul. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.⁷⁹

A mainstream audience confronted with the irreversible consequences of destructive political behaviour would hardly laugh at its perpetrators' idiocy or clumsiness, and the resulting moral complexity would risk impeding the series' otherwise accessible mainstream humour. Therefore, just as a limitation of intensity is necessary to retain a series' configuration, a certain degree of escapist compositional security is essential for the creation of a morally neutral sphere in which audiences can laugh about the characters' amoral shenanigans without having to consider the consequences these actions might have.

Accordingly, VEEP only abandons its dominant dramatic logics of serial repetition and limited intensity in its finale. The presidency once again at arm's reach, Selina Meyer makes the 3rd-degree sacrifices necessary to secure her win. These include the appointment of the tangibly transgressive, unhinged, and dangerous Jonah to become her VP and the scapegoating of her loyal bagman Gary, a character whom the audience had come to appreciate as harmless, loyal, and comparatively sympathetic over seven previous seasons.⁸⁰ To emphasise the irreversible change that has taken place within Selina Meyer, the episode clearly presents the 3rd-degree consequences of her decisions (a sociopath as VP, a loyal ally jailed for many years) for the first time as part of the visible plot. As it abandons the central serial dramatic rule of escapist *limitation of conflict intensity*, VEEP

77 Henri Bergson, *Das Lachen*, transl. Julius Frankenberger und Walter Fränzel (Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1921), 50, 57, and 61f.

78 Henri Bergson, *Das Lachen*, 7. Translation: “die *Gefühllosigkeit* [...], die gewöhnlich dem Lachen zur Seite geht”.

79 Bergson, *Das Lachen*, 7. Translation: “Das Komische scheint seine durchschlagende Wirkung nur äußern zu können, wenn es eine völlig unbewegte, ausgeglichene Seelenoberfläche vorfindet. Seelische Kälte ist sein wahres Element. Das Lachen hat keinen größeren Feind als jede Art von Erregung”.

80 *Veep*, season 7, episode 7, “Veep”, directed by David Mandel, written by David Mandel, aired May 12, 2019, HBO, 33.32”.

seizes to be a comedy and assumes a decidedly tragic tone. In a break with its previous formal conventions, the series ends with a time-lapse to Selina Meyer's funeral. It concludes with a parade of the broken, mediocre people Veep has left behind on her way to power and with a summary of her own, ultimately unremarkable legacy.⁸¹

5.1.2 Dramatizing Omnishambles: Comical Incongruity

The demystification of politics as a morally corrupt sphere at odds with its august outward pretensions is, as Holm notes, an example of the “incongruous construction of humour”.⁸² Comedy's incongruity theory “surmises that humour follows the substitution of an unexpected event or remark in place of what is anticipated”.⁸³ According to Holm, this type of humour derives from “the bringing together of two disparate elements, so that they uneasily co-exist”.⁸⁴ In the case of VEEP and EICHWALD, humour derives (1) from the intradiegetic incongruity between the respectable offices the protagonists occupy and their personal inadequacy;⁸⁵ (2) from the incongruity between the characters' self-image and audiences' perception of them.

My analysis of THE CROWN (see chapter 4) showed that an incongruous configuration can easily form the basis of drama as well. However, the implicit tendency of incongruity to create a comical effect constantly veers THE CROWN towards comedy. It is the structural explanation for why the series' showrunner, Peter Morgan, once stated that “[t]he wheels on this show want it to do satire, which is what we love doing with our political leaders and royals”.⁸⁶

Following this incongruity, the *King's two bodies* (K2B) trope, which I discussed in more detail in chapter 4, becomes the role model for the underlying structural logic of both VEEP and EICHWALD. Following an Elizabethan concept, the structural K2B motif assumes that, just as the king before them, the vice president, the president and, to a lesser degree, the MP possess two distinct bodies: on the one hand, a *body natural*, that is their personal, private, physical self, and, on the other hand, a *body politic*, that is, the idealised and entirely conceptual “superbody”⁸⁷ of their office. As I discussed in chapter 4, in post-modernity, it is through the presentation of a person as an official and the subsequent interpretative reception of a diegetic public that the two bodies join to form the third

81 Veep, season 7, episode 7, “Veep”, directed by David Mandel, written by David Mandel, aired May 12, 2019, HBO, 39.10”.

82 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 10.

83 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 10.

84 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 11.

85 As noted above. For VEEP see, e.g., Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 80.

86 Valentine Low, “Writer braces royal courtiers for Netflix series The Crown”, *The Times*, September 9, 2019, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/writer-braces-royal-courtiers-for-netflix-series-the-crown-hqgg5g88f?wgu=270525_54264_15682818054572_2607def8c7&wgexpiry=1576057805&utm_source=planit&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_content=22278.

87 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4.

mythical body of a political representative.⁸⁸ The body politic of the political official, like the monarch before them, “comes into existence only in the imagination of his followers”.⁸⁹

As an established narrative convention, the K2B construct, with its associations with the postmodern political imaginary, underlies the demystification of fictional politics in VEEP and EICHWALD because it highlights the incongruity between the respective protagonists’ bodies politic and natural.

Initially, it may seem strange to attribute a monarchic concept to a democratically legitimised (fictional) office. However, Friedrich Balke, in his analysis of THE WEST WING, already noted the “tension between the *body politic* and *body natural* of the president”,⁹⁰ thus demonstrating the feasibility of the trope for non-monarchical polit-fiction. Moreover, this narrative practice closely follows established historical precedent, especially in the reception of the US presidency. Anne Norton, e.g., in her discussion “the president as sign”, has shown the breadth of imaginaries attached to the imaginary body of the historical US presidency. She states:

As signifier, the President calls up not only the American nation, the government, the executive branch, and the triumphant party (already a rich – and variable – assemblage of images) but the mythic and historical associations that attach to the office and to its past and present occupants. The Presidency comprises a collection of associations that includes “the American Dream”, war powers, impeachment, and assassination.⁹¹

Implicitly evoking the *King’s two (respectively three) bodies* trope, Norton states that “[e]ach connotation is embedded in a historical context that is also available in the image”.⁹² In the US, the personified myth of the presidency thus comprises and personifies various other myths essential to the national identity. As is the case with a monarch, the public’s often unconscious operation of constructing a unified, mythical *one* out of a representative’s two bodies is an essential prerequisite for political power.⁹³ As Jean Baudrillard

88 See also Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, transl. Martha M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 8f. and 13–15.

89 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 8. My translation: “Den politischen Körper des Königs kann man nicht sehen; er wird allein im Imaginären seiner Gefolgsleute und Untertanen gegenwärtig.”

90 Friedrich Balke, “Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in The West Wing”, in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka Klein and A. Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015), 85. – My translation: “[...] Spanungsverhältnis von *body politic* und *body natural* des Präsidenten”. Original emphasis.

91 Anne Norton, *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 91.

92 Norton, *Republic of Signs*, 91.

93 Paula Diehl notes the pervasiveness of the King’s two bodies structure for modern democracies. In Paula Diehl, “Von ‘Medienkanzler’, ‘singender Bundesrätin’ und Showman: Körperinszenierung zwischen Unterhaltung und politischer Repräsentation”, in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 109.

states: "No one would grant the least consent, the least devotion to a *real* person. It is to his double [...] to which allegiance is given."⁹⁴

As I have shown in my analysis of *THE CROWN* in chapter 4, in polit-drama, the diverging demands of the private body natural and the public body politic create what E. Tory Higgins calls a "self-discrepancy" in which the three "basic domains of the self" (*actual* self, *ideal* self, *ought* self) are at odds with one another and thus generate an incongruence that causes distress.⁹⁵ Accordingly, in drama, this motif usually initiates a plot-driving coming-of-age process aimed at consolidating these opposing vectors.

The effect is decidedly different in the comedies *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, with their static characters and configuration. In a satirical variation of dramatic irony, the discrepancy between Veep and Eichwald's bodies politic and natural becomes noticeable only across ontological planes and exclusively to audiences. Following a classic comical trope, both Eichwald and Veep are ultimately unconscious of the discrepancy between their bodies natural and politic. As Holm notes regarding *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*'s predecessor, *THE THICK OF IT*: "a comic gap opens up between the truth of narrative events, as the audience knows them, and the beliefs and actions of the on-screen characters".⁹⁶ Veep, Eichwald, and their teams thus fulfil an essential prerequisite for the comic, which, as Bergson notes, must be "*unconscious*. As though it was the ring of Gyges with reverse effect, visible to all others it is invisible to itself".⁹⁷

Both Veep and Eichwald must remain ignorant of their apparent inadequacy to remain comic instead of tragic figures. Other than the fictional Elizabeth Windsor, Veep does not consciously experience (and suffer from) the chasm between her private and public identities herself. She instead believes herself to be capable and entitled to the offices she holds. The disparity between her public and personal roles only causes Veep suffering when they have *direct* consequences, e.g., through the loss of an opportunity, a vote, or an election. In *EICHWALD*, the protagonist's inadequacy lies out in the open. Harjo Eichwald's energy is thus spent entirely on (successfully) ignoring the apparent discrepancy between his personal and professional disposition and the impossibility of ever reconciling these differences.

The same unconscious self-discrepancy afflicts all those who work with the various inadequate officials in either series. The supporting characters in *EICHWALD* and *VEEP* continuously find themselves torn between the demands of their roles as political staffers and their limitations as human beings. In both series, there is a clear expectation of the ideal political operative: He*she is in action 24/7, possesses no personal needs, is always in command of any situation and of him*self, entirely ruthless and in tune with the ill-defined 'public'. They are requirements that any human will inevitably fail to fulfil. In

94 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 26. Original emphasis.

95 E. Tory Higgins, "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect", *Psychological Review* 94, no.3 (1987): 320f.

96 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 77.

97 Henri Bergson, *Das Lachen*, transl. Julius Frankenberger und Walter Fränzel (Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1921), 15. My translation: "[...] *unbewußt*. Als ob es ein Gegenstück zum Ring des Gyges wäre, sichtbar den andern allen, sich selber unsichtbar". Original emphasis.

the series, this inconsolable self-discrepancy causes anxiety and even frantic panic as the characters struggle (and fail) to consolidate the unattainable requirements of their dual nature as people and political operatives.

In VEEP, there are several ways to deal with this conundrum: There are those, like chief of staff Amy Brookheimer or political advisor Dan Egan, who are young and ambitious enough to delude themselves into thinking that they are, in fact, the ideal political operative. Ultimately, they both break from the pressure, with Dan suffering a nervous breakdown⁹⁸ and Amy begging Veep on her knees not to make Jonah Ryan the VP.⁹⁹ Veep herself ends up in a mental institution disguised as a “Spa”¹⁰⁰ following an election defeat. Others, like press secretary Mike McIntock, have long resigned themselves to always falling short of the requirements, thus consistently underperforming at the bare minimum. Eichwald’s staff appear equally overwhelmed and even less able to consolidate the demands of their professional and private identities. Eichwald’s advisor Sebastian uses professional engagements in his attempts to form amorous connections.¹⁰¹ His colleague Berndt, while the only one in Eichwald’s team to take the administrative and productive side of politics seriously, is ageing, physically unhealthy, and almost as emotionally worn out as his employer. After a recalibration in season two, he falls in line with the staff’s general resigned solipsism and is shown throughout the season to be consumed almost entirely by the volunteer work he uses to compensate for his marital problems and professional disappointments.

5.1.3 Operationalizing Incongruity in VEEP

As narratives in the demonstrative dramatic medium of TV, both VEEP and EICHWALD illustrate this basic layout through tangible character interactions. In VEEP, the incongruous K2B configuration manifests in what I want to call the *President’s two Bodies* game (P2B game, see figure 23). It involves a hierarchically superior actant (most frequently but not exclusively Selina Meyer as vice president and later as president and ex-president, respectively) and a hierarchically inferior co-player who engage in complex transactions containing an ostensible ceremonial and an ulterior personal vector. On the ostensible ceremonial vector, interactions play out in ritualised Parent (Veep)-Child (co-player) transactions in accordance with protocol and precedence.¹⁰² Despite her relative powerlessness throughout the series, Veep is endowed with the trappings of power: people almost always rise to their feet when she enters a room, address her as “mam”, and display varying levels of (disingenuous) deference.

98 Veep, season 3, episode 7, “Special Relationship”, directed by Becky Martin, written by Simon Blackwell, Tony Roche, and Armando Iannucci, aired May 18, 2014, HBO, 20.20”.

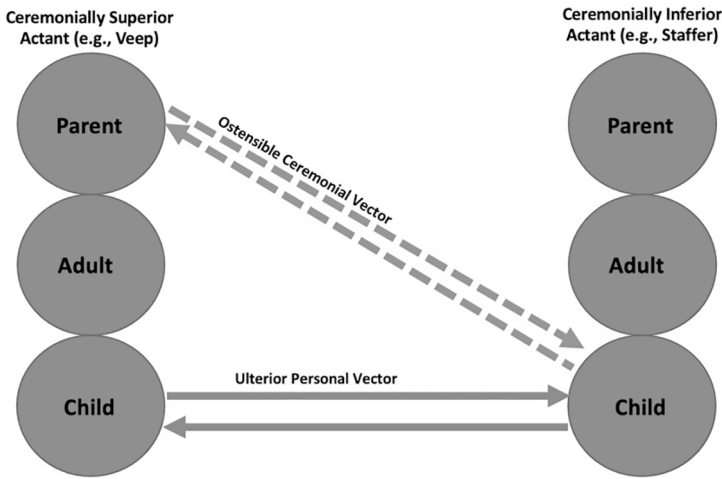
99 Veep, season 7, episode 7, “Veep”, directed by David Mandel, written by David Mandel, aired May 12, 2019, HBO, 27.00”.

100 Veep, season 6, episode 1, “Omaha”, directed by David Mandel, written by Lew Morton, aired April 16, 2017, HBO, 10.15”.

101 For example, with a technical expert working on a project in: *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 3, “Die Ampel”, directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 30, 2015, ZDFneo.

102 See my description of the *Monarch’s two Bodies* game in chapter 4.

Figure 23: *The President's two Bodies game – exemplary configuration*



The P2B game's second, personal vector serves to emphasise the series' comical incongruity. Other than its counterpart, the personal vector is not governed by binding and ritualised external rules of protocol, composure, and deference. As largely uncooperative games, that is, as games that possess no referee-function of a higher order that would guarantee the upkeep of its rules,¹⁰³ the transactions on the personal vector depend primarily on a player's personal and intellectual properties as well as his/her actual political influence. To increase comical incongruity, the series often emphasises the discrepancy between the ceremonial and personal vectors by presenting interactions that mix ceremonial address and personal invective. Veep's advisor Amy, e.g., retains the ceremonial vector in a rant aimed directly at the then-President:

You have achieved nothing, apart from one thing: the fact that you are a woman means that we will have no more women presidents because we tried one, and she fucking sucked. Goodbye, *mam*.¹⁰⁴

In VEEP, most players can discern the co-constructed and superficial nature of the vice president's ceremonial body. As they usually adhere to the ceremonial vector despite their mutual second-order awareness of its fictional nature, the P2B game takes on a decidedly cynical tone. Veep's staff find themselves in a particularly bipolar situation as they are simultaneously charged with creating the VP's official body and deferring to it. THE CROWN largely omits the impossibility of this situation. In VEEP, on the other hand, the tangibly superficial nature of the ceremonial vector further emphasises the incongruity between the political ideal and the pronounced humanity of the series' political officials.

103 See Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, s.v. "Spieltheorie", ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394.

104 *Veep*, season 4, episode 5, "Convention", directed by Stephanie Laing, story by Armando Iannucci, Sean Gray, and David Quantick, teleplay by Sean Gray and David Quantick, aired May 10, 2015, HBO, 18.11".

Veep's *dramatically* assured comical inability to discern clearly the discrepancy between her personal and official bodies manifests in a constant failure to navigate the personal vector on its own. This becomes visible, e.g., in the constant mistreatment of her daughter Catherine (whom Veep primarily uses as an unsatisfactory pawn in her political performances) and her inability to sustain friendships or relationships without the ceremonial vector's protection against criticism.

The P2B game thus presents a satirical variation of the *poetry vs prose* progression of the classic narrative coming-of-age process present, e.g., in *THE CROWN*. Both *THE CROWN*'s Elizabeth and Veep sacrifice much of their personal selves to the demands of their office. However, where, in *THE CROWN*, this process marks Elizabeth's growing into her role as queen, in *VEEP*, it appears simply as a result of the static character's ongoing comical delusion.

Consequently, the progression of the central games in *VEEP* – those between Selina Meyer and her staff – does not illustrate a diegetically established development but merely constitutes reactions to external events, which, following the *dramatic rule of general omnishambles*, serve as stimuli to create the greatest possible irritation and incongruence between the P2B game's transactional vectors.

Following comical incongruence, Veep and her high-ranking co-players are most at home in a regressive Child state. Veep only ever diverts from this transactional position to display 'real' leadership with regards to issues that objectively do not matter, e.g., insisting on a name change for a hurricane called "Selina",¹⁰⁵ dismissing a security guard for smiling,¹⁰⁶ or in the few barely visible instances where dramatic logic requires her to be successful in order to retain the series' configuration.

Veep usually initiates transactions from a Child position on the personal vector that stand in stark contrast to her Parental ceremonial position. One of the most blatant examples of this is Veep's extensive reliance on her staff. She, e.g., informs them: "If you want me to use my own goddamn words, then write me something to say".¹⁰⁷ Her bagman Gary, e.g., routinely supplies Veep with everything she needs (from hand wipes to names of people she meets), and, following a debate on abortion, Veep states, "we're trying to figure out how I think about this issue".¹⁰⁸ After informing her staff that she will vote on a bill "the way my principles and my conscience tell me to go", Veep adds, "Which way do you think that should be?".¹⁰⁹ Veep's lingering Child position is amplified further by her asymmetrical relationship with the President, which is expressed by his continuous absence and the series' early running gag of Veep fruitlessly asking: "Did the President call?".

105 *Veep*, season 1, episode 3, "Catherine", directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Sean Gray, Armando Iannucci, and Tony Roche, aired May 6, 2012, HBO.

106 *Veep*, season 1, episode 5, "Nicknames", directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Simon Blackwell and Armando Iannucci, aired May 20, 2012, HBO, 09.41".

107 *Veep*, season 7, episode 1, "Iowa", directed by David Mandel, written by Lew Morton, aired March 31, 2019, HBO, 01.32".

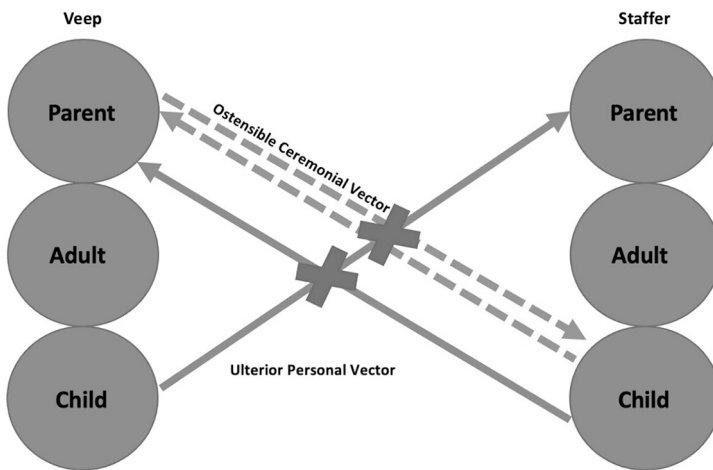
108 *Veep*, season 3, episode 2, "The Choice", directed by Becky Martin, written by Armando Iannucci, Roger Drew, and Ian Martin, aired April 13, 2014, HBO, 09.18".

109 *Veep*, season 1, episode 5, "Nicknames", directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Simon Blackwell and Armando Iannucci, aired May 20, 2012, HBO, 21.18".

Faithful to the *dramatic rule of general omnishambles*, the P2B game's transactions usually fail. Bagman Gary, e.g., continuously misreads Veep's nonverbal demands supplying her with unwanted whispered names or context in awkward moments. Having asked her staff to determine her Senate vote, Veep likewise receives two opposing opinions from her co-players¹¹⁰, who are themselves most comfortable in an unconscious Child state and only assume an unproductive momentary Parent-position when forced to do so by the VP.

The P2B game, in VEEP, is thus constantly at risk of producing crossed transactions both on the personal vector and between the personal and ceremonial vectors, thus causing significant transactional tension (see figure 24).

Figure 24: The P2B game in VEEP – exemplary initial configuration



In order to ensure the transaction's poignant continuation, the games usually dissolve tension and create a complementary configuration by (1) Veep reluctantly taking a Parental state in reaction to her co-player's Child state after being forced to do so by external circumstances (see figure 25). Strong expressions of displeasure usually accompany this. After a particularly avoidable crisis, she, e.g., yells: "I am putting out two fires in there, and I turn around to find out that you have set fire to the fucking firetruck. The level of incompetence in this office is staggering!"¹¹¹ In another example, she is forced to – and ultimately does – cast the tie-breaking vote in the Senate,¹¹² leading her to reject a bill she herself had previously sponsored.

110 Veep, season 1, episode 5, "Nicknames", directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Simon Blackwell and Armando Iannucci, aired May 20, 2012, HBO, 21.40".

111 Veep, season 1, episode 1, "Fundraiser", directed by Armando Iannucci, written by Armando Iannucci and Simon Blackwell, April 22, 2012, HBO, 20.52".

112 Veep, season 1, episode 5, "Nicknames", directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Simon Blackwell and Armando Iannucci, aired May 20, 2012, HBO, 23.01".

Figure 25: First Dissolution of Tension

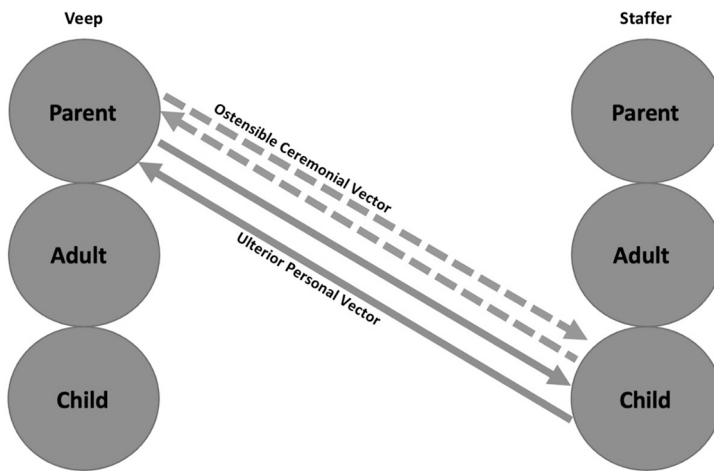
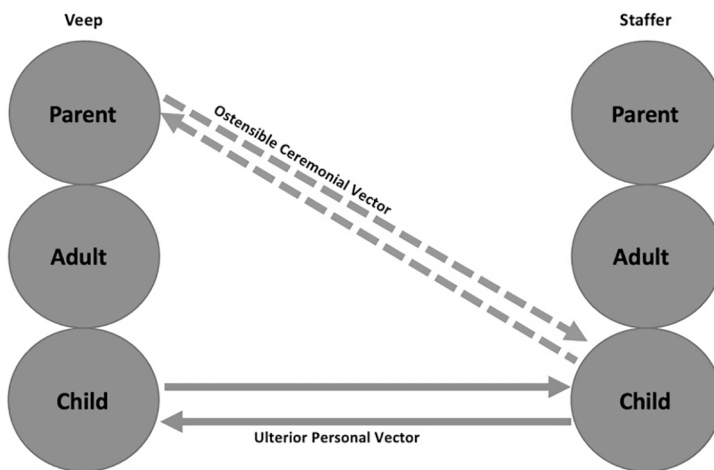


Figure 26: Second Dissolution of Tension



The P2B game's tension is (2) dissolved by all players' taking a complementary Child position which usually leads the transactions to dissolve in either unhinged invective or otherwise unruly behaviour on all sides (see figure 26). After learning of her ascension to the presidency, e.g., Veep and Gary engage in minute-long hysterical joviality in a White House bathroom.¹¹³ These escalations of P2B game usually serve to mark the end of a round. Having served its purpose as a stimulus for the game to escalate, an episode's external event usually fades out or is otherwise dissolved outside the plot. The constant

113 Veep, season 3, episode 9, "Crate", directed by Chris Addison, written by Armando Iannucci & Simon Blackwell & Georgia Pritchett, aired June 8, 2014, HBO, 18.55".

miscommunications and irritation that result from the P2B games' externalised transactional pattern serve to create and maintain the series' signature comically dysfunctional and chaotic environment.

5.1.4 Operationalizing Incongruity in EICHWALD

In EICHWALD, the P2B configuration is more implicit. There exists no visible ceremonial vector that transactionally emphasises the incongruity between the ideal and the real. Eichwald, his staff, and his colleagues ostensibly remain purely on a personal vector, even addressing each other in the informal form of address "du" [you]. However, the transactional inability of the comical P2B game's players to access the personal vector appears in EICHWALD as well. Struggling (and failing) to consolidate the demands of his bodies politic and natural, Harjo Eichwald, like Veep, has lost the ability to operate solely on the personal vector. As a result, his adult daughter ignores and exploits him,¹¹⁴ and he possesses no actual friends despite an extensive social network. Eichwald is, e.g., unable to properly acknowledge the pregnancy of his staffer Julia, whom he continues to treat according to the impossible demands of the *Two Bodies* configuration. Aware of her condition but incapable of processing its consequences, Eichwald carelessly continues to make Julia run physically straining errands during her maternity leave.¹¹⁵

The transactions of EICHWALD and his staff usually show an externalised progression along the lines of highest irritation in which Eichwald alternates between clumsily asserting his dominance as the group's leader in Parent (him)-Child (co-players) transactions and reverting into a defeatist or panicked Child state. Like VEEP and her staff, Eichwald and his team feel most comfortable in the Child position, which leads to clumsy and tension-rich interactions whenever a different transactional pattern is required.

This regressive Child-state likewise dominates the team's tactical moves in games with outside players, which usually do not exceed the level of ill-conceived petty schemes. After having his idea of defecating in a box and sending it to a competitor dismissed by his assistant Julia in a Child (him)-Adult (her) configuration, Eichwald, e.g., tries (and fails) to implicate his unsuspecting adversary Bornsen in a corruption scandal by sending him a gift basket marked with a Russian lobbyist's emblem.¹¹⁶

Outside of his team, Eichwald appears almost exclusively in what I want to call the *Treat me like an Adult* game (TA game, see figure 27). It is the source of the series' classic mockumentary-style comedy of lingering social awkwardness. The TA game is a highly agonal zero-sum game consisting of an ulterior pattern that features demon-

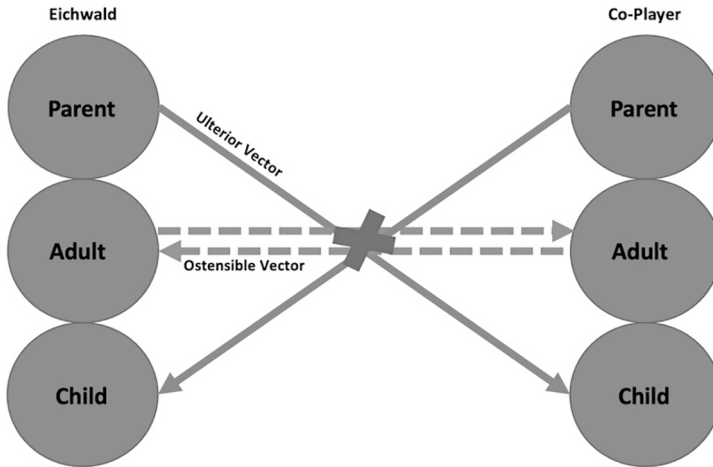
114 Their one-sided relationship (taking place exclusively over the phone) appears, e.g., in *Eichwald, MdB*, season 2, episode 1, "Männer können alles", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired June 14, 2019, ZDFneo, 00.01"-00.27"; and in *Eichwald, MdB*, season 2, episode 5, "Verletzlich", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired July 12, 2019, ZDFneo, e.g., 01.26" and 08.35".

115 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 2, episode 2, "Tief im Westen", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired June 21, 2019, ZDFneo.

116 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 1, "Der Konkurrent", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 10.03".

strative Adult-Adult transactions on the ostensible vector and a struggle over Parental dominance on the personal vector.

Figure 27: *The Treat Me Like an Adult game – initial configuration*



It usually – but not always – ends up with (1) Eichwald taking an inferior Child position in highly asymmetrical Parent-Child transactions or (2) with an external interruption of the ongoing transaction that serves the dramatic purpose of leaving the created tension to linger over the scene and future rounds of the same game. The TA game is usually played over very low stakes and thus has a low intensity that collides with the players' devotion to the game, thus creating further incongruous situational humour. A poignant example of this pattern is the introductory visit of Eichwald's loathed MP-colleague, Uwe Bornsen.¹¹⁷ While the game's ostensible vector remains strictly one of Adult-Adult transactions, the duplex ulterior vector features a struggle for Parental dominance.

Uwe Bornsen (UB): Hi there

[Tagchen.]

Harjo Eichwald (HE): Uwe... that...

[Uwe... das...]

UB: I just wanted to do a quick inaugural visit as the whippersnapper among the old-timers.

[Ich wollte mal einen kurzen Antrittsbesuch machen, so als Jungspund unter all den alten Hasen, ne.]

Advantage Bornsen: He establishes his youthful energy while simultaneously emphasizing Eichwald's diminishing capacities.

117 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 1, "Der Konkurrent", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 02.45".

HE: Yeah, I was just about to leave to go to the...

[Ja, ich muss gleich weiter zum...]

UB: Shame!

[Ach schade.]

[...] *He continues to introduce himself to Eichwald's team*

Advantage Bornsen: He establishes dominance by ignoring Eichwald's cues to leave.

HE: You know what, I'll take the time for you.

[Weißt du was ich nehm' mir für dich die Zeit.]

Eichwald trying to reassert his own control over the situation.

UB: Yes, so this is for you. Greetings from home.

[Ja, das ist für dich. Kleiner Gruß aus der Heimat.]

He hands him a box of chocolate. [...]

UB: I really just wanted to pop in. I do have some other engagements today, press and all that and...

[Ja ich wollte ja wirklich nur ganz kurz den Kopf reinstecken, ich habe ja auch noch Termine, Presse und so weiter. Und...]

HE: That's awful, Uwe. Why don't you take a cookie for the way?

[Ah, furchtbar Uwe. Nimm doch einen Keks mit hier auf den Weg.]

Advantage Eichwald: He asserts his dominance, trying to force Bornsen to leave.

[...] *Bornsen stays and awkwardly eats his cookie in silence.*

Stalemate: neither competitor is willing to give in and neither is willing to abandon the ostensible Adult-Adult vector.

UB: The quality they manage now at Aldi is incredibly, isn't it? We usually have 'Bahlsen' [a more expensive cookie brand], but I think these are actually just as good.

[Das ist schon Wahnsinn, ne, was die für eine Qualität jetzt hinkriegen bei Aldi. Wir haben immer Bahlsen aber ich finde, die sind eigentlich genauso gut.]

Bornsen trying to regain dominance by asserting his economic superiority.

Eichwald: Yeah, well, I wouldn't know. I'm more of a fruit guy myself.

[Ja, ich weiß das ja gar nicht. Ich bin ja mehr der Obst-Typ.]

Eichwald repelling Bornsen's attempt by questioning the validity of the brag and asserting his virility, thus returning to B.'s initial point of attack.

[...]

UB: [...] I have Schulz's [his high-ranking predecessor] old shack upstairs.

[Ich habe jetzt ja die alte Bude vom Schulz oben.]

HE: Well, hang on, I think I would ask again because usually, we rotate according to age here, and that would make me...

[Gut äh, da würde ich nochmal nachfragen, weil normalerweise rotieren wir hier nach Alter und da wäre ich...]

Bornsen: Ah yes, no. I thought before we start a Box Bolognese, I might as well slide into Schulz's ratty old chair and be done with it.

[Achso ja, ich dachte bevor jetzt hier die Karton-Polonäse losgeht da schiebe ich mich auf den abgewetzten Stuhl vom Schulz und gut iss'.]

Advantage Bornsen:

He successfully asserts that he is doing Eichwald a favour by taking the superior office.

[...]

UB: Well, Harjo, somebody has to do the internet thing. The only place to find you online is probably on eBay, isn't it? Just joking. But let's go have a drink together sometime this week!

[Ja Harjo, einer muss das machen mit dem Internet. Dich kriege ich online ja höchstens über Ebay, ne? Nur Spaß, nein hör mal wir sollten mal auf ein Weinchen gehen diese Woche.]

Advantage Bornsen: he disparages Eichwald's competence as well as integrity.

HE: Well, I don't know, I'm already doing Badminton.

[Du, ich weiß gar nicht. Ich mache ja schon Badminton.]

Advantage Bornsen: Eichwald has no appropriate rebuttal.

He reverts to his initial strategy of asserting his virility over the much younger man.

UB: Anyway, we'll see each other more often now. I don't want to keep you from what you were doing. Bye-bye, see you.

[Also, wir sehen uns ja jetzt öfter. Ich will auch gar nicht lange den Betrieb aufhalten. Tschüssikowsky, bis die Tage.

HE: Bye-bye, see you.

[Tschüssikowsky.]

He leaves.

Interim win Bornsen: He has established his claim to the superior office and his overall transactional dominance by being the one to determine when to end the transaction. However, the game never escalates because neither player breaks the ostensible Adult-Adult vector. As Eichwald is not defeated in this game of low second-degree intensity, there is no resolution, and the social tension between the players remains for later rounds of the TA game.

An extreme example of the TA game are Eichwald's frequent meetings with his party's Chief Whip Birgit Hanke. The pair usually engage in highly static duplex transactions in which they ostensibly interact as coequal Adults – engaging in the familiar “du” – while actually showing a highly asymmetrical Parent (Hanke)-Child (Eichwald) configuration on the ulterior vector. This extreme version of the TA game usually features Hanke excoriating Eichwald for his failures in hyperbolically elaborate rants.¹¹⁸ However, they, too, never escalate beyond the TA game's stabilizing configuration.

5.1.5 Transgression vs Awkwardness

Formally, both VEEP and EICHWALD follow the mockumentary style tradition with a visibly unsteady camera and an unassuming mise-en-scène creating a pseudo-naturalist impression that suggests the metaleptic authentication of a documentary.¹¹⁹ However, both in VEEP and EICHWALD, the mockumentary style's original strong *editorial presence* is reduced through a referential rather than consequential implementation of the style's motifs,¹²⁰ which arguably mirrors audiences' habituation to its well-established conventions. The characters, e.g., no longer break the fourth wall by directly interacting with the camera and the fictional documentary crew behind it as they had done in earlier mockumentaries. Indeed, both in VEEP and EICHWALD, the mockumentary style appears more as a nod to the visual habits of an audience function schooled in the comedic traditions of series like THE OFFICE, THE THICK OF IT, MODERN FAMILY (USA, 2009–2020) and cinematic examples of the 2000s and 2010s – e.g. CONFETTI (Debbie Isitt: UK, 2006) and WHAT WE DO IN THE SHADOWS (Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi: New Zealand, 2014) – than as a direct formal means to support the series' narrative. Indeed, their editorial rhythm, following conventions of continuity editing, creates a smooth, natural flow that supports narrative progression. In VEEP, as Holm points out, characters rarely interrupt each other, thus leaving room for the poignant dialogue to play out.¹²¹

Kanzler argues that VEEP interlaces “a humor of awkwardness”, which implies the early tradition of the mockumentary with its focus on social failure, “and a humor that organizes around invective”.¹²² The former, which constitutes mockumentary's typical “cringe comedy”,

118 See, e.g., *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 1, “Der Konkurrent”, directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 11.40” and 18.30”; and *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 4, “Die Dienstreise”, directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired May 7, 2015, ZDFneo, 10.37”.

119 See Stefan Höltgen, “Metalepse”, *Lexikon der Filmbegriffe*, last modified March 6, 2022, <https://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/doku.php/m:metalepse-2582>.

120 See Holm's similar remarks on VEEP overall formal composition: Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 78.

121 See Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 78f.

122 Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 152. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

straddles the boundary between an invitation to laugh at the misfortunes of its characters – to laugh the laughter of ridicule – and an invitation to empathy, to share in the characters' suffering.¹²³

However, as the series progresses, its focus on social awkwardness notably diminishes in favour of emphasising what Kanzler has called “insult humor and rant humor”.¹²⁴ They work by balancing the “tension between offensiveness and containment”¹²⁵ of transgressive behaviour through satirical inversion. Indeed, as an increasingly invective spectacle, VEEP is much more focussed on its provocative humour, which “engages with [...] explicit cultural fault lines and controversial topics”.¹²⁶

The main attractions of VEEP's “invective spectacle” are arguably the elaborate and graphic ways the characters find to abuse one another verbally. An angry Veep, e.g., informs a staffer that his efforts are “like trying to use a croissant as a fucking dildo. [...] It doesn't do the job, and it makes a fucking mess”.¹²⁷ Accordingly, fan activity surrounding VEEP often focuses on identifying the series ‘best’ – that is, most innovative – insults and rants.¹²⁸ Not for nothing has the series been called “a f*cking Masterclass in Cursing”.¹²⁹ In this, VEEP follows the example of its predecessor, the British series *THE THICK OF IT*. Here, the political plot served mainly as an excuse for the series' protagonist, the choleric Whitehall spin doctor Malcolm Tucker, to embark on minute-long, abusive, and highly innovative rants.

The surprising success transgressive humour has had with HBO's supposedly progressive prestige audiences – transgression is one of the hallmarks of what Dan Hassler-Forest calls the “cultural logic of gentrification”¹³⁰ – suggests a connection to the “liber-

123 Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 152. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

124 Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle”, 155.

125 Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle”, 156.

126 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 119.

127 Veep, season 1, episode 5, “Nicknames”, directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Simon Blackwell and Armando Iannucci, aired May 20, 2012, HBO, 17.28”.

128 A quick google search provides a plethora of fan-made compilations of the show's best insults.

129 Kevin Fallon, “Veep is a f@cking masterclass in cursing”, *The Daily Beast*, July 12, 2017, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/veep-is-a-fking-masterclass-in-cursing>.

130 For discussion with regards to recent 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, and especially 189f, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14; also Katja Kanzler's remarks on the “Characteristic transgressiveness” of prestige TV: Katja Kanzler, “Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>. See also Janet McCabe and Kim Akass' earlier discussion of classic linear HBO-led ‘Quality TV’ as “courting controversy”: Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV”, in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 62–76, see, e.g., 63f.

ation theory” of humour.¹³¹ If one assumes, as has often been done, that “humour either creates or allows for a moment of freedom within the otherwise oppressive political, cultural or ideological spaces of everyday life”,¹³² transgressive ‘prestige’ humour can be seen to serve as a freeing outlet designed particularly for the momentary liberation of those progressive populations with high cultural capital that constitute HBO’s (and other ‘prized’ content providers’) core target *audience functions*. The comparatively high cultural capital of the creatively ‘refined’ transgressions in formerly ‘prized’ programs such as *VEEP*, thus, may appear to serve as the provision of socially acceptable, momentary respite from the constraints of a liberal-progressive world which has generally defined the limits of its own freedom to be where the freedom of others begins. Kanzler has accordingly noted that rant humour functions by violating social codes while

simultaneously framing these as offers of experiential pleasure and as disruptions of a supposedly stagnant social order, as a form of truth-speaking colored by righteous anger.¹³³

Just how acceptable humorous transgression is – in general – and where particular lines are drawn is a highly contested issue this thesis cannot pursue further. Even though *VEEP*’s transgressions still retain limits defined by the progressive sensibilities of its target audiences (e.g., by largely avoiding racial epithets), the series’ boundaries of what can be said and done are significantly more permeable than those of most of its audiences would be. *VEEP*’s transgressive comedy accordingly could be considered to fulfil the relief function of humour, according to which laughter is “a means of expelling pent-up nervous energy”.¹³⁴

Transgression and invective play a significantly less central role in *EICHWALD*. Characters are often tactless, even vulgar, in their expressions, e.g., when Harjo Eichwald rejoices over the death of a colleague stating, “I’m so happy I don’t have to see the fat swine anymore”.¹³⁵ However, Eichwald’s team, while generally disrespectful, rarely engages in extensive verbal abuse of one another. The invective in *EICHWALD* is generally much less innovative and usually does not exceed the level of underhanded comments. The victims of Eichwald’s disparaging comments, e.g., are usually characters that remain invisible to audiences. The dominating party whip Brigit Hanke is the only character in the series who directly follows in *THE THICK OF IT*’s footsteps by engaging in inventive, minute-

131 A theory described in 1971 by Harvey Mindess, see *ibid*, *Laughter and Liberation* (London/ New York: Routledge, 2011). However, I am referring, here, to Holm’s more critical discussion of Mindess and humour as ‘liberation’ in Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 42–51.

132 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 47.

133 Katja Kanzler, “*Veep*, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine”, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 157. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

134 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 113.

135 *Eichwald, MdB*, season 1, episode 1, “Der Konkurrent”, directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 00.09”. My translation: “Ich bin so froh, dass ich die fette Sau nicht mehr sehen muss”.

long rants about Eichwald's incompetence.¹³⁶ However, even Hanke remains significantly less abusive than her British and US-American predecessors, usually staying within the boundaries of the TA game.

The comedy in EICHWALD is much more in line with the 'cringe humour' of the classic mockumentary tradition with its emphasis on lingering "moments of social failure" and decidedly life-sized characters.¹³⁷ While VEEP operationalizes its incongruous K2B configuration through hyperbolically elaborate displays of transgressive misbehaviour, EICHWALD derives its incongruous configuration from approachable social failures, petty schemes, and miscalculations that surround the characters with a lingering veil of social and professional discomfort.

5.2 Changing Paradigms: THE POLITICIAN

With the release of its first season in 2019 on the streaming portal Netflix, POLITICIAN is this study's youngest subject. Other than VEEP and EICHWALD, the series presents a decidedly optimistic vision of politicians and representative politics framed by a set of structurally complex coming-of-age plots that mark a significant shift from its predecessors in this chapter. It is crucial to note that POLITICIAN features a notable recalibration between seasons 1 and 2. The first season shows the struggle of high school student Payton Hobart to win the election for student body president and simultaneously grow into a functioning adult. Season two concentrates on Payton's struggle to win a race for state senator that concludes his coming-of-age journey.

The previously described K2B structure can well be regarded as a pattern for the structural organisation of POLITICIAN too. Its first season features two central coming-of-age processes: (1) the private struggle between the various teenage protagonists with their respective parents and (2) their coming-of-age as political actors. Following TV's demonstrative requirements, both processes are presented through the characters' changing interactional patterns.

5.2.1 Personal Coming-of-Age: The Lethal Games of Children with their Parents

In POLITICIAN's first season, the personal coming-of-age of Payton and his peers appears mainly as a struggle to emancipate from overpowerful and, in many instances, highly abusive parental figures. This process unfolds in simple *Coming-of-Age* (CoA) games where the transactional pattern reverses from initial Parent (older actant)-Child (younger actant) to Child (older actant)-Parent (younger actant) transactions (see figures 28 and 29. For the game's general structure see also chapter 3). As was the case in THE CROWN, the games possess a *dramatic* zero-sum structure in which the emancipation

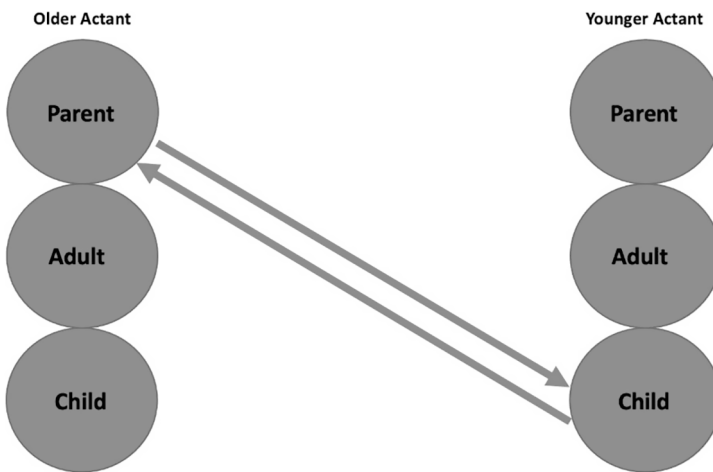
136 See, e.g., *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 1, "Der Konkurrent", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired April 16, 2015, ZDFneo, 11.40" and 18.30"; and *Eichwald*, *MdB*, season 1, episode 4, "Die Dienstreise", directed by Fabian Möhrke, written by Stefan Stuckmann, aired May 7, 2015, ZDFneo, 10.37".

137 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105.

of the younger player is proportional to the diminishment of the initial parental player in order to increase its narrative impact. In *THE POLITICIAN*, this diminishment ranges from a cessation of contact to arrest to death. The series' personal CoA games take on a tangible 3rd-degree intensity (irreversible consequences). For a comedy, this is unusual as it, in many instances, impedes the emotional detachment that is necessary for audiences to laugh at a story. I will discuss this in more detail in the coming sections.

Almost all games involving physical adults in *POLITICIAN*'s first season are initially defined by a strong complementary Parent-Child pattern with a potential 3rd-degree power discrepancy between the Parental and Child players. Protagonist Payton's billionaire father, Keaton Hobart, for example, holds his family in economic bondage, constantly threatening his sons and wife with disinheritance. He ultimately only cares about Payton as a means to ensure the obedience of his wife and her continued participation in their highly opportunistic marital game and ultimately has no issues disinheriting Payton while his son is in a coma.¹³⁸

Figure 28: Personal Coming-of-Age game in *THE POLITICIAN*, Season 1 – initial configuration



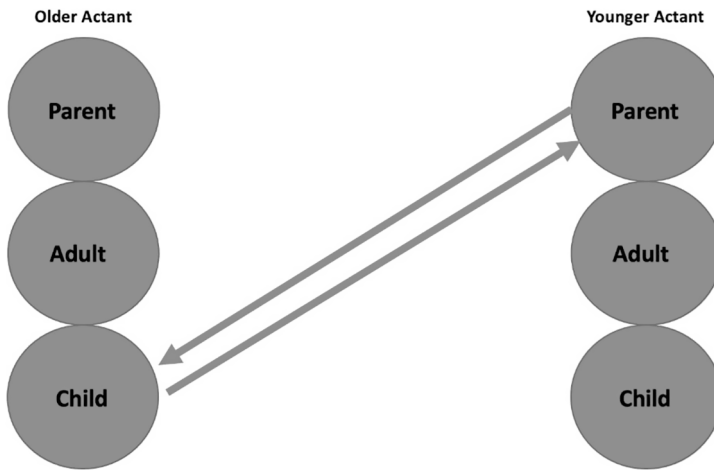
Payton's political antagonist, Astrid, struggles with an emotionally abusive father who, e.g., informs his daughter: "You put a few pounds on since your boyfriend blew

138 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 7, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart: Part 2", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013583?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 01.33".

his brains out".¹³⁹ Astrid claims that her father, Theo, only cares for her because "he likes pretty things."¹⁴⁰ According to his wife, he is even sexually attracted to his daughter, although audiences do not learn whether this is true or used simply as a jab in one of the couple's frequent marital fights.¹⁴¹

Theo ends up in jail after his daughter reports his various criminal activities to the FBI. During his arrest, he shouts at Astrid: "I've never been prouder in my life. Upper-cut to my jaw, sweetheart, that's exactly what I was talking about. That's my girl!"¹⁴² His comments mark the completion of Astrid's agonal 3rd-degree zero-sum CoA game in a satirically hyperbolic version of a final parental blessing.

Figure 29: Personal Coming-of-Age game in *THE POLITICIAN*, Season 1 – final configuration



In another 3rd-degree CoA game, Payton's running mate for student body president, Infinity Jackson, is secretly poisoned by her grandmother, Dusty 'Nana' Jackson. The lat-

139 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 3, "October Surprise", directed by Janeck Moch, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013579?trackId=255824129>, 20.50".

140 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859>, 05.39".

141 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 4, "Gone Girl", directed by Helen Hunt, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013580?trackId=200257859>, 01.32".

142 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 7, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart: Part 2", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013583?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 31.25".

ter, suffering from the rare mental disorder *Münchhausen by proxy*, attempts to ensure her granddaughter's ongoing dependency by making her believe she has cancer. In the course of the season, audiences learn that Nana has already killed Infinity's mother in this manner. The extreme Parent-Child dynamic of their game holds Infinity in a perpetual state of arrested development, making her appear, at times, infantile and even cognitively impaired (she is neither). Infinity's zero-sum CoA progression ends with her grandmother's exposure, confrontation, and subsequent suicide¹⁴³ leaving Infinity to become a powerful advocate for climate justice in the series' season 2.

With their 3rd-degree intensity and zero-sum structure, the series' various personal CoA games are ultimately unsuitable for creating comedy and, in fact, remain a disturbing presence that contradicts the series' otherwise pastel-coloured hyperbole, as the next section will illustrate.

5.2.2 Season 1's Narrative Imbalance

POLITICIAN's humorous premise rests on the incongruity between the high intensity that the election game holds for its diegetic participants and its significantly lower intensity for the series' audiences. Faithful to Bergson's dictum of comic unconsciousness,¹⁴⁴ POLITICIAN's characters are seemingly unable to discern the primarily pedagogical purpose of student representation and its overall low *political* impact. Diegetically, the election appears as a game of highest intensity. Everybody within the diegesis, even most of the physical adults, takes it extremely seriously. In the season's pre-finale, Payton's running mate Skye goes so far as to poison Payton when he fails to be an efficient student body president.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, Payton's mother, Georgina, causes a scene and even cites the US constitution when a student of colour is refused her vote because she does not possess a valid student-ID¹⁴⁶ (an apparent reference to ongoing historical debates about attempts at discriminatory voter restriction legislation in the US).

However, the central compositional position of the low-intensity high school election plotline becomes somewhat difficult to accept when, at the same time and in the same plot structure, teenagers are being abused, poisoned, and made to shoot themselves in

143 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 7, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart: Part 2", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013583?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 19.26".

144 Henri Bergson, *Das Lachen*, transl. Julius Frankenberger und Walter Fränzel (Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1921), 15.

145 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 6, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan, September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013582?trackId=200257859>, 31.34".

146 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 5, "The Voter", directed by Ian Brennan, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013581?trackId=200257859>, 23.10".

the head like Payton's lover River.¹⁴⁷ The narrative's use of these 3rd-degree events as B- or C-plots supporting an ultimately low-intensity A-plot (the election) creates a significant compositional imbalance throughout much of season 1.

Compositional imbalances such as this suggest a strong presence of various *pragmatic* (and most likely algorithmic) considerations, which the plot must accommodate. The most tangible is the influence of prestige audience functions on the series. It shows, not least, in *POLITICIAN*'s notable focus on US coastal elites (its characters are young, wealthy, and college-educated, and season 1 takes place in affluent Southern California, season two in Manhattan) and an adaption of a wealth of motifs from 2019/2020's progressive discourse, such as mental health, climate change, inequality, and the empowerment of women, BIPoC, and LGBTQ* people.

5.2.3 Political Coming-of-Age: Step 1

The series' private CoA arcs remain secondary for *POLITICIAN*'s titular protagonist, Payton Hobart. His primary CoA process – as well as that of his partners James, McAfee, and Alice – takes place in the political sphere. It plays out as a satirical inversion of the Hegelian struggle to consolidate the poetry of the heart and the prose of reality that usually accompanies the narrative coming-of-age configuration of the aforementioned K2B trope.

From the outset, Payton is considered to be a born politician because he seemingly lacks any personal traits (body natural) that would get into the way of his political projections (body politic). Consequently, Payton gets notably uncomfortable when told, "I want to know you, the real you".¹⁴⁸ Asked the question, "Did you cry because you were moved or because you thought you were supposed to?" Payton gives the confused but honest answer, "Does it matter?".¹⁴⁹ In a repetition of this motif, Payton, after his lover River's suicide, gets upset about not being upset enough, asking his mother:

What if I'm just wired differently? I mean... what if I can't feel for anyone else? They say that sociopaths can't do that. What if all I'll ever be able to do is pretend to feel?

To which she replies, "Does it matter if you can't tell the difference?".¹⁵⁰ The series' intro supports this initial interpretation of Payton having successfully approached his body

147 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859, 24.54>".

148 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859, 01.45>".

149 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859, 02.27>".

150 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859, 37.05>".

politic by eliminating all sense of a cumbersome self. It shows a Payton-shaped, empty wooden chest being filled with the ingredients supposedly necessary to make a US President: biographies of predecessors, the bible, mandarin skills, straight A's, prep-school and Harvard, money and a small heart covered in a black led-like substance. Once full, the chest is carved and polished until it becomes Payton Hobart. The intro is, in many ways, reminiscent of the beginning of *THE CROWN*. In the latter's intro, audiences saw a crown, a supposedly inanimate object, growing and taking shape almost as an organic, living thing. In line with the series' leitmotif, this made the crown appear as a visible embodiment of the dynamic mythical principle of monarchy. In *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, audiences witness an organic, living person, Payton Hobart, being recreated as a political automaton, an empty shell that can become whatever the office requires. Both intros (and both series) thus implicitly reference the K2B trope in reverse ways.

5.2.4 The Making a Play for the White House Game

Together with his friends, James and McAfee, and his girlfriend, Alice, Payton has created an epigenetic plan to reach the White House, that is, a plan in which one step must necessarily be completed before the next can be approached. The epigenetic nature of this plan serves as the diegetic justification for Payton's intense investment in becoming student body president: the high school office is a necessary, inescapable step on his way to the presidency. Like Payton, James, McAfee, and Alice seemingly subordinate all of their personal needs to this plan. Despite his alleged love for Payton's girlfriend Alice, James, for example, immediately abandons their affair to protect the common goal.¹⁵¹ At the series' outset, Payton and his team thus incorporate the ideal of the cynical but highly professional political operator with seemingly no personal needs that *THE CROWN*'s Elizabeth II took two seasons to acquire and that neither *Veep* nor *Harjo Eichwald* ever reached.

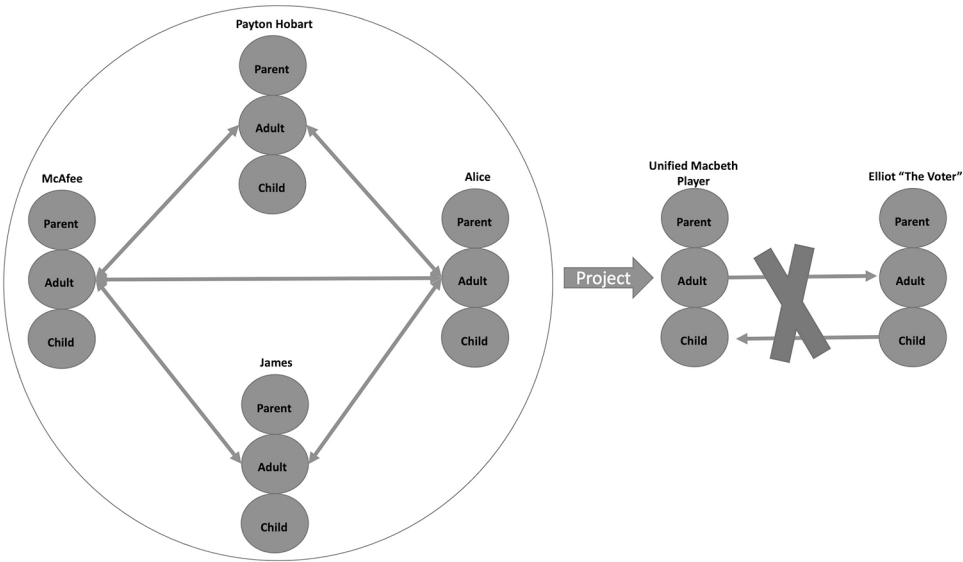
Throughout *POLITICIAN*, Payton and his friends engage in a multi-player version of the *Macbeth* configuration (see chapter 3), which I will call the *Making a play for the White House* game (WH game, see figure 30). Following the *Macbeth* structure, the WH game features hyperbolic Adult-Adult transactions between a frontstage player and several backstage players who form an allied unit for the interaction in other games. Evoking comical incongruity, the interactions of Payton and his team are characterised by calculated effectiveness, hyperbolic levels of professionalism, and a seeming unemotionality that clash with the characters' young biological age. The series' WH game draws much of its self-evidence for audiences from its satirical reference to the stereotypical views of historical politics and conventional polit-fiction predating the series' release. The series' initial viewer discretion parenthesis expresses this sentiment claiming that *POLITICIAN* is a show "about moxie, ambition, and getting what you want at all costs."¹⁵²

151 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 3, "October Surprise", directed by Janeck Moch, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013579?trackId=255824129>, 13:58".

152 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by Ryan Murphy, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80242983?trackId=200257859,00:10>". Original spelling in all capital letters.

The WH game's rigid Adult-Adult structure serves to portray a highly satirical ideal of what a politician is. Following Bergson's notion of comical unconsciousness, the characters in *POLITICIAN*'s diegesis remain wholly unaware of the incongruity between their satirically mature self-conduct and their young age, as well as the disconnect between the low-stakes high school election and the tenacity with which they engage in winning it. The satirical incongruity of the politically engaged characters is emphasised, e.g., in the episode "The Voter", where Payton and his team encounter the undecided voter Elliot. Very much a stereotypical teenager, Elliot's only interest seems to be video games and masturbation. The constant attempts of his political classmates to include him in the Adult-Adult transactional structure of the WH game create a row of crossed transactions that ultimately lead Elliot (still very much in a perpetual Child-state) to flee the encounters and even hit James in the face (see figure 30).¹⁵³

Figure 30: *The Making a Play for the White House game – example Elliot*



In season 1, Payton's political CoA process entails the satirically reversed progression from a state of pseudo-adult self-assurance to instability following a dissolution of the rigid configuration of the WH game. By season 1, episode 7, Payton has lost everything: the student body presidency, his reputation, his spot at Harvard, his reputation, his girlfriend, Alice, and his confidence. In a non-serial CoA narrative, this loss would conventionally entail Payton re-evaluating his priorities in order to arrive at a 'real' consolidation

153 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 5, "The Voter", directed by Ian Brennan, written by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Ian Brennan, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013581?trackId=200257859, 09.41>".

of the *poetry* and *prose* in his life. Referencing this convention, Payton's mother assures him: "Your life going off the rails is the best thing that could happen to you".¹⁵⁴

However, with *POLITICIAN* being a *series*, the dissolution of Payton's self-image and the associated WH game marks only a stop on his journey. In the season's final episode and after a diegetic time-lapse of several years, Payton has become an alcoholic, lives in New York, works as a musician in a bar (a recurring nod to screen actor Ben Platt's primary Broadway career) and "stumbles home drunk every night".¹⁵⁵ On his way to becoming a 'real' adult, Payton has shed the politician and the corresponding WH game, and he is miserable, trapped in a violent identity diffusion akin to the worst excesses of adolescence. In a satirical inversion of the CoA journey, the heart's poetry, for Payton, equals his initial state of absolute commitment to the political quest. At this stage, and contrary to *THE CROWN*'s Elizabeth, Payton is nothing without his body politic. Accordingly, it is only when his former companions and adversaries James, McAfee, Alice, Astrid and Skye convince him to revive his political ambition and begin another round of the WH game at the season's cliffhanger¹⁵⁶ that Payton regains his personal and political confidence paving the way for the series' continuation in season 2.

5.2.5 Political Coming-of-Age: Step 2

There is a profound recalibration taking place in *POLITICIAN*'s seasons 2. Compositionally, the narrative focus in season 2 lies almost entirely on the political plotline (a race for the state senate). Other than in season 1, other plotlines usually take on a mainly supporting role in the main narrative. This contributes to season 2's narrative becoming significantly more streamlined. There is one episode less, and the seven existing episodes are, on average, shorter than those in season 1, varying between a little under half an hour and not exceeding 50 minutes (by comparison: season 1's pilot had 62 minutes). Season 2, likewise, features a clear set of antagonists with a clearly discernible purpose: the incumbent state senator Dede Standish (Judith Light) and her campaign manager, Hadassah Gold (Bette Midler).

Like Payton's team, Dede Standish and Hadassah Gold appear in a *Macbeth* configuration (see figure 31). Though Dede is formally Hadassah's boss, there seems to be no visible hierarchy between the two women. Their dynamic is one of respectful, long-established Adult-Adult transactions, with each being content to advance their common cause from their respective front- (Dede) or backstage (Hadassah) positions. Hadassah accordingly

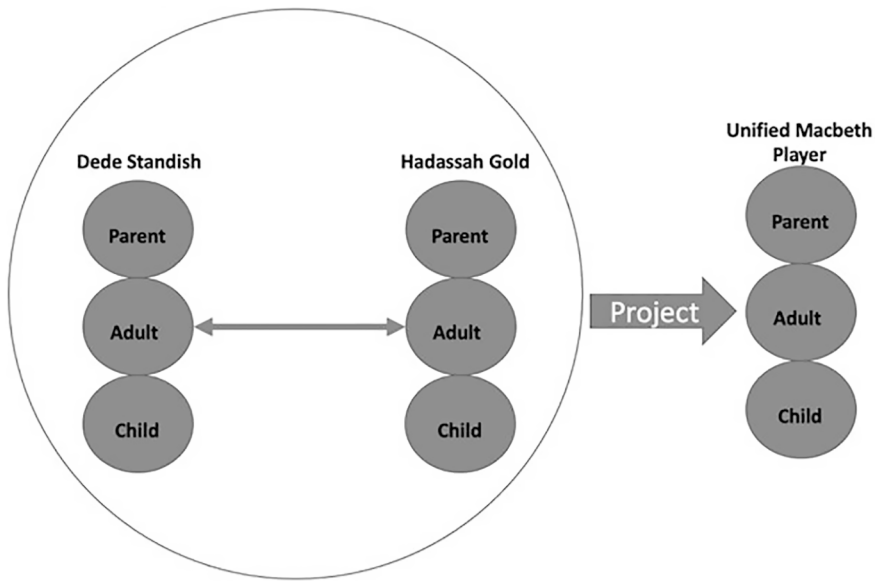
154 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 7, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart: Part 2", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013583?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 35.45".

155 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 8, "Vienna", directed by Brad Falchuk, written by Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013584?trackId=200257859, 06.51>".

156 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 8, "Vienna", directed by Brad Falchuk, written by Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013584?trackId=200257859, 49.09>".

states: “I want to keep going till we go over the cliff. Like *Thelma and Louise*”.¹⁵⁷ That the women’s configuration circumvents the *Macbeth* game’s traditional (and often sexist) binary gender connotations is no accident. *POLITICIAN* encodes Dede and Hadassah as a reversal of the patriarchal notions of (1) women and politics and (2) women and sexuality as natural antitheses by presenting them as powerful, confident, and sexually active adult women. It thus incorporates many prominent motifs from progressive historical discourse surrounding female empowerment in the early 2020s.

Figure 31: *Macbeth* game Dede and Hadassah in *THE POLITICIAN*, season 2



POLITICIAN’s season 2 sees the completion of Payton’s somewhat diverted CoA path. Starting his story arc in the satirically stereotypical configuration of the WH game, Payton ends the season by accepting the limits of his own ambition and resigning himself to be a productive state senator instead of continuing his quest for the presidency.¹⁵⁸ Other than most CoA progressions in polit-fiction, Payton does not become more ruthless, cynical, or ambitious. By the end of season 2, he, instead, has turned into a dedicated civil servant. Moreover, he is now a caring father and devoted husband. In a classic CoA consolidation of *poetry vs prose*, Payton has consolidated his previously dominant political ambitions with his own emotional needs and his family’s requirements. In the season’s finale, Payton accordingly engages his former WH co-players in a strangely benevolent

157 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 6, “What’s in the Box?”, directed by Tina Mabry, written by Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211651?trackId=200257859>, 22.54”.

158 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, “Election Day”, directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 37.13”.

new Parent (him)-Child (them) configuration that marks his advanced maturity as he passes a supposedly final resumé of his personal and professional achievements.¹⁵⁹ In the scene, the struggles, the doubts, the pronounced sexual fluidity and experimentation of the past two seasons are over, and Payton has become a “philistine, just like the others”, which Hegel describes as the usual outcome of a fictional coming-of-age arc.¹⁶⁰ In the scene, even Payton’s clothes change. While his colourful suits and sweaters had previously contributed to the series’ pastel *mise-en-scène*, Payton ends up wearing conservative, well-tailored grey business attire. It is no surprise that such a setup can only occur at the end of a season that marks the series’s temporary endpoint (currently, no further seasons are planned).

The political CoA process of Payton Hobart involves a reversal of the initially *uncooperative* zero-sum structure of the political game. Immediately after the campaign is over, Payton and his opponents, Dede and Hadassah, engage in emphatically amicable Adult-Adult transactions. In a revealing scene taking place after the ballots have been cast, the trio share a drink in a bar, congratulating each other for their tenacity.¹⁶¹ In the scene, both sides acknowledge the necessity and ultimate legitimacy of playing ‘dirty’ throughout the campaign. After telling Dede and Hadassah about his regrets for the lines crossed in the campaign (one of Payton’s staff released sensitive personal information about their opponent), Dede states: “I would’ve advised you to release that stuff. We’re big girls; we know this isn’t tiddlywinks.”¹⁶²

This ‘adult’ approach dissolves the initially *uncooperative* zero-sum structure of the political game. In presenting the political game as extensive but limited, *THE POLITICIAN* introduces the *cooperative* notion of ‘good sportsman*womaniship’, in which a player’s tenacity is both valued and limited within a set of rules respected (implicitly or explicitly) by all players.

Diegetically, both Payton and Dede appear motivated by ambition as much as political ideals. Both are clearly marked as progressives and represent all the core values required to harness a bi-coastal prestige audience’s sympathy (e.g., progressive attitudes towards sexuality, a commitment to racial and gender equality, support of liberal abortion policy). While Payton is the stronger candidate for climate action, diegetic commentary makes it clear that while Standish is weak on the environment, she has nonetheless achieved a lot both in terms of improving the living conditions in her district and her

159 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, “Election Day”, directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 35.45”.

160 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik II*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 220. My translation: “ein Philister so gut die anderen auch”. He writes this with regards to the “Romanhafte” of the novel (219f.).

161 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, “Election Day”, directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 13.29”.

162 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, “Election Day”, directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 14.47”.

fight for marginalised groups.¹⁶³ Thus, the narrative leaves the characters not only in a place of diegetic mutual respect but in a place where they both retain the respect and sympathies of their historical target audiences.

Unsurprisingly, the season's cliffhanger suggests the eventual formation of a new *Macbeth* game between Payton, Dede, and Hadassah in a potential run for the White House in a future season.¹⁶⁴ This final character constellation foregoes the conventional zero-sum protagonist-antagonist dynamic of mainstream entertainment: Dede and Payton are *opponents*, not *adversaries*. Thus, they remain undiminished and able to follow up on their previous cooperative game with a new one.

5.3 Diverging Images of Politics

Both *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* present a highly pessimistic, at times absurdist image of politics and representative democracy. *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, ends on a highly optimistic note that emphasises the functionality of representative democracy in effectuating positive change.

In their presentation of politics, *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* conjure up a panoptic vision of "24/7 spectacle politics",¹⁶⁵ not unlike the similar motif in *THE CROWN* (see chapter 4). Like the prisoners in Bentham's panoptic prison, all political operators in the two series must assume that a potentially all-powerful public is watching them without being able to verify this assumption. Therefore, the diegetic political class finds itself in a position where it must continuously examine and adjust its visible representation to their panoptic guards' assumed expectations. As individuals, the members of the public are disdained and mistreated. *Veep*'s secretary Sue, for instance, notes that chief of staff Amy "sounds uncomfortable, like she's with a member of the public".¹⁶⁶ However, as a collective, 'the public' is unknowable, potentially all-seeing, and – faithful to the rule of omnishambles – usually misinterpreting what they see.

At a birthday dinner with her daughter and ex-husband, *Veep*, having pretended for hours to be in good spirits following a substantial political defeat, loses her composure for just an instant. The moment is captured on film and released on Twitter, resulting in entirely unrelated rumours of a private rift in the Meyer family that threatens to tarnish

163 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 5, "The Voters", directed by Ian Brennan, written by Ian Brennan, aired June 19, 2020, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211650?trackId=200257859_03.56; and Gwyneth Horder-Payton, dir. "Election Day", *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, Netflix, 2020, 13.53".

164 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, "Election Day", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859_40.50".

165 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: *Veep*, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 188.

166 *Veep*, season 3, episode 3, "Alicia", directed by Christopher Morris, written by Armando Iannucci, Sean Gray, and Ian Martin, aired April 20, 2014, HBO, 02.46".

her reputation.¹⁶⁷ While *Veep* behaves atrociously to those around her, it is ultimately not incompetence that turns this situation into omnishambles but the impossible configuration of the panoptic affordances of politics themselves. Consequently, *VEEP*'s dedication to performative simulation, at times, takes on hyperbolically satirical forms, e.g., when she states: "I can't identify myself as a woman. People can't know that. Men hate that. And women who hate women hate that".¹⁶⁸

In *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, the constructed, mythical body politic appears to its diegetic creators as constantly in danger of being exposed as the deceptive front, which it, in fact, is. In his analysis of *VEEP*, Stock accordingly notes that "[a] continuous stylistic device of political culture is the idea of the dominance and power of interpretation of the media".¹⁶⁹ Politics, in the series, appears synonymous with the "political game for control and image management".¹⁷⁰ Gilberg et al. write accordingly that "In *Eichwald*, *MdB*, political crisis and the handling of a scandal serve as central markers of quality for the evaluation of a politician's ability".¹⁷¹

As I have noted before, while the notion has been prevalent since Plato, historically, the inherently performative nature of politics does not necessarily imply the erosion of a 'real' political process. As Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler point out, "representative political action includes processes of conveyance of meaning; performative politics is not 'politics without policy', but usually generates genuinely productive effects".¹⁷²

VEEP and *EICHWALD*, however, "understand the sensual manifestations of politics [...] as simulacra",¹⁷³ in which they become fiction without any link to reality (which usu-

167 *Veep*, season 2, episode 6, "Andrew", directed by Christopher Morris, written by Armando Iannucci and Tony Roche, aired May 19, 2013, HBO, 24.40".

168 *Veep*, season 3, episode 2, "The Choice", directed by Becky Martin, written by Armando Iannucci, Roger Drew & Ian Martin, aired April 13, 2014, HBO, 09.27".

169 Alexander Stock, "Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als insitutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?", in *Politik in Fernsehserien*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript 2018), 296. – My translation: "Ein durchgängiges Stilmittel politischer Kultur ist das Thema der Dominanz und Deutungsmacht der Medien".

170 Bettina Soller and Maria Sulimma, "'It's A Great Time To Be A Woman In Politics': Politikerinnen als Protagonistinnen von US-Fernsehserien", *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.4 (2014): 87. My translation: "[...] politisches Spiel um Kontrolle und Imageverwaltung".

171 Florian Gilberg, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 119. My translation: "Die politische Krise und der Umgang mit einem Skandal dienen bei *Eichwald*, *MdB* als zentrale Qualitätsmerkmale für die Bewertung der Fähigkeit eines Politikers [...]".

172 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler; "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 74. My translation: "[...] Politisches Stellvertretungshandeln schließt Prozesse der Sinnvermittlung ein; Darstellungspolitik ist nicht "politics without policy", sondern produziert in der Regel genuine Herstellungseffekte, weshalb die Unterscheidung letztlich eine der kasuistischen Gewichtung ist".

173 Celikates and Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter", 67. They write this with regards to their examination of conspiracy polit-films. My translation: "Die Verschwörungsfilme begreifen die sinnlichen Manifestationen der Politik jedoch als Simulacra".

ally remains in some form in the classic understanding of pseudo-events). As Celikates and Rothöhler note, this image of political representation as a simulative deception is a common trope in fictional narratives that deal with politics' ambivalent dependency on mimetic representation. They write: "Representation, here, degenerates to a dereferenced act of performance which only produces insubstantial forms of public visibility, that is, images that deceive".¹⁷⁴

Both VEEP and EICHWALD illustrate a vision of politics that is not *representative*, as democratic structures should be, but *simulative*. They thus enact well-established post-modern conceptualisations of democratic governance. According to Jean Baudrillard,

Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real [...]. Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference.¹⁷⁵

Accordingly, Ingolfur Blühdorn, in his concept of "simulative democracy",¹⁷⁶ regards "the principle of simulation as the late modern counterpart of traditionally modern *representation*".¹⁷⁷ Following the idea of the "postdemocratic turn",¹⁷⁸ according to which postmodern democratic procedures have lost much of their function in determining governance and instead primarily serve to create a legitimizing appearance of democracy, Blühdorn points out that,

174 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler; "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 67. – My translation: "Repräsentation degeneriert hier zu einem dereferenzialisierten Darstellungshandeln das lediglich substanzlose Formen öffentlicher Sichtbarkeit, also Bilder, die Täuschen herstellt".

175 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6. Original emphasis.

176 Ingolfur Blühdorn, "Billig will Ich: Post-demokratische Wende und simulative Demokratie", *Forschungsjournal Soziale Bewegungen* 19, no. 4 (2006): 78ff. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fjsb-2006-0409>. The occurrence of this phenomenon in polit-fiction has been remarked for HOUSE OF CARDS in 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>, referenced with regards to House of Cards in 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>.

177 Blühdorn, "Billig will Ich", 81. My translation: "So kann die simulative Demokratie schließlich als spätmoderne Nachfolgerin der repräsentativen Demokratie und das Prinzip der Simulation als das spätmoderne Gegenstück zur traditionell-modernen *Repräsentation* verstanden werden". Original emphasis.

178 Blühdorn, "Billig will Ich", 72.

As long as there are no blatant violations of symbolically held basic principles, it is secondary how decisions are made and by which means these decisions are implemented.¹⁷⁹

Baudrillard notes accordingly that a postmodern “head of state – *no matter which one* – is nothing but the simulacrum of himself, and *only that gives him the power and the quality to govern*.”¹⁸⁰

THE CROWN presented a monarch whose sovereign body politic continues to exist only as a simulacrum in mediated mythical presentations. However, this near-total simulation of royal sovereignty appears comparatively legitimate. Indeed, the only thing more scandalous than the ongoing simulacrum of a monarch would be a monarch who actually possesses the extensive political powers he*she simulates.

In VEEP and EICHWALD, the situation is entirely different. Politicians, other than constitutional monarchs, are not supposed to exclusively simulate a body politic but are also charged with impacting the world around them, namely, through governing and implementing policies. However, in their constant struggle to uphold the protective simulacrum of their mythical body politic, Veep, Eichwald, and their colleagues appear to be capable only of what Stock calls “placebo politics”.¹⁸¹

Accordingly, VEEP and EICHWALD satirically invert the formal motive of the “Walk’n Talk”, which, as Balke remarks, has become a common trope in polit-fiction at least since THE WEST WING (USA, 1999–2006).¹⁸² Showing the characters in constant engaged motion along the corridors of power, this trope created a vision of politics as a dynamic, co-creative and productive team effort in THE WEST WING. In both VEEP and EICHWALD, the ‘walk ’n talk’ is satirically increased to a feverish pace, with characters often running through the corridors of power (or impotence) in a panicked haste that usually amounts to nothing.

In both series, politics is full of static uncooperative, zero-sum games played by static players. While neither Veep nor Eichwald has any illusions about the meaninglessness of their political activity, neither character can even consider the possibility of reform. The characters’ feverish devotion to ensuring their meaningless, simulative survival thus adds a profoundly absurdist notion to both VEEP and EICHWALD’s presentation of politics. As Holm states, absurdism “is a mode of humour premised in the abandonment of

179 Blühdorn, “Billig will Ich”, 80. My translation: “Solange es nicht eklatante Verstöße gegen symbolisch gepflegte Grundprinzipien gibt, ist es sekundär auf welchem Wege es zu Entscheidungen kommt und mit welchen Mitteln diese Entscheidungen umgesetzt werden.”

180 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, transl. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 25f. Original emphasis.

181 Alexander Stock, “Veep: Das Amt des Vizepräsidenten der USA als insitutionalisierte Bedeutungslosigkeit?”, in *Politik in Fernsehserien*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript 2018), 297. My translation: “Placebo-Politik”.

182 Friedrich Balke, “Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in The West Wing”, in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginäre*, ed. Rebekka Klein and A. Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 2015), 69. Original emphasis.

everyday regimes of sense and meaning, rather than decorum and behaviour".¹⁸³ Both VEEP and EICHWALD are absurd in that they implicitly convey:

the lack of sense that informs everyday social rules and norms, political positions and discussions, and perhaps first and foremost the conventions of television in general, and humour in particular.¹⁸⁴

As I have shown, part of this absurdity results from the dramatic logic of seriality itself. When Veep, Eichwald and their respective staff struggle to survive in the impossibly demanding game of politics yet return time and again because they are required for the repetitive serial continuation of the narrative, their diegetic existence and dramatic presentations are rendered *absurd*.

POLITICIAN paints a decidedly different picture of politics. Here, representative democracy remains a decidedly functional institution despite its agonal and, at times, simulative nature. The series is a fictional illustration of the realisation that "political rationality always means consolidating matters of fact and power".¹⁸⁵ With its cooperative zero-sum structure and limited intensity, politics, in POLITICIAN, appears as *realpolitik* in which morally 'good' policies, to a certain degree, justify morally questionable means. Neither Payton nor Dede adheres to idealism in their conduct as campaigners and politicians. As political 'adults', they are ruthless and ambitious in attaining political power. Nevertheless, ruthlessness and ambition are no ends in themselves, and neither are power or political offices as they would be in VEEP or EICHWALD. All of the above ultimately serves the creation of genuinely positive change through policy.

In its optimistic vision of *realpolitik* as a functional constructive force and its rejection of transgressive humour, POLITICIAN, in many ways, references an older tradition of polit-fiction last visible in THE WEST WING¹⁸⁶ (that both series share their progressive worldview and prestige audience functions is undoubtedly a contributing factor to this similarity).

Like Elizabeth II., Selina Meyer, or Harjo Eichwald before them, Payton Hobart and his competitors continually attempt to construct a mediatised mythical conjunction of their respective bodies politic and natural. They, too, must continually adjust and readjust their mythical representations to the demands of the panoptic public. However, with its emphasis on the characters' various *Macbeth* configurations (the teams' internal dynamic is as central to the narrative as the external political struggle), POLITICIAN presents a much more *cooperative* vision of politics. In the series, politicians are the

183 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 149.

184 Holm, *Humour as Politics*, 173.

185 Karl-Rudolf Korte, "Warum eigentlich nicht?: Über die Unmöglichkeit, deutsches Politikmanagement im Fernsehen abzubilden", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Nico Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 364. My translation: "Politische Rationalität bedeutet immer, Sach- und Machtfragen zusammenzubringen".

186 See Friedrich Balke, "Doppelkörper und Korridorbildung: Souveränität und Subversion in The West Wing", in *Souveränität und Subversion: Figurationen des Politisch-Imaginären*, ed. Rebekka A. Klein and Dominik Finkelde (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 2015), 68–98.

result of a team's collective effort (Payton and his friends, Dede and Hadassah) and the co-creative interpretation of a diegetic recipient (the electorate).

The relationship between performative projections and a political agenda distinguishes the tactical performances of Payton and Dede from the simulacra created by Selina Meyer (VEEP), Harjo Eichwald, and Elizabeth II (THE CROWN). Both Payton and Dede Standish want to get things done. Dede, e.g., states: "You know I love governing. It's the campaigning part of the job that I never liked."¹⁸⁷ Both repeatedly justify their ruthlessness on the campaign trail with the positive impact they can make once elected. Indeed, Dede's track record of successfully implementing progressive policies in the state senate and Payton's political efficacy in realising his ecological platform somewhat prove them right, at least within realpolitik's teleological morality.

POLITICIAN thus references a vision of a functional representative democracy, in which a causal and multi-directional link exists between a politician's simulative projections, the attainment of power and mandates, and the ability to implement policies. Within representative democracy, performance is an integral part of politics and a prerequisite to political substance.¹⁸⁸

Accordingly, the vision of politics in POLITICIAN is one of productive democratic representation, not hollow postdemocratic simulation. The system is functional in that voters' voices change politicians' simulative self-projections and influence the candidates' actual positions. Dede Standish, e.g., claims that it is her "bionic" ability to listen to the winds of political change and "hear what your constituents want, above all the noise of the media and the special interest"¹⁸⁹ that make her a great politician. Payton similarly lays out the mechanism of representative democracy in an "adult conversation" he has with an idealist volunteer during the final hours of his ecologically charged campaign. Challenged over the authenticity of his belief in the need for climate action, he states:

I believe that we're in a climate emergency [...]. So, if ... when I win, I will commit to focussing on that issue because there is really no problem that is more all-encompassing. And the only way I'm going to win this race is to get young people to vote. And the only thing that truly inspires young people to get off their buns and actually vote is climate change. If that issue was economic inequality or like guns or the subway, I would still be spending my life fighting to save the planet, but no, I probably

187 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 6, "What's in the Box?", directed by Tina Mabry, written by Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211651?trackId=200257859>, 20.40".

188 See Paula Diehl, "Von 'Medienkanzler', 'singender Bundesrätin' und Showman: Körperinszenierung zwischen Unterhaltung und politischer Repräsentation", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 109f; And Robin Celikates and Simon Rothhöler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 74.

189 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, "Election Day", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 21.14".

would not be taking a cold shower in Madison Square [an event he had staged to campaign for sustainability]."¹⁹⁰

While Payton's 'adult' answer might serve as proof of his personal opportunism, it simultaneously demonstrates the basic principles of representative democracy: It is ultimately secondary whether Payton believes in his campaign platform. What matters is that, in creating his political persona, he adjusts to concrete issues that concern his voter base and subsequently effectuates meaningful change.

In *POLITICIAN*, ideals and utopias (e.g., an eco-friendly planet) *exist* and *persist* through compromise. Both Payton and Dede have a clear agenda, even though they are realistic about what it takes to achieve it. As Payton expresses it in his acceptance speech at the end of season two: "There is an old adage that says that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose. So now we are on to the prose part."¹⁹¹

It is no accident that this 'old adage' fits perfectly with Hegel's description of the fictional *poetry vs prose* motif. Other than in *VEEP* or *EICHWALD*, in *POLITICIAN*, the consolidation of political poetry and prose does not involve giving up on one's ideals but learning to rely on a productive compromise between the two. In its portrayal of politics, the series, after taking several satirical detours, thus ultimately ends on a conventional fictional note.

5.4 Conclusion: Simulation, Representation, and a Progressive Turn

In analyzing three examples from the beginning, middle, and end of the 2010s, this chapter showed that the way mainstream polit-comedies present politics and construct humour has evolved throughout the decade and in accordance with historical discourse.

Analysing the structural composition of *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, this chapter argued that, to maintain their signature leitmotif of constant failure, the series required a particular set of dramatic rules that would sustain the narrative throughout its serial progression. Accordingly, it became clear that the series' 'omnishambolic' leitmotif is partly a result of *dramatic* serial logic. To create a plausible narrative in which incompetent protagonists can maintain their political position for several seasons, all other characters who enter the narrative focus must forcibly be equally incompetent in order to retain the compositional balance.

It became clear that, in *VEEP*, the previously discussed *King's two bodies* trope is operationalised in the uncooperative, zero-sum *President's two Bodies* game in which a superficial ceremonial vector collides with ulterior personal transactions to create a maximum of comical incongruence and invective. In *EICHWALD*, transactions occurred according

190 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 5, "The Voters", directed by Ian Brennan, written by Ian Brennan, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211650?trackId=200257859>, 16.00".

191 *The Politician*, season 2, episode 7, "Election Day", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired June 19, 2020, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81211652?trackId=200257859>, 33.02".

to the *Treat me like an Adult* game, in which ostensible Adult-transactions collide with ulterior pettiness. The games' limited intensity and stabilising configuration allowed the creation of lingering social awkwardness that forms the base of the series' conventional, mockumentary-style "cringe humour".

It became clear that, in the narrative logic of both VEEP and EICHWALD, politics is primarily an external factor that serves as a stimulus to trigger the invective/ awkward transactional patterns between the static player ensemble, which constitute the series' primary source of comedy.

My examination of POLITICIAN showed that the series presents a multi-faceted paradigm shift from VEEP and EICHWALD. A structural analysis of the series' main games illustrated that, in its first season, POLITICIAN suffered from a compositional imbalance. It resulted from the minor role of the protagonists' 3rd-degree intensity zero-sum games with their various parental figures and the great narrative weight of the series' central, albeit low-intensity game of a high school election. The high intensity of these side-games, at times, undermines the series' attempts at creating humour through the incongruity of the protagonists' young age, their hyperreal professionalism, limitless tenacity and the objectively low stakes of their election campaigns.

Further transactional analysis showed that the coming-of-age process of protagonist Payton Hobart is a satirical inversion of the classic Hegelian *poetry vs prose* motif: Payton develops from a stereotypical image of an unfeeling polit-automaton to consolidating his political and personal needs, thus becoming a responsible civil servant, friend, husband, and father.

Analyzing the presentation of politics in all three series, I showed that in VEEP and EICHWALD, politics appears as a highly agonal zero-sum game of power politics in which all means are justified to achieve personal aggrandizement. THE POLITICIAN, on the other hand, shows a constructive vision of realpolitik whose cooperative zero-sum structure is limited to the temporal boundaries of the campaign trail and allows for political opponents to form personal attachments.

I showed that both VEEP and EICHWALD present a vision of politics in which post-democratic, deceptive simulation replaces the productive mechanisms of representative democracy. It became clear that the series' presentation of politics as a cesspit of omnipresent incompetence and amorality and the *serial dramatic* logic of retaining a character-set despite their continuous failings created and amplified the narratives' general sense of cynical absurdity.

In POLITICIAN, on the other hand, the progression into an 'adult' consolidation of the pragmatic realities and idealistic possibilities of realpolitik resulted in a positive depiction of politics reminiscent of earlier, more idealistic presentations, e.g., in THE WEST WING. POLITICIAN does not follow its predecessors' omnishambolic tendency for impotent surrender to the gruesome and lamentable absurdity of a base political reality that has long been presumed to be *the* 'realistic' portrayal of political processes. Instead, the series faces postmodernity's metaphysical insecurity and the harsh realities of politics and finds them – underneath all the ruthlessness and moral depravity – fertile ground for cooperation, compromise, and productive political action.

POLITICIAN is, therefore, arguably an early example of an increasing shift in the humorous (and general) narrative traditions of so-called prestige audiences. While the se-

ries shares with EICHWALD and VEEP its progressive, high-cultural-capital target audiences, it no longer prescribes to the transgressive “uncomfortable humour” that had long been regarded as one of the hallmarks of the so-called ‘Quality TV’. Where VEEP and EICHWALD gained much of their humour from transgressing the boundaries of the liberal order, POLITICIAN’s pastel-coloured diegesis emphasises the progressive or ‘woke’ values that have, in the late 2010s and early 2020s, become increasingly prevalent among its target audiences. The series thus arguably demarcates – together with other productions – a decisive shift in the “cultural logic of gentrification”, resulting from a substantial evolution in historical discourse and attitudes towards transgressive behaviour.

Neither VEEP, EICHWALD, nor POLITICIAN is revolutionary in the sense that they advocate for fundamental systemic change. All three series present their characters as *adjusted players* of their respective political games. In both VEEP and EICHWALD, audiences witness a desperately flawed political system and a lamentable general state of affairs. However, the omnipresence of failure and depravity in VEEP and EICHWALD creates a seeming lack of alternative that turns this sad state of affairs into an unchangeable systemic, even natural, fact. The series thus display a “reflexive impotence”¹⁹² in the tradition of what Mark Fisher has called “Capitalist Realism”. They seem aware that “things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it”.¹⁹³

POLITICIAN, however, no longer follows the political cynicism that permeated its predecessors. The show has few traces of the reflexive impotence of series like THE CROWN, VEEP and EICHWALD. Instead, POLITICIAN presents an optimistic vision of the possibilities of representational democracy in general and the US system of government, in particular, for effectuating meaningful, intrasystemic change. Despite its ultimately conventional (preliminary) end, the series rejection of the cynical and transgressive conventions of ‘prized’ polit-fiction in the 2010s thus inadvertently helped usher in a new decade of US-led nonlinear prestige storytelling that has recently materialised, among others, as the highly complex, diverse, and innovative (albeit non-polit) narratives of the more recent (non-polit) Netflix dramas DIRTY LINES, LES 7 VIES DE LÉA, or DRÔLE (all released in 2022).

With SLUHA NARODU, the following chapter will focus on a polit-comedy from a decidedly different background. The Ukrainian series is a fascinating example of polit-fiction because of its controversial incorporation of the pragmatic logics of Ukrainian presidential politics in the late 2010s and its exemplification of a variety of – seemingly transversal – dramatic conventions.

192 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21.

193 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 21.

6. The Curious Case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko

Idealism and Populism in SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

Since its debut as a regional TV production in November 2015, the Ukrainian television series *Слуга народу* [Romanised Ukrainian: *Sluha Narodu*, English: *Servant of the People*] has become a notable, unusual, and in many ways tragic part of world history. Its star (and showrunner function), Volodymyr Zelensky, first rose to notable celebrity in the role of the series' 'president of the people' Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, who, in three seasons of various lengths and one feature film, shakes up the corrupt Ukrainian polity. *SLUHA NARODU* (SN) subsequently became the platform that arguably helped launch Zelensky on his path to the real-life Ukrainian presidency, an office he took in May 2019, much to the disdain of many of his critics who accused the entertainer of deliberately blending serial fiction and reality to serve his political ambitions.

As this chapter is being edited in the summer of 2022, the former "celebrity president"¹ has garnered global prominence and respect for his role in organizing Ukraine's defence against his country's invasion by Russia, which started on February 24th, 2022. With the war ongoing, its outcome uncertain, and history's verdict still out at the time of writing, this chapter will not examine Volodymyr Zelensky's role as a wartime leader but focus on the fictional series that helped constitute the foundation for all that was to follow.

The striking similarities between SN's idealised hero-president and the public persona, which the real-life Volodymyr Zelensky created during his election campaign, have often been pointed out. Given Zelensky's non-existent political record pre-presidency, many observers believe the comedian's fictional alter ego to have been instrumental in deciding the election in his favour, e.g., calling SN a "three-year political campaign".² Viktoriia Demydova states that on his way to the presidency, "Volodymyr Zelensky [...]

1 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 582.

2 Stephanie Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's Servant of the People?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

seemed to perform a role of his hero from the TV series".³ Moreover, Stephanie Petrella writes that SN's "narrative – that of the people's man, who disrupts Ukraine's oligarchic rule by returning honesty to politics – comprised Volodymyr Zelensky's campaign platform".⁴ The curious case of Volodymyr Zelensky and Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko is, indeed, full of remarkable details. One example is Zelensky's newly founded political party, which won a majority of parliamentary seats and 43% of the popular vote in the summer of 2019. It carries the name *Servant of the People* and is thus conspicuously eponymous with the fictional series. To avoid confusion between the homonymous TV series and political party, I will refer to the series by its Romanised Ukrainian title SLUHA NARODU and the political party by its English name (SoP).

Few contemporary series have arguably been as visibly dominated by the politicised *pragmatic* logic of its network as SN. This chapter will examine how the series presents politics, the ways in which its composition and leitmotifs might seem advantageous to a historical politician on his way to high elected office, and how its role in Zelensky's political efforts has, in turn, shaped its narrative. It is crucial to note here that this chapter will not attempt to discern the ways and extent to which SN influenced the 2019 elections but, instead, examine how its *pragmatic* logic influenced the narrative.

Given the series' unique context, this chapter will start by giving a historical overview of the many remarkable convergences between Zelensky's road to the presidency and SN's development as a cultural commodity and fictional narrative. This chapter will subsequently examine the series' narrative configuration and its presentation of politics in a structural and formal analysis. It will become clear that SN uses a variety of established narrative conventions to present a utopian and idealised version of politics, following what Liesbet van Zoonen has called "the populist telling of the quest".⁵ I will show that, in the construction of their narratives and characters, the series follows the "populist tradition" of building an opposition between supposed elites and 'the people'.⁶ It is a motif that has been an established part of polit-fiction appearing in on-screen entertainment as early as the 1939 feature film "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (Frank Capra, USA).

It will become clear that SN, in dramatizing this *intradiegetic* populist logic, revolves around a central axis that divides its characters into morally upstanding *outsiders* and corrupt *insiders*. This binary juxtaposition corresponds to a normative division that divides the good from the bad, the competent from the incompetent, and the legitimate from the illegitimate.

I will show that, from this comparatively simple construction, the series' protagonist, Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, emerges as a messiah-type saviour hero in the tradition of the American Monomyth (AM). It will become apparent that, despite its Ukrainian origin, SN follows this narrative archetype in almost every way, e.g., by portraying an individualistic outsider hero who saves a potential Eden which had previously been failed by

3 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 587.

4 Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's Servant of the People?"

5 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

6 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 110f.

its institutions.⁷ I will demonstrate that, following the implicit impetus of the AM, the series ultimately rejects notions of pluralism and democratic representation in favour of a simplified vision of organic and immediate leadership despite paying lip service to progressive politics. However, this seeming paradox emerges not from ostensible anti-democratic tendencies within the series' historical network but from the narrative requirements of dramatizing utopian, idealistic politics itself.

Contextualising these findings with a comparative analysis of three other sample series – MADAM SECRETARY (USA, 2014–2019, MS), DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (USA, 2016–2019, DS US) and 60일, 지정생존자 [*Designated Survivor: 60 Days*] (Republic of Korea, 2019, DS 60), I will show that the populist construction of idealistic politics reappears – and functions – in a variety of cultural contexts. This chapter will demonstrate that, as a narrative trope, this construction emerges primarily from the *pragmatic* logics of linear circulation and political idealism rather than cultural or ideological convictions.

A subsequent analysis of SN's evolution throughout its three seasons – in the context of its emerging historical role as a tool in Zelensky's presidential campaign – will show that the series develops from a relatively conventional idealistic polit-comedy to an easily legible and highly biased commentary on the Ukrainian election of 2019. Therefore, if politics is the process of negotiating the distribution of power,⁸ then SN may arguably be considered the most *political* series in this study.

6.1 When History and Fiction Converge? A Timeline

When and how the pragmatic logic of Volodymyr Zelensky's political ambitions started to influence SN and, in turn, whether and how the series became a discursive part of the Ukrainian presidential race is a contentious question. The circumstances of Zelensky's rise to power and the subsequent ascent of his SoP are certainly astonishing and merit a closer look. A short historical overview will show how much Zelensky's growing political ambitions influenced SN as an integral part of its pragmatic logic (for an illustrated timeline, see figure 32).

For this compilation, I rely on various scholarly discussions and media reports on both Zelensky's political campaign and the fictional series. It is important to note here that this compilation is intended merely as an overview and that this chapter does not aim to discern whether or not Zelensky broke the rules of political campaign ethics by instrumentalising his TV series nor to decide the extent of this instrumentalization, or ascertain the negative or positive effects such an amalgamation of fiction and reality might have had on Ukraine's political culture.

7 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

8 See Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.

Figure 32: Timeline: The convergence of SLUHA NARODU and key historical events



In November/December of 2015, SN's first season aired on the Ukrainian 1+1 network and subsequently rose to success among Ukrainian and Russian-speaking audiences. In December 2016, a full-length feature film called "Sluha Narodu 2" was released. It carried on the first season's plot and was followed by a second season in October/November 2017. This second season is remarkable for two reasons: (1) an unconventional use of serial and cinematic material and (2) the historical events following its release.

(1) Season 2 incorporates the plotline and sequences from the previously released feature film. The first seven episodes are a sequel to season 1 and a prequel to the film's plot. The narrated time of the following seven episodes is congruent with that of the feature film, and the episodes heavily feature material from the film and expand on its plot. The season's last ten episodes tell the story of what happens after the film's ending.

(2) Shortly after the release of season 2, the SoP party was reported as officially registered with Ukrainian authorities by Ivan Bakanov, long-term head of Kvartal 95 Studio [Студія Квартал-95], Volodymyr Zelenky's production company.⁹ The party evolved from renaming the already existing Party of Decisive Change [Партія рішучих змін], which had been founded in April 2016 by people seemingly unconnected to the Zelensky-camp. Following reports, the SoP initially occupied four rent-free square meters in the offices of a law firm associated with Zelenky's Kvartal 95-production company.¹⁰

It was initially claimed that its registration was little more than an unconventional copyright move intended to protect SN's brand from ill-use, with Zelensky stating in January 2018 that "so far", the SoP was "not a political project, but rather a legal nuance".¹¹

It would be speculation to try to discern whether, at this point, this claim was valid, whether there were further marketing ambitions or already formed political ambitions in play. However, by mid to late 2018, the picture becomes much clearer, with some observers placing the unofficial start of the presidential campaign here.¹² In November

9 Anastasia Daynod, "Political Party Servant of the People Appeared in Ukraine", *Ukrainian National News*, December 2, 2017, <https://www.unn.com.ua/ru/exclusive/1702069-v-ukrayini-zyavilasya-p-olitchna-partiya-sluga-narodu>; and "'Party of Decisive Change' changed its name to 'Servant of the People'", LB.ua, December 2, 2017, https://lb.ua/news/2017/12/02/383656_partiya_reshitelnih_peremen.html. Accessed through Google Translate.

10 Natalia Patrikeeva, "How 'Servant of the People' was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections", *Pyx ЧЕCHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020, https://www.chesno.org/post/3823/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATViJe_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYwUuHFlvqJqJQCZDAGVpMG6-YwBUL1_RJJjBomBNVHlwoLvLcFgziZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWho7NmEPiPvGrLCuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVaA9QqqvVrVolT92D7ofkUIQXL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQEJoX8sBETUmIkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8Dx-z7-ViDJ98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAyJ4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMY4_P8iJ3MrQ. Accessed through Google Translate.

11 Alexey Sysoev and Yulia Katsun, "Volodymyr Zelensky: If I go into politics, Kvartal 95 will joke even worse with me", *kp*, January 24, 2018, <https://kp.ua/culture/599107-vladymyr-zelenskyi-esly-poidu-v-polytyku-kvartal-budet-shutyt-nado-mnoi-esche-pokhleshe>. Accessed through Google Translate.

12 Johanna Rohozinska, Vitaly Shpak, "Ukraine's Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an 'Outsider' President", *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 36.

2018, large-scale outdoor billboards appeared advertising an undefined entity called *Servant of the people* in connection with the presidency.¹³ One example read, “The President is a Servant of the People: Soon”.

Whether this advertising referred to the TV series or the homonymous political party and its rumoured presidential candidate (who had, by then, still not declared his intentions) remained unclear.¹⁴ Other examples include the reported release of ambivalent video trailers that seemed to emphasise advertising political messaging. Zelensky, at the time, did nothing to clear up speculations over his political ambitions, stating ambiguously:

As for the ‘Servants of the People’ videos, they are the ‘Servants of the People’ videos. Could this be a form of election campaign? No one has ever done this before.¹⁵

Similarly, footage of Zelensky in his role as SN’s protagonist, Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko, appeared on his campaign website (see figure 33), and ambivalent advertising materials with the label “Servant of the people”, again, left deliberately unclear whether it advertised the TV series or the political party.¹⁶

On new year’s eve 2018, Zelensky finally announced his much-rumoured candidacy and the beginning of the “Ze!-campaign” on his ‘home’ channel 1+1,¹⁷ which had previously aired SN and many of Kvartal 95’s other productions.

13 Natalia Patrikeeva, “How ‘Servant of the People’ was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections”, *Pyx 4ECHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020, https://www.chesno.org/pos/t/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATViJe_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYwUuHFlvqQjeGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJJjBomBNvHlwoLvLcFgziZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWho7NmEPiPvGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVaA9QqqvVrVolT92D7ofkUIQXL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQEJoX8sBETUmlkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-z7-ViDJJ98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAyJ4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMY4_P8iJ3MrQ. Accessed through Google Translate.

14 Natalia Patrikeeva, “How ‘Servant of the People’ was born and where it took more than 200 Million for the elections”, *Pyx 4ECHO [Chesno]*, February 13, 2020. https://www.chesno.org/pos/t/3823/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=4ccffof24007458ba5262a1fc7c35b45a0903984-1610475489-0-ATViJe_DxNxLncJ6tarvybHeCdNkPa5qOwYwUuHFlvqQjeGCCZDAGVpMG6-YWbUL1_RJJjBomBNvHlwoLvLcFgziZhAP9JZTDmQBZYxX4ABCIUrFmpJaX7vBoiCxQy_d3k6mc-KQpyGJPzc8EUciWho7NmEPiPvGrLcuvXsKsvrN4-evqHpuHkM43ImYGFiqDaGOVaA9QqqvVrVolT92D7ofkUIQXL8hJTbxj6RusxNLdNRyFtXR4mwz-aKA9UrOsnlJQEJoX8sBETUmlkt8L_PINJqYLFpUx_U7voVO5qQxucL5DW9rdZLduMLMRqc8DX-z7-ViDJJ98Z4O8Ps8NtVvfAyJ4bQutQvYwEpqDGHORCAx2locjCMY4_P8iJ3MrQ.

15 Roman Kravets, “The limit of a joke: how Zelensky is preparing for the elections”, *Ukrainian Pravda*, October 25, 2018. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/10/25/7196270/>. Accessed through Google Translate.

16 Roman Choncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <http://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.

17 Alla Marchenko, “The personal is political: Volodymyr Zelensky in the spotlight of the international mainstream media”, *Baltic Worlds* 13, 1–2 (October 2020): 102.

Figure 33: Photo from 'Sluha Narodu' on Zelensky's Campaign Website.



Передвиборча програма кандидата на пост Президента України Володимира Зеленського

© Volodymyr Zelenskyj

The Main Inscription says: “Manifesto of the candidate for the Ukrainian Presidency Volodymyr Zelensky”. In the upper left corner: “Ze! Team” (Google Translat). Found in Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. Credit: Volodymyr Zelensky.

The ensuing campaign was, as Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak claim, “largely devoid of any clear statements of ideology or significant policy proposals”¹⁸ and focused mainly on Zelensky’s personal appeal and image. Viktoriia Demydova has likewise described the SoP party as a “populist, pro-western party that has anti-corruption stance”,¹⁹ calling Zelensky’s election program “a utopian essay about the future of Ukraine”.²⁰ In his campaign, Zelensky followed, as Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield put it, a “centrist”, “catch-all” position “deemphasising ideological divisions”²¹ and focussing on the commonplace valence issue of “replacing the existing party system and political establishment”.²² Zelensky thus managed, as Rohozinska and Shpak note, to serve “as something of a black screen onto which voters could project their hopes or assumptions.”²³

- 18 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 33.
- 19 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 589. [sic!].
- 20 Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine”, 588.
- 21 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages: Explaining the Landslide Victory of the Servant of the People Party in the 2019 Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections”, *Party Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2022): 118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820965413>.
- 22 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages”, 122.
- 23 Rohozinska and Shpak: “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles”, 37.

During his campaign Zelensky, as Andika Hendra Mustaqim states, showed clear opposition to “mass media hegemony”²⁴ and, as Demydova observes, a shift to “the virtual sphere where young Ukrainians are particularly active”.²⁵ In the run-up to the election, Zelensky largely avoided public appearances and interviews, instead focussing on curated social media appearances, initially refusing to participate in a televised presidential debate.

At the beginning of 2019, ambivalent outdoor advertising reappeared, again without a clear distinction between the fictional series SN and the, by now, very much non-fictional SoP party and its candidate, Volodymyr Zelensky. This amalgamation of fiction and reality neither went unnoticed nor uncontested. According to Diana Duzyk, Zelensky moved in a grey area of Ukrainian electoral law.²⁶ The “Committee of Voters of Ukraine” went even further, claiming that SN’s third season, which aired on March 27th and 28th, 2019, a mere four/three days before the presidential election, had to be considered an election campaign and regulated as such.²⁷

On March 31st, 2019, the first round of the presidential election showed no clear winner, with Zelensky gaining 30,24%, incumbent Petro Poroshenko 15,95%, and former minister-president Yulia Tymoshenko 13,40% of the votes. On April 19th, a presidential TV debate between the run-off’s remaining candidates, Zelensky and Poroshenko, was held after all; Zelensky had previously issued the challenge on social media. The run-up to the debate quickly took an unconventional turn with Zelensky demanding, e.g., prior drug testing and that former contestant Yulia Tymoshenko host the duel.²⁸ The event itself followed suit in unconventionality, as Demydova describes:

During the debate, Volodymyr Zelensky knelt down in front of the Ukrainians in order to commemorate the victims of the war in Donbas while Poroshenko got down on one knee and turned his face to the Ukrainian flag. Candidates ended up singing Ukrainian national anthem [...].²⁹

On April 21st, the run-off election made Volodymyr Zelensky the presidential race’s clear winner, with 73,2% of the votes cast in his favour. During his inauguration on May 20th,

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- 24 Andika Hendra Mustaqim, “Politik Selebriti: Perlawanan Terhadap Sistem (Studi Kasus Gaya Komunikasi Politik Pada Kandidat Presiden Ukraina Volodymyr Zelensky)”, *Dakwah Risalah* 30, no.1 (June 2019): 1, <https://doi.org/10.24014/jdr.v30i1.7059>.
- 25 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 597.
- 26 Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”, *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <http://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.
- 27 The Committee of Voters of Ukraine, “KVU calls on V.Zelensky to pay for ‘Servant of the People 3’ from the election fund”, February 12, 2019, <http://www.cvu.org.ua/nodes/view/type:news/slug:kvu-zaklykaie-v-zelenskoho-oplatyty-sluhu-narodu-3-iz-vyborchoho-fondu>. Accessed through Google Translate.
- 28 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 39.
- 29 Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine”, 590. [sic!].

2019, he announced snap parliamentary elections and on July 21st, Zelensky's SoP won the highest post-soviet majority in Ukraine with 254 out of 450 seats.³⁰

According to Demydova, the 2019 election "brought a very different type of the political leader," with Zelensky becoming a "celebrity president".³¹ Natalia Petlyuchenko accordingly states that Zelensky's public image was decisive in securing the SoP's electoral victory claiming its transfer onto "all the representatives of the Servant of the People party resulting in them becoming a collective avatar of president Zelensky's individual charisma".³²

Faced with this development, many observers asked the question, as Roman Goncharenko for DW put it,

Who did 30% of Ukrainians really vote for on March 31st: the political newcomer Volodymyr Zelensky – or Vasyl Holoborodko, the protagonist of the comedy series 'Servant of the People'?³³

Was the 2019 presidential election really "*Servant of the People* come to life", as Petrella notes?³⁴ One will invariably be hard-pressed to answer this question with precision. It is possible that, as some observers have claimed, "Voters are not voting for Zelensky, but actually for Holoborodko".³⁵ Another observer just before the election stated that

judging by the rating of the series [...], the electorate does not distinguish between the serial Holoborodko and the real Zelensky. So already on Sunday, people will vote under the impression of the utopian product of the Kvartal 95 studio [SN].³⁶

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- 30 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, "How Challenger Parties Can Win Big with Frozen Cleavages: Explaining the Landslide Victory of the Servant of the People Party in the 2019 Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections", *Party Politics* 28, no. 1 (January 2022): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820965413>.
- 31 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 582. [sic!].
- 32 Natalia Petlyuchenko, "Servant of the People as a Collective Avatar of Zelensky's Charisma: Phenomena of Ukraine's 2019 Electoral Discourse", *NANO-2019: Limits of Nanoscience and Nanotechnologies* (September 2019): 47.
- 33 Roman Goncharenko, "Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?". *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>. My translation: "Für wen haben 30 Prozent der Ukrainer in der ersten Runde der Präsidentschaftswahlen am 31. März denn nun wirklich gestimmt: für den politische Newcomer Wolodymyr Selenskyj oder für Wasyl Holobordoko, den Protagonisten der Comedy-Serie 'Diener des Volkes'?"
- 34 Stephanie Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's servant of the People?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.
- 35 Maria Buchelnikova, "Voters are not Voting for Zelensky, but actually for Holoborodko", *Media Detector*, February 2, 2019. <https://vybory.detector.media/2019/02/22/vybortsi-holosuyut-ne-za-zelenskoho-a-faktychno-za-holoborodka/>. Accessed through Google Translate.
- 36 Gala Sklyarevska, "'Servant of the People 3': Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky", *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluga-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>. Accessed through Google Translate.

Andriy Bytschenko doubts the singular role of SN, adding that Kvartal 95 had been an essential source for satirical, critical content in Ukraine and that “[t]here are synergy-effects between the series and other Kvartal 95 productions, that amplify each other”.³⁷

However, it is possible that Ukrainians mainly opted for neither Zelensky nor his on-screen persona and instead *against* the establishment personified by Yulia Tymoshenko and Petro Poroshenko.³⁸ Rohozinska and Shpak, e.g., claim that “Zelensky tapped into the deep public desire for new faces and disgust with political elites that had been the undercurrent of the 2013–14 EuroMaidan Revolution.”³⁹ Demydova likewise estimates that the reason for Zelensky’s election was, overall, a hope for change.⁴⁰ Ratnikov and Zemzyulina point out accordingly that the election of such populist celebrity “politicians as D. Trump and V. Zelensky” is possible “only in conditions of electoral fragmentation”.⁴¹ Considering the significant societal and political complexities that shape elections, one should thus not oversimplify matters by claiming an exclusive causal link between SN and V. Zelensky’s election victory.

Only one claim seems to be undoubtedly false: the much-repeated claim that SN somehow *predicted* the future of Ukraine.⁴² Instead of ‘predicting’, the series undoubtedly took an active part – however big or small – in *shaping* the country’s future.

6.2 Fictionalising Idealpolitik and the Narrative Logic of Populism

In constructing its plot, its protagonist, Vasyl Petrovich Holoborodko, and its vision of governance, SN operates with a simplified notion of idealistic politics [*Idealpolitik*]. Opposed to *realpolitik*, the term denotes a deontological concept of politics primarily determined by the normative principles behind political action instead of the moral evaluation of its outcome. Series that follow the trope of *idealpolitik*, as Andreas Dörner notes, “define a utopian space, which can function as the normative benchmark” for politics.⁴³

37 Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”. *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>. My translation: “Es gibt zwischen der Serie und anderen Produktionen von Quartal-95 Synergieeffekte, die sich gegenseitig verstärken”.

38 See Roman Goncharenko, “Selenskyj: Wahlerfolg dank TV-Serie?”. *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dw.com/de/selenskyj-wahlerfolg-dank-tv-serie/a-48199041>.

39 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 33.

40 Viktoriia Demydova, “2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?”, *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 581.

41 Max Ratnikov and Natalia Zemzyulina, “Comparative Analysis of the Political Motivation of the Partisans who Vote for D. Trump and V. Zelensky”, *The Journal of Society and Media* 4, no.2 (October 2020): 434, <https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v4n2>.

42 See Michael Garrood and Yuri Zoria, “What Zelensky’s prophetic ‘Servant of the People’ TV show suggest for his further steps”, *Euromaidan News*, August 7, 2019, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2019/08/07/what-zelenskyys-prophetic-servant-of-the-people-tv-show-suggests-for-his-further-steps/>.

43 Andreas Dörner, “Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik”, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 8. My translation: “Die Politserie definiert utopi-

Dramatizing this approach to politics, SN applies a well-established narrative convention, which van Zoonen has called “the populist telling of the quest”. In it, “the people are the source to which all actions of the hero can be traced”⁴⁴ and become “the dispatchers of the hero”.⁴⁵ To construct a protagonist as a saviour hero in line with utopian, idealistic logic, SN thus implicitly applies what Jan-Werner Müller calls the “internal logic of populism”.⁴⁶ Populism, for him, does not refer to a type of charismatic leadership but to a vision of politics and governance that assumes a direct, organic connection between the populist leader and a unified and incorruptible ‘people’, whose will the populist hero alone can discern and represent.⁴⁷

This simplified dichotomy is the structural principle according to which SN is organised. As Petrella states:

Servant of the People’s surreal humor derives from the clash between two exaggerated archetypes: Ukraine’s establishment politicians and Zelenky’s man-of-the-people, history teacher Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko.⁴⁸

The central juxtaposition of corrupt elites vs ‘the people’ has been an established trope in popular on-screen polit-fiction, at least since the feature film “Mr Smith Goes to Washington” (1939).⁴⁹

This pervasiveness is partly due to a distinct underlying dramatic logic. The ideal hero is most visible as the people’s envoy when put against the foil of antagonists who clearly are not. In narrative composition, the construction of a hero in line with the utopian claims of idealpolitik is, therefore, achieved by a clear division of protagonists and antagonists into a morally pure *outgroup*, whose members – and moral values – exist safely ‘outside’ the corrupt sphere of politics and the morally deprived *ingroup* of the political establishment.

While it is primarily motivated by dramatic logic, this narrative construction of idealpolitik thus almost inadvertently evokes a specifically populist conception of politics

schen Raum, der als normative Messlatte, als positives Gegenbild zur außermedialen politischen Realität fungieren kann”.

44 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

45 Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen* 112. She notes this with reference to Vladimir Propp’s structuralist terminology of narrative.

46 Jan-Werner Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 191, <http://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>. My translation: “Der inneren Logik des Populismus”.

47 Müller, “Was ist Populismus?”, 191.

48 Stephanie Petrella, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine’s servant of the People?”, *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

49 See Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 110f.

chain, which Holoborodko remembers to take off just in time before entering the presidential office. The president, likewise, pays off a mortgage for a microwave, and audiences learn from an introductory report given by an antagonist's investigator that "he is known for having staunch and strong moral qualities, a Nordic temperament and for being ironclad and brave",⁵³ is free of bad habits of any kind⁵⁴ and, as per his students, "simply a saint".⁵⁵ Holoborodko takes a taxi to his own inauguration⁵⁶ and prefers the bus instead of the presidential motorcade to get to work.⁵⁷ Furthermore, in season 1, he appears as a caring divorced father who touchingly prioritises playtime with his son, Dima, over all else, even his presidential duties.⁵⁸

Holoborodko is a politician sans désir and, as such, possesses no sense or desire for power, stating, "The people elected me to effectively manage the country and that's all".⁵⁹ He belongs to no political party, did not actively campaign for the presidential election, and his initial candidacy was paid for through a crowdfunding campaign organised by his pupils.⁶⁰ 'The people' later fund Holoborodko for a second time when he runs for re-election by the end of season 2.⁶¹ SN's main antagonists, a sinister trio of faceless oligarchs, accordingly express their surprise that, although they have largely divided the political realm of Ukraine among themselves, nobody seems to 'own' Holoborodko.⁶²

As a man of the people, Holoborodko feels entirely uneasy in the formal and luxurious world of presidential splendour and, for example, does not know how to eat with formal cutlery.⁶³ He rejects the lavish presidential mansion offered to him by prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko, choosing instead to continue living with his family (the latter changes with a recalibration after season 1, which I will discuss later in this chapter). It is worth noting that the location featuring as the fictional presidential villa is the historical Mezhyhiria residence [Мезигір'я], previously inhabited by the discharged Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich before his fall and subsequent exile following the

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- 53 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 10.49".
- 54 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 11.58".
- 55 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 11.41".
- 56 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859>, 21.58".
- 57 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 4, "#1.4", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119387?trackId=200257858>, 03.52".
- 58 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859>, 11.47".
- 59 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 11, "#1.11", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119394?trackId=200257858>, 13.16".
- 60 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859>, 36.39".
- 61 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 18, "#2.18", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 7, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597219?trackId=200257859>, 12.50".
- 62 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859>, 33.56".
- 63 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859>, 16.09".

2014 Maidan Revolution [Револуція гідності]. The lavishness of the historical residence caused significant international media attention following Yanukovych's fall. In 2015, with the release of SN's first season, it arguably constituted a strikingly current symbol of excessive government corruption that would have been easily legible for most Ukrainian and many international audiences. The fictional presidential villa accordingly contains several features that reference the historical Mezhyhirya residence's furnishings, such as gilded fixtures and an ostrich farm, as well as some even more excessive (and troubling) features like a remote to summon prostitutes⁶⁴ that are most likely fictional.

Following the populist trope, governance, in SN's world, occurs in a highly simplified version of political decision-making. It directly results from Holoborodko's alliance with 'the people' and the corresponding antagonism towards the political establishment. The president governs by simple proclamation without deliberation or adherence to 'obstructive' political, administrative, or democratic procedures. As the people's champion, Holoborodko does not possess or require a parliamentary majority or allegiance to a political party. Despite a lack of experience, he becomes a sweeping reformer, making profound decisions in the blink of an eye without knowing – or needing to know – how government functions in the first place; indeed, he is not even aware of the initial cabinet ministers' names.⁶⁵ In his 'common sense' reforms, Holoborodko, for example, cuts down administrative staff, dismisses "450.000 bureaucrats",⁶⁶ supports a reduction of parliament from 450 down to 70 seats,⁶⁷ and moves the government to a more modest location, giving the excess buildings "to the children"⁶⁸ (what precisely this means remains unclear).

It should be noted that, in historical liberal democracies, processes of representation are deemed necessary because, as Müller states: "A *priori* nobody can know the people's will; it is only ever *a posteriori* that we learn about (often relative) majorities".⁶⁹ Therefore, as I have discussed in this thesis' previous chapters, the co-creation of political imaginaries is essential for assembling the pluralistic variety of a society's disparate, individual views into functional (albeit fictional) representative entities. Political majorities and identificatory imaginaries, such as national mythologies, are, by their very nature, fictional creations often containing a great deal of compromise and volatility (chapters 4 and 5 discuss some fictional illustrations of this). As Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler note,

64 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 3, "#1.3", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 17, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119386?trackId=200257859>, 18.03".

65 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, "#1.5", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 07.51".

66 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 15, "#2.15", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 2, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597216?trackId=200257859>, 20.33".

67 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 6, "#1.6", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119389?trackId=200257858>, 09.17".

68 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, "#1.5", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 18.28".

69 Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 197, <http://s://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>. My translation: "A *priori* kann niemand den Volkswillen kennen; wir erfahren immer erst *a posteriori* von (oft nur relativen) Merheiten".

A substantiated understanding of representation is thus informed by acts of conveyance that must be negotiated again and again. It dispenses with a formation of the represented that is welded together in the term 'people'.⁷⁰

In SN's diegesis, however, Holoborodko's populist "imperative mandate"⁷¹ is informed directly by the will of a diegetically *extant* unified people. The series thus denies the need for the co-creative fictions as a prerequisite to political representation and instead constructs Holobodoko as an idealised leader by suggesting the possibility of "a frictionless transfer"⁷² and "an identity between representatives and represented", which "deceives politics about its own aesthetic dimension".⁷³

6.2.2 Dramatizing the Clash of *Inside* and *Outside*

In SN, the conflictive meeting of the political, corrupt *inside* and the non-political, upstanding *outside* serves to facilitate engaging interactions that constitute the series' main plot (see figure 34). The two spheres and their interaction operate according to a set of basic *dramatic* rules, which reappears in all narratives that fictionalise a populist vision of idealpolitik.

1. All games on the *inside* are agonal, uncooperative games, that is, competitive games in which no force of a higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. All games on the *outside* are cooperative games, that is, games in which a referee function of higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. In SN, this function often falls to protagonist Vasyl Petrovych Holobodorko. While the dominant tools on the *inside* are slyness, deception, and intrigue, the primary means of the *outside* are common sense, incorruptible morality, and the court of (unified) public opinion.

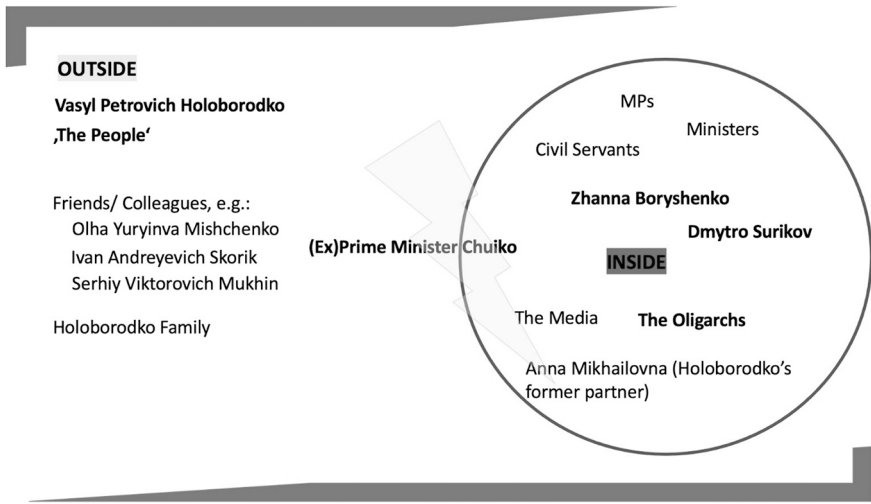
70 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 73. My translation: "Ein gehaltvolles Verständnis von Repräsentation speist sich demzufolge aus immer wieder neu auszuhandelnden Akten der Vermittlung und verzichtet auf eine im Begriff 'Volk' zusammengeschweißte Formation der Repräsentierten".

71 Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 188, <https://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>. My translation: "Diese Vorstellung eines imperativen Mandats".

72 Robin Celikates and Simon Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter: Politische Repräsentation zwischen Identität, Simulation und Institution: Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, The Parallax View, The West Wing", in *Inszenierungen der Politik: Der Körper als Medium*, ed. Paula Diehl and Gertrud Koch (Munich: Fink, 2007), 63. my translation: "transferkostenfreie Vermittelbarkeit". They write this with regard to "Mr. Smith goes to Washington" but it generally applies to populist narratives.

73 Celikates and Rothöhler, "Die Körper der Stellvertreter", 72. My translation: "das die Möglichkeit einer Identität zwischen Repräsentanten und Repräsentierten suggeriert und die Politik damit über ihre eigene ästhetische Dimension täuscht".

Figure 34: Inside and outside players in *SLUHA NARODU*



- Accordingly, players can only belong to one sphere and are fundamentally unable to grasp the other sphere's rules. Accordingly, too much *inside experience* is directly related to an incapability to understand and adhere to the *outside's* rules and thus connect to 'the people'. A player who understands the nature of the *outside games* must, likewise, remain ignorant about the nature of the political *inside games*. This entirely *dramatic* construction ensures that the moral depravity/ rectitude of the respective player is clearly emphasised and that the games retain their simplified conflictive layout.
- Consequently, characters are static and easily recognizable as insiders or outsiders. They start their journey with all their values in place and usually do not change their position on the *inside* or *outside* throughout the series. Indeed, as is the case with protagonist Holoborodko, most characters actively refuse to adapt even when faced with new circumstances ensuring the *dramatic* serial principle of repetition. Accordingly, SN's plot is almost entirely action-based, featuring external events as the element of serial innovation.
- All interactions on the political *inside* and all games that transgress the boundaries between *inside* and *outside* take the shape of agonal *Zero-Sum* games in which one player's gain equals another player's loss. This increases the stakes for the players involved and, thus, the amplitude of the games, creating engaging narrative suspense. For audiences, it also assures a satisfying proportionality between the hero's victory and the villain's fall.
- The rules of the *outside* trump the rules of the *inside*. This *dramatic* principle (i) ensures that all games in SN ultimately turn out cooperatively and thus follow the series' overall utopian vision of politics. It (ii) causes the curious *intradiegetic* phenomenon that, although they lack experience and resources, Holoborodko and his noble band of allies are continuously able to outwit their much more seasoned opponents. Holoborodko's friend, the idealistic foreign minister Serhiy Viktorovich Mukhin,

e.g., is an actor with little education, no diplomatic know-how, and no willingness to acquire either. Nevertheless, he remains a successful official and overall positive character due to his upstanding loyalty and integrity (*outside*).

6.2.3 Diminishing the Inside

Games that feature players from both the *inside* and the *outside* provide the central plot-driving dynamics in SN. The individual games usually start within the functional logic of the *inside* (agonal, uncooperative zero-sum structure) and subsequently progress towards that of the *outside* (cooperative structure). They often create comical tension by creating crossed transactions between the *inside* and *outside* players who engage in non-complementary Parent-Child transactions. Holoborodko, for example, starts his initial game with the *inside* from a Child-position in an often-patronising Parent-Child transactional configuration that evokes the initial stages of a CoA *Student-Mentor* game (see chapter 3): After being elected, the newly minted president is found by the sly prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko while reading a comic book on the toilet.⁷⁴ The following two and a half episodes feature a wide-eyed Vasyl Petrovych (Child) being shown around the presidential world by a patronising Parental PM.

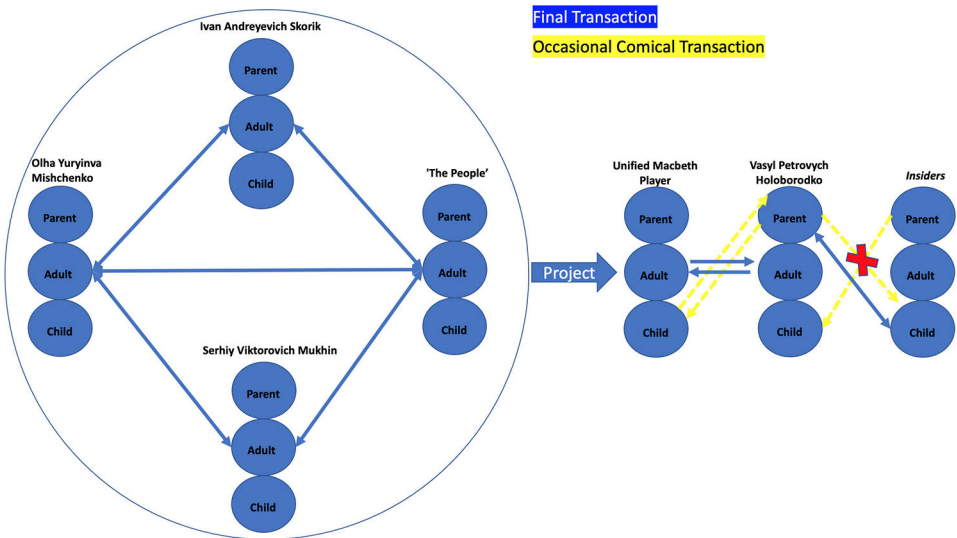
The series makes it unmistakably clear that Holoborodko knows absolutely nothing of the political *inside* and its rules. However, following the series' *dramatic* configuration, such knowledge subsequently turns out to be unnecessary, even harmful, as the rules of the *outside* trump those of the *inside*, with insight into one sphere precluding players from comprehending the other. It is a central feature of the static character Holoborodko that he does not follow the configuration of the CoA *Student-Mentor* game into political maturity by learning to apply the rules of the *inside* through consolidating the poetry of his ideals with the prose of political realities (as is required, e.g., in *THE CROWN*, see chapter 4).

Instead of adjusting his character in accordance with a CoA progression, the static player Holoborodko shifts the uncooperative game of politics to the cooperative logic of 'his' *outside* realm. Here, the poetry of the protagonist's ideals equals the prose of reality. As a now superior player, Holoborodko often engages his *inside* co-players – now reduced to a diminished Child-state as per the game's zero-sum *inside-outside* configuration – in superior Parent (him)-Child (co-player) transactions (see figure 35). He, for example, embarks on frequent lectures on morality and uses the means supplied by his superior position as 'the people's president' to diminish his opponents' standing, e.g., by firing most of the (insider) cabinet.⁷⁵ As the uncontested arbiter of the *outside* games' cooperative nature, Holoborodko is usually able to punish the bad and reward the good in line with the requirements of the games' demonstrative zero-sum structure.

74 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859>, 08.07".

75 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 6, "#1.6", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119389?trackId=200257859>, 12.54.

Figure 35: The outside Macbeth game and the inside-outside configuration



6.2.4 Playing on the *Outside*

In SN, all players who belong to the *outside* sphere automatically join Holoborodko's camp. The qualification for their various positions is usually a limited degree of demonstrable hands-on experience in their field, a healthy portion of common sense, and the fact that they are just as morally upstanding and untainted by political experience as Holoborodko himself.⁷⁶ Serhiy Viktorovich Mukhin, e.g., becomes foreign minister because he is, in Holoborodko's words, "handsome and easy to talk to" and possesses some English skills.⁷⁷ Following a similar logic, Holoborodko's ex-wife, the economist Olha Yuriyivna Mishchenko, becomes the decidedly unpolitical director of the Ukrainian central bank. A teacher Holoborodko feared as a child (jokingly nicknamed "Beria" after the infamous Lavrentiy Beria, who ran the feared USSR-secret services until his execution in 1953) consequently becomes the chief of the secret service. Moreover, army officer Ivan Andreyevich Skorik qualifies for the job as defence minister after proving his *outside* credentials by getting into trouble selling jeep tires to pay for his men's boots.⁷⁸

SN narratively operationalizes the loyalty and morality of the *outside* sphere by showing its occupants engage in a cooperative multiplayer version of the *Macbeth* game (see figure 35). It consists of framing Adult-Adult transactions between a primary actant

76 The first assembly of the group takes place in *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859>, 15:35".

77 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859>, 17:56"

78 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859>, 12:33"

(*Holoborodko*) and several supportive actants (his allies and 'the people') who together form a unified front to participate in games with secondary *inside* players.

Several episodes of SN, e.g., derive their suspense from showing Holoborodko's team finally giving in to bribery only to ultimately reveal the 'corruption' as part of a coordinated scheme to fight the broken system. Examples of this are episodes #1.9 and #1.10, where several members of Holoborodko's *Macbeth* group seemingly accept bribes before it is revealed that they did so only to raise money for the empty state coffers.⁷⁹

To create comical internal dynamics among the *outside* players, the *Macbeth* game, at times, reverts to a low-intensity Parent (Holoborodko)-Child (allies) pattern in which Vasyl Petrovych reprimands his co-players for minor moral transgressions, after which the collective reverts back to the Adult-Adult *Macbeth* progression as soon as things get serious. The games involving Holoborodko's family in season 1, e.g., usually serve the purpose of such comic relief.

The members of the Holoborodko family are well-meaning but ultimately less morally steadfast than their presidential son/brother and thus in need of Parental transactional supervision. Holoborodko's parents, e.g., lavishly redecorate their apartment following their son's inauguration.⁸⁰ His sister Svetlana secures a position as the deputy head of the tax revenue service by playing on her relation to the president (behind her brother's back)⁸¹ and subsequently abuses her power, e.g., by taking bribes and having an ex-partner arrested.⁸² In each case, a set of complementary, conflict-free Parent-Child transactions mitigates the low-2nd-degree damage done by the family's transgressions, thus quickly restoring the moral unity of the *Macbeth* collective.

However, other than in previous *Macbeth* games featured in this study, Holoborodko ultimately does not depend on his co-players to project his presidential persona. The populist intradiegetic congruence between Holoborodko's bodies natural and politic and his superiority as the arbiter of the game's cooperative rules of higher order ultimately renders such support obsolete. Therefore, the allies' whimsical and good-natured interactions essentially serve the *dramatic* purpose of allowing Holoborodko's qualities to play out in demonstrative dramatic action. However, his *outside* co-players rarely occupy a vital intradiegetic function. Diegetic reform is ultimately implemented by the saviour-president Holoborodko alone. Indeed, throughout the series later seasons, many *outside* characters disappear or appear in a highly reduced format – e.g., "Beria", Holoborodko's son, and the rest of his family – without leaving much of a gap in his intradiegetic political efforts.

79 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 9, "#1.9", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119392?trackId=255824129>, and *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 10, "#1.10", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119393?trackId=200257859>.

80 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 5, "#1.5", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 18, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119388?trackId=200257858>, 20.15".

81 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.13", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119396?trackId=200257858>, 23.51".

82 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, "#1.14", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119397?trackId=200257859>, 8.31 and 15.20".

6.2.5 Playing with the *Inside*

Just as all characters on the *outside* are allied with Holoborodko and possess positive characteristics, all characters on the *inside* are automatically immoral and corrupt. An example of this is prime minister Yuriy Ivanovich Chuiko, the series' central single antagonist and the main pawn in the sinister oligarchs' play to retain their stranglehold on Ukrainian politics. Chuiko is a political mastermind whose superior ability is second only to Vasyl Petrovich Holoborodko's all-conquering integrity.

Following the narrative's zero-sum structure, in which a hero's complete victory must equal a villain's total destruction, Chuiko ultimately suffers multiple defeats when Holoborodko reveals him to be the head of a vast conspiracy.⁸³ The series supplements Chuiko's material and political defeat (and arrest) with personal defamation. Diegetically, the public revelation that his codename "Milady" references the fact that Chuiko used to play women's roles in his college theatre group subjects the formerly powerful PM to widespread ridicule that contributes to his political fall. The series, thus, reveals its conservative take on binary gender roles and fragile masculinity by aligning villainy with effeminacy and defeat with emasculation.

A *soft recalibration* in season 2 somewhat reverses Chuiko's previous defeat. Following his expulsion from the political *inside* – at the oligarchs' behest, he receives a 20-year prison sentence (although he occupies a comically luxurious cell)⁸⁴ – Chuiko becomes Holoborodko's ally in the fight against the sinister trio. However, as a static character, his change of allegiance largely remains external. As Holoborodko's involuntary ally, the corrupt Chuiko, in season 2, thus serves as a comical foil for the President's equally static virtue.

6.2.6 The Issue of Corruption

The main narrative struggle in SN is the *outside* characters' fight against widespread corruption. At the series' outset, Vasyl Petrovych Holobordko encounters a vision of two ancient Greek philosophers who describe Ukraine as a paradise threatened by underhanded politicians, thus laying out the series' central theme and its protagonist's future mission.⁸⁵ While corruption is a common trope in much of polit-fiction, contemporary western series usually present it as a moral condition associated with the struggle for power while the issue of money remains a means to attaining that end.⁸⁶ For example,

83 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 23, "#1.23", directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired December 9, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119706?trackId=200257858>, 11.54".

84 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 5, "#2.05", directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired October 2, 2017 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80172540?trackId=200257859>, 00.30".

85 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, "#1.2", directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 01.57".

86 Discussed with regard to *HOUSE OF CARDS*, e.g., in Chris Byron and Nathan Wood, "Money Gives Power... well a Run for its Money": Marx's Observation why Capital and not Frank Is Really in Charge of the White House", in *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic*, ed. J. Edward Hackett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 152–162; and Kody W. Cooper, "Praying to One's Self, for One's Self: Frank's Ethics and Politics of Autoreroticism", in *House of Cards and Philosophy*, 210.

HOUSE OF CARDS' antihero Frank Underwood states accordingly: "Money is the Mc-Mansion in Sarasota that starts falling apart after ten years. Power is the old stone building that stands for centuries."⁸⁷

In SN, on the other hand, money and its effect on politics are the omnipresent central issue. Ukraine is said to find itself in an "eternal engine of debt"⁸⁸ where even the national gold reserve has been swapped for gold-painted plaster.⁸⁹ This emphasis on financial corruption is personified in the first two seasons' main antagonists: the three sinister, initially faceless oligarchs. As a well-known trope personifying notions of the questionable connection between wealth and political power, the oligarchs serve as the series' main focal point for all that is rotten in the fictional state of Ukraine.

In a prologue to the first episode, the oligarchs reveal that they have divided the political realm and the country amongst themselves.⁹⁰ In season 1, they often appear to be engaging in hyperbolic activities that symbolise their status as the cynical puppet masters of a political Ukraine. For example, they discuss their disreputable business while having themselves painted as medieval kings⁹¹ or over a round of poker⁹² and play Ukraine-shaped games of "Risk"⁹³ and "Monopoly".⁹⁴ Thus the series presents tangible representations of the oligarch's cynical 'game' with Ukraine's politics and the playful, almost careless attitude with which they determine the country's fate. The oligarch's faces appear for the first time in the SN feature film (after the recalibrated trio underwent a re-cast). They thus move from omnipotent puppet masters to visible, tangible antagonists that can be fought and – as the film's conclusion shows – defeated.

Equally corrupt, Ukraine's fictional politicians hide extensive assets with family members⁹⁵ and renovate critical infrastructure purely to serve their own needs (e.g.,

87 *House of Cards*, season 1, episode 2, "Chapter 2", directed by David Fincher, written by Beau Willimon, aired February 1, 2013, https://www.netflix.com/watch/70248290?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAIPA%40%40%7C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265_titles%2F1%2F%2Fhouse%20of%20cards%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAIPA%40%40%7C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265_titles%2F1%2F%2Fhouse%20of%20cards%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C44f58894-d78a-49c3-94bd-47818dff3256-692265%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C70178217, 04.46".

88 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 16, "#1.16", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119399?trackId=255824129,07.51>".

89 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 16, "#1.16", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119399?trackId=255824129, 15.46>".

90 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 1, "#1.1", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119383?trackId=200257859, 01.25>".

91 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 17, "#1.17", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 20, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119700?trackId=200257859, 22.37>".

92 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 20, "#1.20", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 3, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119703?trackId=200257859, 08.24>".

93 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 9, "#1.09", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 23, 2015 <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119392?trackId=200257859, 00.16>".

94 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 11, "#1.11", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119394?trackId=200257859, 22.41>".

95 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 12, "#1.12", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 24, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119395?trackId=200257859, 09.50>".

by building a new street to their family home).⁹⁶ Accordingly, when, during a highly competitive hiring process for government posts, Holoborodko spreads the bluff that he will introduce the death penalty for corrupt civil servants, only two applicants remain.⁹⁷

Given the comparatively high tangibility of corruption in historical Ukraine, it is understandable why the issue would be a dominant topic in SN. The 'Corruption Perceptions Index', published annually by the NGO Transparency International, aims to measure the respective level of perceived corruption in the public sector of currently 180 countries by analysing 13 different corruption surveys and assessments conducted by independent international institutions such as the World Bank.⁹⁸ In the 'CPI' of 2016, the year of release of SN's feature film and second season, Ukraine ranked 131 out of 176 countries.⁹⁹ The Chinese production *IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE* (人民的名义, 2017) is another contemporary example of a polit-series that concerns itself with financial corruption (in this case, of regional government officials). Correspondingly, in 2017's CPI, China occupied rank 77 out of 180¹⁰⁰, showing a notable awareness of corruption as a governance issue.

For comparison, Germany and the UK, at the start of *EICHWALD*, MdB in 2015, occupied a shared corruption perceptions index rank of 11/168.¹⁰¹ The US, at the start of *VEEP* in 2012, occupied rank 19/176.¹⁰² France, at the outset of *BARON NOIR* in 2016, was listed on rank 23/176¹⁰³, and South Korea, at the start of *DS 60*, in 2019, occupied rank 39/180¹⁰⁴, with the country continuing an upward trend that, as of 2021, has been ongoing.¹⁰⁵ In all of these series, corruption appears as a primarily moral rather than economic condition. These comparisons suggest a direct correlation between the historical level of perception of government corruption and the fictional emphasis on its moral vs its economic dimension in the polit-fiction of a given country.

96 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, "#1.14", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 25, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119397?trackId=200257858, 10.04>.

97 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.07", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859, 05.12>.

98 *Transparency International*, "The ABCs of the CPI: How the Corruption perception Index is Calculated", December 20, 2021, <https://www.transparency.org/en/news/how-cpi-scores-are-calculated>.

99 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2016", last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2016/index/ukr>.

100 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2017", last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2017/index/chn>.

101 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2015", last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015/index/deu> and <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2015/index/gbr>.

102 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2012", last accessed 08.03.2022, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2012/index/usa>.

103 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2016", last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2016/index/fra>.

104 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2019", last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2019/index/kor>.

105 *Transparency International*, "CPI 2021", last accessed 08.03.2022 <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/kor>.

6.2.7 The Issue of Europe

In SN, Holoborodko's political platform essentially appears as a collection of vague commonplace valence issues (e.g., the fight against corruption, the country's reform, and the removal of its elites). However, on several occasions, the series makes it a point to illustrate a Western rapprochement and an admission to the European Union as a utopian ideal. An accidental phone call by then-German chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, leads Holoborodko to falsely believe that Ukraine has been granted an EU membership, prompting the animated Kyiv fountains to spring up to the rhythm of the 'Ode to Joy' in one of Holoborodko's satirical visions.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, the EU intercedes to review the conditions of Holoborodko's detention.¹⁰⁷

The series' presentation of the European Union is notable because it breaks with an established convention of polit-fiction according to which the EU either does not feature at all or, if it does appear, is presented as a more or less corrupt and inefficient technocratic dystopia.¹⁰⁸

SN's treatment of Europe illustrates just how crucial the historical political circumstances in Ukraine were for parts of the series' network. The issue of Ukraine orienting itself towards the West (the EU) or the East (Russia) has been at the core of much of the country's recent political struggles. The historical 2013/14 Euromaidan Protests and the subsequent Maidan revolution in 2014 resulted in the removal of then-President Viktor Yanukovych and erupted as a response to the pro-Russian leader's decision to turn down an association agreement with the EU. With its first release in 2015, SN, likewise, followed at the heels of the ensuing Crimean crisis, which saw, among other things, the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Zelensky's historical SoP party has accordingly taken a pro-western stance.¹⁰⁹ Volodymyr Zelensky – not least since the invasion of Ukraine through Russian forces in late February 2022 – frequently and strongly emphasised his country's wish to join the so-called Western community of values and, more concretely, the European Union. The series' expression of pro-European tendencies is, thus, unsurprising and most likely uncontroversial among much of its initial target audience functions.

6.2.8 SN as American *Monomyth* and the Populist Narrative Paradox

In its populist structural setup, SN largely follows the conventions of a narrative archetype, which Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence described as the American

106 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 18, "#1.18", directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired December 1, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119701?trackId=200257859>, 07.22".

107 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, "#3.01", directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 29.33".

108 Mentioned with regards to British polit-fiction in Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", LSE (blog), March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

109 Viktoriia Demydova, "2019 Presidential Election In Ukraine: How Zelensky Was Elected?", *Karadeniz Araştırmaları: Journal of Black Sea Studies* 17, no. 67 (2020): 589.

Monomyth (AM). It has significant consequences for the series' presentation of politics and political processes. Jewett and Lawrence define the AM as follows:

*A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity.*¹¹⁰

Of course, SN is by no means a US-American production and was arguably not intended for the US market. However, the series' adherence to the AM's narrative conventions is far from accidental. It began its life as a decidedly commercial – rather than political – entertainment commodity. The AM, on the other hand, is a well-tested narrative formula for constructing a sympathetic hero and simplifying – among other things – complex political structures and processes according to established conventions with proven suitability for mass consumption.

Following the AM, SN predominantly features static characters, and its action-centred plot is not “based on rites of initiation”¹¹¹ as is the case in classically monomythical, character-based coming-of-age stories like *THE CROWN* (chapter 4) or *THE POLITICIAN* (chapter 5). In fact, in SN, the uncompromising unchangeability of Holoborodko's character appears as one of his primary virtues. Following the AM's presentation of “tales of redemption”,¹¹² SN presents its protagonist as a messiah-like ‘super-saviour’¹¹³ who emerges to fend off a “threat against Eden's [Ukraine] calm” and to save “a chosen people [Ukrainians] under attack”.¹¹⁴ Two ancient philosophers who visit Holoborodko in a dream during the series' exposition, e.g., explicitly describe Ukraine as a potential paradise.¹¹⁵ Holoborodko likewise rises to appropriate, messianic grandiosity in season 3, where the framing story of a history class in the year 2049 makes it entirely clear just how singularly great his political struggle and ultimate redemptive impact has been (more on this later).¹¹⁶

In the narration of the fictional “super-presidency”¹¹⁷ within the dramatic conventions of the AM, there often arises, as Lawrence and Jewett note, a contradiction between the fictional trope of a singularly powerful (super)hero and the limited powers of a fictional president within a system of checks and balances.¹¹⁸ In the historical Ukrainian

110 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX. Original emphasis.

111 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

112 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

113 See Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

114 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 174.

115 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 2, “#1.2”, directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired November 16, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119385?trackId=255824129>, 01.57”.

116 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, “#3.03”, directed by Oleksiy Kyrushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 56.00”.

117 John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 128.

118 See Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 128f.

polity, the president is, e.g., considered “primarily responsible for foreign policy”.¹¹⁹ In SN, on the other hand, president Holoborodko shows the AM-(super)hero’s typical “pure motivations, a redemptive task [to free Ukraine from corruption], and extraordinary powers [both his personal virtue and his simplified presidential omnipotence]”¹²⁰ as he pushes through reform after reform with no knowledge of – or regard for – the political process (in the tradition of many US American on-screen presidents).

The AM’s projection of “all evil outward upon others”¹²¹ manifests in SN’s building of populist opposition between the protagonist and the “Intruding, Evil Other”¹²² of the corrupt political establishment (as discussed above), which directly opposes Ukraine’s potential Eden-like natural state.

One of the many binary juxtapositions in SN that closely follow the AM’s conventions is the series’ construction of an opposition between the negatively connotated intelligence of antagonist Chuiko and his accomplices (as slyness) and the positively connotated naivety and ignorance of Holoborodko and his team (as unspoiled honesty and common sense). As Jewett and Lawrence put it: “So hostile is monomythic material to individual intelligence that one of its most durable conventions is to use ‘brains’ as a distinguishing trait of evil persons”.¹²³

SN even features the AM’s signature “hostility towards human sexuality”.¹²⁴ Holoborodko himself is essentially sexually abstinent. He appears single and attractive, but not overtly sexual and thus, as a non-threatening hero and statesman. The characters of his ex-wife Olha and their little son serve to assure the audience of Holoborodko’s virility without him having to engage in any sexual or romantic activity. The series thus solves the ‘double bind’ of male sexuality in binary polit-narratives (both fictional and historical), according to which politicians “must present virile and potent figures, without being allowed to resort to their sexuality as proof of their virility”.¹²⁵

Indeed, the one time in which Holoborodko does give in to his libido, disaster quickly ensues. His courtship of the beautiful government employee Anna Mikhailovna, who ultimately becomes his short-term partner,¹²⁶ plays out as a satirical struggle to resist his urges/her charms. As the series progresses, Anna Mikhailovna turns out to be an accomplice of the antagonistic oligarchs.¹²⁷ She is ultimately exposed and removed from the

119 Johanna Rohozinska and Vitaly Shpak, “Ukraine’s Post-Maidan Struggles: The Rise of an ‘Outsider’ President”, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (July 2019): 42.

120 Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 47.

121 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 176.

122 Lawrence and Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 26.

123 Robert Jewett, John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 215.

124 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 219.

125 Wieland Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters: The Body Politic and Its Restrained Libido”, in *A Man’s World? Political Masculinities in Literature and Culture*, ed. Birgit Sauer and Kathleen Starck (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 143.

126 Starting in *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 19, “#1.19”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 2, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119702?trackId=200257859>, 19.53”.

127 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 20, “#1.20”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired December 3, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119703?trackId=200257859>, 09.00”.

narrative in the middle of season 2.¹²⁸ Both historical narrative tradition and the conventions of the AM suggest that “the tale of the politician who falls in love (or who tries to follow his libido) is one destined to end unhappily”.¹²⁹ By disposing of Anna and unceremoniously dropping her story arc mid-season, SN thus performs a soft recalibration correcting what must – in the AM’s dramatic logic – seem like an unfortunate compositional choice for the happy-ending-bound series. Accordingly, the reveal of Anna’s betrayal remains a relatively brief sidenote in season 2 that primarily serves to justify her disappearance and has little effect on the plot or the static character Vasyl Holoborodko.

6.2.8.1 The Implicit Anti-Democratic Impetus

As I have shown, SN blends idealism with populism to create an “escapist fantasy”¹³⁰ of politics. To Jewett and Lawrence, the AM’s similar mixture

encourages passivity on the part of the general public and unwise concentrations of power in ostensible redeemers. It betrays the ideals of democratic responsibility and denies the reliance on human intelligence that is basic to the democratic hope¹³¹

AMs such as SN thus implicitly create a vision of societal redemption through “anti-democratic means”.¹³² For Jewett and Lawrence, the AM

conveys a pessimism about democratic institutions and public responsibilities, a messianic expectation that society can be redeemed by a single stroke, and an impatience with constitutional processes.¹³³

Vasyl Holoborodko regularly uses his official and unofficial presidential powers to force MPs to vote according to his wishes.¹³⁴ He relishes in the ‘comical’ phantasy of shooting the entire uncooperative assembly with a machine gun¹³⁵ and openly threatens an

128 *Sluha Narodu*, season 2, episode 13, “#2.13”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 1, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597214?trackId=200257858>, 17.40”.

129 Schwanebeck “Lovers, Not Fighters”, 150.

130 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 210. They write this with regard to the AM in general.

131 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 210f.

132 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, XX.

133 Jewett and Lawrence, *The American Monomyth*, 215.

134 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 14, “#1.14”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 1, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597215?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593_title%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C7b12f351-2af6-403d-8a4b-2a4dcf92714f-801593%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80119382. 24.48”.

135 *Sluha Narodu* 2, directed by Aleksey Kiryushchenko (2016, Kyiv, Ukraine: Kvartal 95 Studio), Netflix, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81597220?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%20of%20the%20people%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C99ee83e4-e460-4c4a-bbbd-e2024ee27e03-33040978%7C1%2C%2C, 04.41”.

uncooperative cabinet with another Maidan Revolution.¹³⁶ In his circumvention of procedure and the (broken) democratic institutions, Holoborodko thus becomes the AM's classic vigilante hero whose legitimacy derives not from procedure but the self-evident righteousness of his redemptive quest.

6.2.8.2 The Populist Narrative Paradox

Is it possible to infer from these narrative observations any concrete populist convictions of SN's historical network? The series' tangible yet implicit anti-democratic impetus is, above all, the result of dramatic logic. Diegetically, SN constantly evokes the ideals of liberalism, democracy, and justice commonly associated with idealpolitik. However, the dramatic construction of SN's narrative as a binary juxtaposition of *inside* and *outside* generates a normatively charged, simplified protagonist-antagonist structure that dismisses all actors of representative democracy and thus contradicts any intradiegetic avowals of democracy.

This populist paradox of intradiegetic progressive idealism and structural anti-democratic impetus results from the interplay of the nature of idealpolitik with the conflicting dramatic logic of serial fiction and the systemic logic of historical politics. As Niklas Luhmann points out, historically, it is an essential prerequisite for any (functional) democratic system that contestants concede their opponents' fundamental moral eligibility to compete.¹³⁷ Principles of morality (and the question of an opponent's moral fitness), thus, ideally, play no role in any democratic contest. On the other hand, a reduction of a contested political sphere full of highly abstract processes to seemingly tangible questions of morality usually serves to disqualify opponents from participating.¹³⁸

For the notion of idealpolitik to persist, however, this very reduction of politics to moral categories is essential. Idealpolitik, by its very nature, determines a participant's legitimacy through their adherence to a set of categorical moral imperatives and thus usually clashes with the refracted discursive realities of representative democracy. Translated into narrative composition, morality inadvertently becomes the single decisive factor for determining a character's position in the series' protagonist-antagonist structure. At least in mainstream narrative, the almost unavoidable result is the morally charged binary *inside-outside* structure described above.

The binary dramatic logic of the utopian "Opera of Power" inadvertently tends to evoke a populist vision of politics in line with the anti-democratic tendencies of the AM, even where this vision directly opposes intradiegetically voiced ideals or even the political intentions of the series' overall network. As the next section will show, the almost inevitably populist structural construction of fictional idealpolitik and its resulting anti-democratic impetus reoccur in various series that feature an idealistic saviour hero.

136 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 7, "#1.7", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 19, 2015, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119390?trackId=200257859>, 14.58".

137 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 170.

138 Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, 171.

6.3 A Comparative Analysis of a Paradox Narrative Convention

Before attempting to assess the influence of politicized pragmatic logic within SN's network, it is crucial to note that the structural requirements of idealistic polit-fiction, which manifest in the narrative conventions of "the populist telling of the quest",¹³⁹ are by no means unique to series' arguably serving as tools in historical election campaigns such as SN. Instead of a particular cultural or political context, the paradoxical populist construction of fictional idealpolitik seems to occur primarily in accordance with the traditional storytelling conventions of linear television, e.g., perpetual seriality and the principle of the 'Least Objectionable Program' (LOP).¹⁴⁰ The latter aims to structure linear TV content according to what audiences might find the least offensive rather than most appealing, thus enticing them to stick with – rather than seek out – a program's flow. I will discuss this in more detail in the coming sections.

I want to illustrate this principle further by highlighting the main features of three of SN's contemporaries: The two US-series MS and SD and the Korean remake of DS US, DS 60. Like SN, all three series present a vision of idealpolitik that features the populist construction of an idealistic saviour hero and a dichotomy between moral *outgroup* and evil *ingroup* (of politics).

6.3.1 Madam Secretary

The CBS series MS tells the story of the idealistic college professor Elizabeth McCord (Téa Leoni), who – together with her trusted team – reforms US politics (and arguably the fictional world) first as the titular US secretary of state and later as president.

In keeping with the populist construction of idealistic polit-fiction, the series frames McCord as an outsider hero whose primary qualification for the job is her deontological moral rectitude – she leaves her career at the CIA for moral convictions – and the related fact that she does not belong to the political establishment. During McCord's appointment, the stereotypically sacrosanct President Dalton (himself a former CIA-man and political 'outsider' in the populist narrative tradition) accordingly emphasizes that:

You quit a profession you love for ethical reasons. That makes you the least political person I know. You don't just think outside the box. You don't even know there is a box.¹⁴¹

139 Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

140 A term famously attributed to NBC executive Paul Klein. See Tom Shales, "NBCees Paul Klein to the Door", *The Washington Post*, March 6, 1979, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/life-style/1979/03/06/nbcees-paul-klein-to-the-door/998c31db-7e66-4bco-bbd3-b3090f0b97d1/?noredirect=on>; see Paul L. Klein, "Why you watch what you watch when you watch", *TV Guide*, July 24, 1971, 6–9.

141 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b

Following the redemptive arc of the AM, Elizabeth McCord, like Vasyl Holoborodko, finds a spoiled potential Eden (the US) unable to fix itself without help from a morally stable/narratively static outsider hero (herself). Her static outsider status subsequently makes McCord the unquestioned champion of the unified 'people'. As such, she is approached by both the Republican and the Democratic parties as their respective presidential candidate.¹⁴² Of course, like all populist heroes, she promptly refuses them. When faced with an option to appease a hostile senator (and representative of the morally corrupt *inside*) through a convenient compromise, she states:

I am not willing to sell out my agenda to sit in the Oval and take orders from a partisan hack who puts his own self-interest before the national good. I'm going to continue serving the American people.¹⁴³

Other than her establishment counterparts, McCord, like Vasyl Holoborodko, possesses a direct link to 'the people', exemplified, e.g., by her instant personal connection to the fabled 'middle America' as personified by an ostentatiously average couple from Minnesota whom she meets during a press appearance.¹⁴⁴

The binary structural dichotomy of *inside* and *outside* appears as a double phenomenon here: (1) it structures the interaction of corrupt establishment and morally upstanding non-politicians following established tropes of delegitimizing the protagonist's political opponents along normative lines and thus granting McCord a claim to sole representation. In MS, to oppose McCord equals refusing the unified will of the people and the self-evident 'best' for the nation. Accordingly, McCord tells the power-hungry Senator Hanson: "You're obsessed with destroying me, and you're willing to take down the whole country to do it".¹⁴⁵

-71437500_titles%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 07.00"

142 *Madam Secretary*, season 5, episode 19, "The great Experiment", directed by Eric Stoltz, written by Joy Gregory, aired April 14, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81135824?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70696136_titles%2F%2Fmadam%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70696136_titles%2F%2Fmadam%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70696136%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232.

143 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 7, "Accountability", directed by Darnell Martin, written by Leland Jay Anderson, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287032?trackId=255824129, 34.02>".

144 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 37.27"

145 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 8, "Ships and Countries", directed by Sam Hoffman, written by Joy Gregory https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287033?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232, 39.55".

(2) The *inside-outside* dichotomy appears in the series' construction of a good America vs a suspicious, potentially dangerous international realm. Foreign secretary Elizabeth McCord frequently voices her disregard for and suspicion of all places that are not the US, stating, for example, that "No one misses Syria if it completely self-destructs".¹⁴⁶ In another example, when a captured US spy faces rapid execution in Pakistan, McCord's associate disparagingly states: "That's fast even for that part of the world".¹⁴⁷

Though it is ostensibly about foreign policy, MS is fundamentally a US American story about US Americans and for US audiences. It follows a vision of US American superiority typical for native productions of the AM with its "traditional notion that America somehow has a responsibility to the world".¹⁴⁸ McCord, e.g., claims:

We're the country that sent men to the moon. We are the envy of our rivals, the hope of the oppressed, the sword and shield of free people everywhere. We, the people, it's up to us, all of us.¹⁴⁹

In the construction of its protagonist, MS frequently evokes the AM's signature messiah trope. For example, a priest and activist from the deprived fictional country of "West Africa" trying to enlist McCord's help to prevent an ongoing genocide, states: "The truth is that you have the power to answer the desperate prayers of thousands of my people",¹⁵⁰ thus taking the AM's pseudo-religious messiah motif to tangible extremes. Subsequently, McCord naturally obliges, stopping the genocide and informing the disreputable envoy of the regime responsible: "You tell your bosses back home that the United States is watching".¹⁵¹

The fictional US's superior moral, military, and economic force become the superpower of the monomythical saviour-hero Elizabeth McCord. In the anarchic, neo-realist international realm, it trumps all need for diplomatic compromise and procedure. When asked about potential inducements to persuade New Guinea to extradite a spy, McCord,

146 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, "Pilot", directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074128?trackId=255824129&ctcx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Ca72e8858-a125-496a-8c93-682b65a78c1b-71437500%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232,36.05

147 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 3, "The Operative", directed by Jeremy Webb, written by David Grae, aired October 5, 2014, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074130?trackId=255824129&ctcx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830_titles%2F1%2F%2Fmadam%20se%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2Cc6ffe597-2ceb-4fad-8a0e-1b4907165cd9-70699830%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80024232,28.33

148 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 225.

149 *Madam Secretary*, season 5, episode 20, "Better Angels", directed by John Murray, written by Matt Ward, aired April 21, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81135825?trackId=255824129,41.25>.

150 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Mark Piznarski, written by Matt Ward, aired October 26, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074133?trackId=200257859,6.26>.

151 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 6, directed by Mark Piznarski, written by Matt Ward, aired October 26, 2014, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80074133?trackId=200257859,10.02>.

e.g. states, “The inducement is, I’m asking”.¹⁵² On another occasion, a reward for the opposing side’s cooperation is that “we won’t sanction them into the stone age”.¹⁵³ The President’s advisor summarizes this notion very clearly when he states, “We’re the United States; we practice whatever the hell we want.”¹⁵⁴

Politics, in MS, is an entirely individualized and personified affair. In a clear example of narrative executive bias, the international polity is generally reduced to one or two players that usually personify governmental authority. Few pluralistic bodies, binding treaties, or moral ambiguities influence McCord’s often-unilateral decisions. Instead, every political event within the plot is a matter of clearly discernible cause and effect resulting from the interactions of McCord and her foreign counterparts.

Like SN, and following the AM’s *dramatic* configuration of idealpolitik, MS portrays a typically populist anti-establishment (and anti-democratic) functional logic. McCord, having risen to the US Presidency, is saved from impeachment through a corrupt Congress by ‘the people’ who – in the shape of millions of protesters¹⁵⁵ chanting “she’s my president” – march on Washington demanding that she remain in office.

In the populist intradiegetic logic of MS, this act appears both plausible and justified: The unified ‘people’ turn out in force to protect their ally against an illegitimate political establishment. However, watching this scene in 2021/2022 after the historical storming of the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, gives one pause. In the historical event, several hundred supporters of the defeated incumbent Donald Trump claimed to defend ‘their’ president from what they perceived to be an abuse of power by an illegitimate legislature. The US Congress had, in reality, been in the process of verifying the largely uncontested election victory of Democrat Joe Biden.

This does not suggest any causal link between the series and historical events. “Carpe Diem”, the episode in question, aired in December 2019 and thus before the historical ‘storm on the Capitol’. Nonetheless, the circumstantial similarity of the fictional and historical scenes is a powerful illustration of the populist logic permeating MS. It is a striking example of the narrative populist paradox that combines liberal idealpolitik with the

152 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 3, “The Operative”, directed by Jeremy Webb, written by David Grae, aired October 5, 2014, [153 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot”, directed by David Semel, written by Barbara Hall, aired September 21, 2014, \[154 *Madam Secretary*, season 1, episode 21, “The Kill List”, directed by Ed Ornelas, written by David Grae, aired April 26, 2015, \\[155 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 9, “Carpe Diem”, directed by Felix Alcalá, written by David Grae, aired December 1, 2019, \\\[<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683> <https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agh> - Open Access - !\\\\[\\\\]\\\\(c94255721c57f40985a29a729053877a_img.jpg\\\\)\\\]\\\(https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287034?trackId=200257859, 40.43”.</p>
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AM's anti-democratic impetus to turn the fictional storming of a democratically elected (fictional) parliament into an act of morally justified defense of democracy itself.

6.3.2 Designated Survivor(s)

There are two Designated Survivors in polit-fiction: One goes by the name Tom Kirkman (Kiefer Sutherland) and features as the protagonist of the DS US. The other is called Park Mu-jin (played by 지진희, Romanised: Ji Jin-hee) and serves as the hero of DS US' South Korean adaption DS 60. Accordingly, while they differ in their individual composition, both series share their premise and much of their general outline. They follow a minor government official who becomes president after a devastating attack kills all higher-ranking members of the executive. Both DS US and DS 60 apply a common trope of polit-fiction where a relatively rare historical law or regulation features as the series' premise.¹⁵⁶ In DS US, Thomas Kirkman, the unassuming US secretary for housing and urban development, becomes president after surviving as the US government's 'Designated Survivor'. The term refers to a little-known historical practice that originated during the Cold War to ensure government continuity in case of a nuclear attack by keeping one government member in an undisclosed location during occasions that require the polity's united appearance.

DS 60 adjusts DS US' storyline to fit Korean circumstances, leaving its structural configuration largely intact. Here, it is the unassuming minister for the environment, Park Mu-Jin, who survives a devastating attack on the *Gukhoe* [국회], the Korean national assembly. Following the historical South Korean constitution, Park holds this office for 60 days, during which new elections must occur.¹⁵⁷

Like the other sample series in this chapter, the narrative structures of DS and DS 60 revolve around the dichotomy between illegitimate, corrupt *inside* and morally pure *outside*. Both Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin are classic outsider heroes with a direct connection to their respective unified 'people'. Like Holoborodko and McCord, they share the mentor trope's background as former college professors, one of architecture (Kirkman) and one of chemistry (Park). The series make it clear that, despite their ascension to the presidency, neither Kirkman nor Park ever becomes an *insider* 'politician'. In "#undecided", Kirkman, e.g., states, "I didn't get into politics to behave like a politician".¹⁵⁸ In another episode with the revealing title "#thesystemisbroken", he is introduced to a hostile anti-Washington protest with the words, "This isn't one of them. This is one of ours. A true independent. The President of the United States, Tom Kirkman".¹⁵⁹ Remarkably, in

156 See Niko Switek, "Spiegel, Daten, Narrative: Politikwissenschaftliche Zugänge zu politischen Fernsehserien", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co.*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 26.

157 In accordance with articles 68 and 71 of the constitution of the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

158 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 9, "#Undecided", directed by Peter Leto, written by Dawn DeNoon, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015342?trackId=255824129>, 42.14".

159 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 1, "#TheSystemIsBroken", directed by Chris grismer, written by Adam Stein, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015334?trackId=200257858>, 31.24".

DS US' paradox populist logic, Kirkman remains a systemic *outsider* – one of 'the people' rather than 'one of them' – even in his role as US President.

Park, too, is decidedly not a politician. As the title of DS 60's fifth episode reveals, he is "A Good Person",¹⁶⁰ and audiences learn that

President Park never even ran for class president when he was in school [...], although he was a model student. Do you know what that implies? He doesn't have any desire for power [...].¹⁶¹

Park himself later affirms his aversion to politics and power, stating,

Did you just say 'power'? That has nothing to do with me. I'm going to carry out my duty as a citizen of this country and return to my school after 60 days as planned.¹⁶²

His unassuming nature is emphasised, e.g., when he, as *acting* president, refuses to sit at his predecessor's desk or when starting his first speech with the entirely needless introduction, "My fellow Koreans, it's nice to meet you. I am the acting president, Park Mu-jin".¹⁶³

Both series express the integrity of their respective protagonist's moral convictions by presenting them as static characters in an equally static moral universe. Kirkman's vice president, e.g., states admirably:

The Tom Kirkman who started this job 20 months ago, ambivalent, aspirational, honest to a fault, is the same Tom Kirkman that they saw today. You have not changed one bit, Sir.¹⁶⁴

160 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 5, "A Good Person", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 15, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101770?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109.

161 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 3, "Maintaining Status Quo", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 8, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101768?trackId=255824129, 02.42>".

162 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 3, "Maintaining Status Quo", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 8, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101768?trackId=255824129, 18.22>".

163 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 10, "Accomplice", directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 30, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101775?trackId=200257859, 01.10.22>".

164 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 19, "Capacity", directed by David Warry-Smith, written by Keith Eisner, aired April 25, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199937?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647, 38.45".

Faithful to the paradoxical narrative construction of populist idealpolitik, both series frame the political *inside* as a seat of corruption and depravity. In DS 60, the powerful government secretary Han states about the Blue House [청와대], Romanised: *Cheongwadae*], the seat of the Korean presidency, “this place is hell, where nothing ends until everyone becomes a monster”.¹⁶⁵ In DS US, Kirkman jokes with his wife about a false promise, saying, “We’re in Washington. They’re the only promises we’re allowed to make”.¹⁶⁶ Referring to the US capital, Kirkman’s associate likewise states, “it was nice to hear some honesty in and about the swamp”,¹⁶⁷ thus referencing a widespread populist metaphor about cleaning up alleged moral deficits in the historical political establishment in Washington that has been popular from Ronald Reagan to Donald Trump.¹⁶⁸

As idealist heroes following a populist narrative construction, Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin – like Vasyly Petrovych Holoborodko, the modest servant of Ukraine, and Elizabeth McCord, the unassuming secretary of state – possess a direct link to the unified ‘people’ (indeed, Kirkman uses the term with almost comical frequency). Evoking this unity, a congresswoman trying to solicit Kirkman’s goodwill, for example, states: “Republican, democrat, independent, it doesn’t matter anymore. We’re all Americans today”.¹⁶⁹ Park Mu-jin, likewise, manages what only a fictional populist hero can do: he wins an election without disappointing anyone, quasi by acclamation. Accordingly, his assistant states: “Mr President won without making any enemies”.¹⁷⁰ Emphasising this universal appeal – a trope likewise recurring in MS – all political parties approach the former designated survivor Kirkman as their presidential candidate.¹⁷¹ Like in MS, both Kirkman and Park

165 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 15, “The Trap”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 19, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101780?trackId=200257859,1.04.49>”.

166 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot”, directed by Paul McGuigan, written by David Guggenheim, aired September 21, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133832?trackId=255824129,02.16>”.

167 *Designated Survivor*, season 3, episode 1, “#TheSystemIsBroken”, directed by Chris Grismer, written by Adam Stein, aired June 7, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81015334?trackId=200257858,6.30>”.

168 Ted Widmer, “Draining the Swamp”, *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/draining-the-swamp>.

169 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, “The First Day”, directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, September 28, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=200257859,14.00>”.

170 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, season 1, episode 7, “Governance”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired July 22, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101772?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C1%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknow%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109,1.09.35”.

171 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, “Target”, directed by Timothy Busfield, written by Bill Chais and Ashely Gable, aired May 16, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199939?trackId=255824129&ctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknow%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C81072109,1.09.35”.

subsequently choose to run as independent candidates, as any true outsider hero and populist 'man of the people' would.

True to the populist construction of fictionalised idealpolitik, both series ultimately sustain the AM's tangible anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus. The bond between Kirkman and 'the people' is presented as so direct and self-evident that even democratic elections must distort it. Die supposed political idealist Kirkman justifies his paradoxical opposition to elections by pointing out his successful advocacy on behalf of the unified people, stating:

The polls didn't make any headway on clean energy or fill judicial vacancies. The only thing that really matters is the actual work that we get done here on behalf of the American people.¹⁷²

He frequently rejects all notions of compromise-based representative democracy, stating: "I'm not going to affiliate myself with any party just because I want to pass a bill".¹⁷³ DS US' populist intradiegetic logic even allows Kirkman to legitimately pressure an uncooperative legislature to approve his military spending bill by threatening direct intervention of 'the people'. In a repetition of Holoborodko's similar threat of another Maidan revolution, he states:

I will take whatever political capital I have left, and I will make my case to the people. I will tell them that I believe partisanship is ruining this country and that their representatives are more interested in keeping their power than serving the people and the soldiers that defend them.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, in DS 60, *insider* antagonists openly declare themselves sworn enemies of the Korean people. After having been revealed as the mastermind behind the Gukhoe-attack, the devious government official Han names disdain for the people as his primary motivation, stating:

This country isn't worthy of a president like him [Park's deceased predecessor]. Impatient, selfish, and greedy, the people of this nation don't know how to be patient.

nown%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647.

172 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 1, "One Year In", directed by Chris Gismar, written by Keith Eisner, aired September 27, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199919?trackId=14170286>, 4.06

173 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, "Target", directed by Timothy Busfield, written by Bill Chais and Ashely Cable, aired may 16, 2018, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80199939?trackId=255824129&ctctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2CNAPA%40%40%7C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254_titles%2F1%2F%2Fdesignated%20survivor%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C13c8497e-8c46-4d31-9c60-9e53fb0538ba-751254%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80113647, 18.00".

174 *Designated Survivor*, season 2, episode 21, "Target", 29.41".

To those people, President Yang and his view of democracy were more than they deserved.¹⁷⁵

Accordingly, Han names “fear and terror” as the “most formidable type of power” and the “governing style which well suited this nation” that he so despises.¹⁷⁶

Both DS US and DS 60 show a notable inconsistency between intradiegetic logic and the demands of their respective dramatic composition. Initially, the series’ shared premise rests on the physical annihilation of the political *insider* elite. As Kirkman’s assistant states with reference to the destroyed Capitol, “My God, there’s no Hill anymore”.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, it is curious to see that DS US, and consequently DS 60, would continue to rely on the traditional *inside vs outside* dichotomy to construct their narrative. So crucial is the populist structural juxtaposition for creating an idealistic hero protagonist in polit-fiction that, in order maintain it, the series end up largely ignoring the momentous diegetic events that initially set off their respective plots. Particularly in DS US, the diegetic Capitol attack serves primarily as the justification for a whodunnit thriller B-plot, which centres on an FBI agent’s investigation of the events and plays a secondary role in the political A-plot as the series continues.

6.3.3 Linear Pragmatic Logic

The consistent reoccurrence of the *dramatic* populist composition of idealpolitik in polit-fiction seems to coincide with a series’ linear circulation background. Indeed, there seems to be a natural kinship between the demands of linear TV and the populist simplification of idealistic politics along the lines of the AM that transcends cultural and ideological contexts.

SN, e.g., appeared as part of the linear schedule of the Ukrainian TV channel 1+1 throughout most of its 51 episodes (barring the homonymous feature film and the series’ third season, which I will discuss shortly). As a production of the linear TV channel CBS, MS’ episodes were released as part of a weekly linear schedule with an eye on potential serial perpetuity (at its finale in December 2019, MS had aired a remarkable 120 episodes spanning six seasons). DS US aired first on the linear TV-channel ABC. After an initial cancellation, it was picked up for a third and final season by the on-demand portal Netflix, which was released in full in June 2019, and subsequently cancelled. DS

175 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, Season 1, episode 16, “The Last Choice”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 20, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101781?trackId=14170289&tctx=2%2C1%2C2Ca73ba9f3-19bd-4383-be07-2c1553df1e8e-44483310%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65-B9F225DDE3A711-B61FFBD686_p_1661499802684%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65_p_1661499802684%2C%2C%2C81072109, 38.30”.

176 *Designated Survivor: 60 Days*, Season 1, episode 16, “The Last Choice”, directed by Jong Sun Yoo, written by Tae Hee Kim, aired August 20, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81101781?trackId=14170289&tctx=2%2C1%2C2Ca73ba9f3-19bd-4383-be07-2c1553df1e8e-44483310%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65-B9F225DDE3A711-B61FFBD686_p_1661499802684%2CGPS_D208422ACC6076379892C70A4F3D65_p_1661499802684%2C%2C%2C81072109, 39.36”.

177 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, “The First Day”, directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, September 28, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=200257859, 9.20>”.

60 is a production of the Korean pay TV channel tvN, which optioned and distributed the US original for the Korean market. The series' 16 episodes were produced for a subscribing audience and distributed as part of the channel's linear schedule over roughly two months, airing two episodes per week on tvN (in Korea) and Netflix (internationally) from June to August 2019. While its subscription-based background becomes visible in some of DS 60's alterations – e.g., a much more streamlined narrative, no intra-episode cliffhangers to accommodate commercials, and a more experimental editorial presence – the series' retains the overall structure of its linear US role model.

The narrative structure of the populist AM, with its provision of a simplified binary morality, static characters, and retention of a core character configuration, seems to chime with the storytelling requirements of linear TV. It creates highly recognizable and structurally repetitive plotlines that are easy to follow and allow audiences to remain oriented throughout temporally extensive release cycles. The well-established configuration of the AM furthermore adheres to the classic LOP principle of linear TV, which assumes that any discrete instalment of a linear TV schedule must fit the generalized appeal and televisual flow of a channel's overall programme, thus avoiding tailoring individual content to specific audience functions. With their construction of an easy-to-recognise yet largely undefined positive outgroup that allows widespread identification, an unambiguous moral spectrum, and their emphasis on commonplace valence issues, the populist construction of idealistic polit-series ultimately serves the LOP requirements to appeal to a large and indifferent – rather than selected and engaged – viewer base.

It is crucial to note the spread of the populist construction of idealpolitik within polit-series across cultural and historical contexts. Realising that SN follows the same dramatic logic as series from entirely different cultural backgrounds, which show no ties to concrete political interests, the claim of SN's unmitigated political purpose becomes somewhat doubtful. Nonetheless, a look at the series' evolution against its historical backdrop will reveal fascinating parallelisms between the fictional developments in SN and Volodymyr Zelensky's campaign.

6.4 Seasonal Changes and Historical Politics

Throughout its run, SN underwent several recalibrations that suggest its recalibration from entertainment commodity to political instrument. While SN's first season seems relatively unassuming, the series' purpose as a tool of political image-building becomes a tangible influence on its network's pragmatic logic in season 3.

6.4.1 Season 1

SN's first season shows a tendency towards comical hyperbole, often supported by tangible moments of *editorial presence* in the series' otherwise largely conventional formal continuity layout that supports the flow of the plot. For example, Holoborodko indulges in frequent daydreams in which he encounters prominent historical characters that provide topical guidance for the different challenges he faces. Throughout episode 1x11, au-

diences likewise hear the comically absurd thoughts of the series' characters. The series similarly shows moments of self-referentiality, providing occasional meta-jokes, for example, when President Holobodorko asks angrily, "Do I look like a comedian?" to which his counterpart replies, "Yes. That is, no".¹⁷⁸

SN's comparatively low initial production values suggest a local European production's relatively limited televisual budget. The historical costumes in Holoborodko's visions, e.g., are often noticeably low-grade. Similarly, Holoborodko moves parliament and the rest of the government to smaller, nondescript locations for the *intradiegetic* reason of cutting down on government spending. This has the effect of providing a diegetic explanation for the series' *pragmatic* decision to shoot in nondescript locations rather than having to rebuild costly sets that work as stand-ins for the Verkhovna Rada [Верховна Рада України], Ukraine's parliament] and other iconic buildings that would be well-known to Ukrainian (and, as of March 2022, many international) audiences.

Season 1 displays a notably incoherent narrative pacing typical of the early stages of an ongoing series still finding its bearing. For example, SN's expository arc takes up seven episodes, with the first three instalments leading up to Holoborodko's inauguration. Here, audiences follow the newly minted President as he is taken from his parents' bathroom to explore the lavish world of presidential life in an unnervingly detailed tour of the presidential palace. The following four episodes show Holoborodko as he gets to know the absurdly lavish government apparatus, various more or less overstuffed, inefficient departments, and the cabinet he fires and re-staffs with his allies.

The narrated time in these first seven episodes is inconsistent. The first three cover little more than one event (the visit to the presidential palace) that appears as one coherent scene, that is, a narrative unit defined by a unity of location, characters, and action. The subsequent four instalments span an unspecified period and revert to a more conventional formal style of narrating in a sequence of scenes. Initially, this temporal incongruence causes some disorientation in audiences, especially because the series simultaneously begins to introduce unrelated B-plots for comical relief (e.g., in the form of Holoborodko family shenanigans) while the exposition of the central plot is still ongoing.

There is little accessible historical context suggesting that SN's pragmatic logic already encompassed a clearly defined political purpose. While the series' season 1 establishes Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko as an idealistic hero in the populist logic of idealpolitik, this composition largely follows the established narrative conventions outlined above and thus a dramatic logic that is prevalent in productions from various cultural contexts.

178 *Sluha Narodu*, season 1, episode 15, "#1.15", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired November 26, 2015, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80119398?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2Co%2CNAPA%40%40%7C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%2Fo%2Fo%2C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348_titles%2F1%2F%2Fservant%2Fo%2Fo%2Cunknown%2C%2C390e0787-1fc3-43f7-8b42-89223f8b9a45-45843348%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80119382, 02.47".

6.4.2 Season 2 and “Sluha Narodu 2”, The Movie

To remind the reader: the story of Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko initially continued with the feature film “Sluha Narodu 2” in December 2016. A year later, in the winter of 2017, the second season started in the diegetic temporal gap between season one and the film. Its first seven episodes cover this gap. The following seven episodes incorporate and expand the film’s plot utilising its material. The last ten episodes continue the plot after the film’s end.

In SN’s second season, notable mitigation of the first season’s formal and narrative inconsistencies occurs. Its narrative is more streamlined, and the increase in production values is clearly visible. The quality of lighting and costumes is notably elevated, and the season features a wider variety of locations. The series also somewhat reduces previous notions of a hyperbolic editorial presence. For example, Holoborodko’s ‘comical’ visions occupy a reduced role in his decision-making, thus giving the character and his actions a more focused and professional air.

These changes are arguably partly due to the fact that SN had, by this time, become a commercial success and that much of its material had been shot for cinematic release. The film “Sluha Narodu 2” is, in many ways, a conventional comedy in which Holoborodko and the ex-antagonist Chuiko embark on a literal quest (complete with leaving Kyiv and going on a road trip-type adventure) to tackle the sinister oligarchs in an often hyperbolic and tangibly physical sequence of events. However, both the film and season 2 notably emphasise Vasyl Petrovych’s ability as an effective administrator and fighter of corruption while reducing the focus on his personal circumstances. For example, his family’s role in producing comical B-plots is significantly diminished, with several characters vanishing from the ensemble.

While the historical part of SN’s network had made no publicly notable political moves before the season’s release (in October/November 2017), the SoP party was registered shortly afterwards (on December 2nd, 2017) by the head of Zelensky’s production company. The well-timed use of the series’ symbolic capital (e.g., through ambivalent advertisements) and the announcement of Zelensky’s candidacy followed roughly a year later.

6.4.3 Season 3: “Choice”

The dominant impact of Zelensky’s political ambitions in SN’s pragmatic logic becomes evident in its third season, conspicuously subtitled “Choice”. Its unusually timed release occurred only days (March 27th and 28th, 2019) before the first round of the presidential election on March 31st, 2019. Season 3 underwent significant recalibrations in terms of narrative composition and serial format. It consists of only three episodes (as opposed to 23 and 24 in the previous two seasons). With a running time between 42 minutes (episode 2) and one hour and five minutes (episode 1), they are significantly longer than most of the previous seasons’ classic 25-minute TV instalments. Scripted and produced as one coherent unit and released within only two days, the episodes show a higher narrative consistency than the previous seasons.

Figure 36: *The Independence Monument in Maidan Square covered in gold.*



Screenshot from *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, “#3.03”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859,55.56>. Credit: Kvartal 95

Season 3’s *pragmatic* purpose as a political tool also becomes evident in its narrative. The season highlights the presidential qualities of Holoborodko while simultaneously presenting the dangers of electing anybody else with explicit reference to the historical election and its contestants. As media commentators noted,

If we briefly retell the plot, then (warning – spoiler) in the first episode, we are told about what a bad president Poroshenko is, in the second – what a bad president Tymoshenko will become, and in the third Zelensky will save the world Ukraine.¹⁷⁹

In season 3, the intensity of the political game increases significantly. Holoborodko is imprisoned after losing the presidency due to electoral fraud, Ukraine’s democracy finds itself in an existential crisis, and the country falls apart in a succession of satirical horror

179 Gala Skylyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluga-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>. Accessed through Google Translate. Original emphasis.

scenarios, e.g., splitting up into 28 hyperbolically specified states,¹⁸⁰ a coup d'état¹⁸¹ and experiencing numerous successive but ultimately futile Maidan Revolutions.

Having emphasised Holoborodko's qualities as a statesman throughout its run, the series' finale emphatically frames his election as the resurgence of Ukraine's ultimate messiah hero. After having unified the nation, ended corruption, and alleviated the national debt, the re-elected President Holoboroko gives a rousing speech in front of his allies and what appears to be a cross-section of the Ukrainian people.¹⁸² While he speaks, grandiose, extradiegetic music sets in, and the camera focuses on the shining, hopeful faces of the diegetic audience listening to their leader. After a cut, a full shot shows the angelic figure atop the Independence Monument in Kyiv's Maidan Square. In a subsequent, evolving extreme long shot, the base of the monument's victory column becomes visible: it is covered in a literal mountain of gold (see figure 36). Another cut to the season's framing story in the year 2049 shows a group of students and their teacher who – having been served the promised golden future – discuss their country's successful history in a state of blissful elation supported by the ongoing grandiose extradiegetic music¹⁸³ before the credits begin to roll.

The series' politicized pragmatic logic is visible in the presentation of Holoborodko's antagonists, the presidential usurpers Zhanna Boryshenko and Dmytro Surikov, as well. Following populist logic, both are not only enemies of Holoborodko but 'the people'. They come to power through illegitimate means and bring Ukraine to the brink of destruction (causing hyperinflation, unrest, and the defection of renegade regional governments). It has furthermore been pointed out that the fictional characters Zhanna Boryshenko and Dmytro Surikov bear striking similarities to Volodymyr Zelensky's most prominent contenders for the historical Ukrainian presidency: former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the then-incumbent president Petro Poroshenko.¹⁸⁴

The signature blond hair (and its recognizable sideway parting), rimmed glasses and, at times, severe demeanour of the incompetent fictional Zhanna Boryshenko is a thinly veiled satire of former Ukrainian PM Yulia Tymoshenko. The fictional Dmytro Surikov

180 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 2, "#3.02", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596234?trackId=200257859>, 36.56"

181 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 2, "#3.02", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596234?trackId=200257859>, 26.10"

182 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, "#3.03", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 51.35".

183 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 3, "#3.03", directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 28, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596235?trackId=200257859>, 56.32".

184 See Gala Sklyarevska, "'Servant of the People 3': Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky", *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluha-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>; Elena Galajiy, "Servant of the People 3: Tymoshenko is surprised by cynicism, Poroshenko is offended, the National Friends are intrigued", *kp.ua*, March 28, 2019, <https://kp.ua/politics/634126-sluha-naroda-3-u-tymoshenko-udyvleny-tsnyzmu-u-poroshenko-obyzheny-nadruzhyny-zayntryhovany>. Accessed through Google Translate. And Michael Garrood and Yuri Zoria, "What Zelensky's prophetic 'Servant of the People' TV show suggest for his further steps", *Euromaidan News*, August 7, 2019, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2019/08/07/what-zelenskys-prophetic-servant-of-the-people-tv-show-suggests-for-his-further-steps/>.

is, among other similarities, said to be the owner of a prominent fictional dairy company with “fairy-tale shops [...] next to each metro station”¹⁸⁵ as well as the fictional “channel 3”¹⁸⁶ while the historical Petro Poroshenko owns (respectively, owned) the prominent chocolate manufacturer ‘Roshen Confectionery Corporation’ [Кондитерська корпорація Рошен] and the TV station “Channel 5” [5 канал].

The series even references the well-known (and cruelly ironic) fact that Petro Poroshenko, the owner of a chocolate manufacturer, is a diabetic: The fictional Dmytro Surikov, who owns a dairy company, is lactose intolerant.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, Surikov’s character carries numerous allusions to some of the historical scandals and communicative missteps associated with Poroshenko (e.g., the fictional president going on a holiday to the Maldives¹⁸⁸ shortly after taking office).¹⁸⁹

Faced with the conspicuous release date, the season’s subtitle “Choice”, the presentation of two presidential usurpers who, to Ukrainian audiences, are easily recognisable satirical allusions to Zelensky’s presidential contenders, and the presentation of Vasyl Holoborodko as the unequivocal saviour hero who will lead his country into a – in all senses of the word – golden future, SN’s season 3 becomes clearly visible as a campaign tool.

6.5 How Fictional is the President Anyway?

By consciously blending the idealised appeal of SN’s protagonist and its simplified political vision with the historical presidential campaign, Zelensky and his team attempted and – by many accounts succeeded – to transfer the fictional political clout of Vasyl Holoborodko onto the political construction of the discursive function of President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Like all politicians, the historical President Zelensky is ultimately a product of the process of co-creatively unifying the *King’s two bodies* in an imaginary third body, which

185 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 21.08”.

186 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 21.34”.

187 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 31.24”. Noted also by Gala Sklyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluca-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/>.

188 *Sluha Narodu*, season 3, episode 1, “#3.01”, directed by Oleksiy Kiryushchenko, aired March 27, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81596233?trackId=200257859>, 49.15”.

189 Compiled, for example, by Gala Sklyarevska, “‘Servant of the People 3’: Three-hour election video of candidate Zelensky”, *Media Detector*, March 29, 2019, <https://detector.media/kritika/article/165967/2019-03-29-sluca-naroda-3-trekhchasovoy-predvybornyy-rolyk-kandydata-zelenskogo/> and Elena Galajiy, “Servant of the People 3: Tymoshenko is surprised by cynicism, Poroshenko is offended, the National Friends are intrigued”, *kp.ua*, March 28, 2019, <https://kp.ua/politics/634126-sluca-naroda-3-u-tymoshenko-udvleny-tsynyizmu-u-poroshenko-obyzheny-nadruzhyny-zayntryhovany>.

occurs between any ruler and his*her audience/electorate.¹⁹⁰ As this study has previously discussed, with recourse to Ernst Kantorowicz and Louis Marin, this process fuses the body natural of Volodymyr Zelensky, the man, and the entirely conceptual body politic of the president in the imagination of his followers to form the imaginary (though not ‘unreal’) third body of President Volodymyr Zelensky. Ironically, President Zelensky is, thus, a product of the very process of co-creating political imaginaries, which SN – in its populist logic – denies.

Zelensky’s use of his fictional alter ego to endow his own mythical body with political clout that he himself did, in fact, not possess arguably made the initial imaginary of President Zelensky appear as a simulacrum. However, it should be noted that history seems to have revealed – at least for the moment – the perhaps unexpected reality of Zelensky’s projections, with him having shown a remarkable ability to unite Ukraine and much of the international community behind the cause of defending the country against the Russian invasion.

Neither the rise of celebrity politicians nor the amalgamation of fiction and reality are new occurrences in politics. Donald J. Trump’s ascension to the US presidency in 2016 is the most prominent recent example of the former. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his gubernatorial bid for California in 2003 are a well-known instance of the latter. In his campaign, Schwarzenegger routinely quoted lines from his movies, thus associating his political persona with notions of the powerful, invincible, and popular fictional movie characters he had impersonated as an actor, ultimately gaining him the nickname “the Governator” (as a reference to his most famous role, the “Terminator”).

Storytellers have likewise often seized the opportunity to profit from the attention and controversy surrounding historical political elections. In 1998, German artist Christoph Schlingensiefel founded the satirical party Chance 2000, which competed in the 1998 German parliamentary elections (to relatively small political success). In the run-up to the 2009 federal elections, German comedian Hape Kerkeling seized the political buzz to promote his election satire “Horst Schlämmer – Isch kandidiere!” (Angelo Colagrossi: Germany). The film’s promotion tour was framed as a political campaign. However, neither Schwarzenegger nor Kerkeling went so far as to blur the lines between fiction and reality: the candidate Schwarzenegger was arguably always clearly distinguishable from the fictional character, the Terminator Kerkeling, on the other hand, while never openly acknowledging the fictional character of his endeavour, never actually attempted to run for office. In the instrumentalization of their fictional entertainment arsenal, it is safe to say that few have gone as far (and succeeded as widely) as Volodymyr Zelensky.

6.6 Conclusion: Politics, Populism, and Paradoxes

The curious convergence of a relatively conventional polit-comedy with unique historical circumstances has turned SN into an unlikely part of world history. Starting as an unassuming polit-comedy, the series arguably contributed to the election of its star, Volodymyr Zelensky, as Ukrainian president, a role in which he was since forced to

190 As discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

emerge as the defender of his country following its condemnable invasion by the Russian Federation in late February 2022.

Summarising the key historical parallelisms between the series and the 2019 presidential election, this chapter showed how and why SN has been credited with and criticised for merging fiction and reality to endow an inexperienced celebrity comedian with the political clout of an idealised fictional president.

In a structural narrative analysis, I demonstrated that SN follows a populist logic in dramatizing idealistic politics by juxtaposing a morally flawless outsider-hero (and direct envoy of a unified 'people') and a corrupt and illegitimate political elite. In SN, politics appeared as a binary sphere in which the political *inside* operates according to the ruthless laws of an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game. At the same time, the *outside* plays a largely cooperative game (ensured by the protagonist's superiority and compositional intervention). Political games between the two spheres take on a cooperative character in which the superiority of the protagonists reigns supreme. They retain their agonal zero-sum structure to ensure narrative suspense and emphasise the protagonist's ultimate victory through his antagonists' proportionate defeat.

It became clear that this construction follows well-established narrative conventions of polit-fiction that largely adhere to the narrative archetype of the AM. With its messiah-like saviour hero, its endorsement of individualism over institutions and procedures, and its distrust of personal intelligence and human sexuality, SN displays the anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus typical for the AM.

While SN shows none of the defeatist tendencies of this study's previous samples (see chapters 4 and 5), it is remarkable that even in the series' utopian construction of politics, change is possible only outside the established avenues of the political system. Positive reform in polit-fiction, or so it would seem, is only an option in highly simplified versions of politics where representation is a frictionless translation of people's will by an unassuming saviour.

However, this compositional base structure emerges not primarily as a consequence of specific cultural or ideological tendencies within SN's historical network but instead results from transferring the normative logic of idealpolitik onto the dramatic logic of conventional fictional storytelling. In what I called the populist narrative paradox, it became clear that morality, as an exclusive benchmark of political legitimacy, almost inadvertently leads to delegitimizing political opponents and, thus, to a populist negation of pluralistic principles.

A comparative analysis of other series of the 2010s – MS, DS US, and its South Korean remake, DS 60 – showed a repetition of the paradox narrative formula underlying SN. I pointed out that this formula – and its ideological consequences for the portrayal of polit-fiction – in many ways adhered to the requirements of linear serial TV and its governing LOP principle by providing understandable and uncontroversial content with an easy-to-follow protagonist-antagonist structure and a correspondingly unambiguous moral universe.

Comparing SN's narrative development to the historical evolution of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's campaign, I discussed how the series evolved from a relatively conventional and seemingly unassuming polit-comedy (in season 1) to a visibly biased commentary on the

2019 Ukrainian presidential race (in season 3), airing only days before the election itself and containing easily recognizable satirical renderings of the historical candidates.

It is not for this study to discern the extent or legitimacy of Zelensky's campaign activities. However, given the series' simplified moral structure and anti-democratic impetus (among other things), it is no wonder that many commentators have taken issue with its instrumentalization as a potential tool in the president's political campaign. In doing so, the series' production entities ran the risk of – and arguably attempted to – transferring SN's simplified populist subtones to real-life Ukrainian politics.

Simplifications and fictionalisations are legitimate and, indeed, essential processes for political communication. However, they are a dangerous instrument that must be wielded with some caution. In SN's diegesis, the simplified, binary assumptions guided by categorical morality – that, in the real world, would rightly be considered populist – are valid. In the series' diegesis, there *is* a unified people. Likewise, there *are* only allies and enemies, and the fictional Ukrainian polity is divided along a binary moral spectrum. Instead of calling the fictional character Holoborodko a populist – he does, after all, adhere to the functional logic of his world – it is much safer to consider SN a populist narrative. Historical Ukraine – like all historical societies – however, is structured much less stringently. A confusion of the simplified narrative lines of popular (and populist) polit-fiction with real-life politics, thus, remains a risky undertaking.

History has forced Volodymyr Zelensky into a tragic encore of his role as 'the people's president'. At the time of writing this chapter, his bravery and skill in leading the defence of Ukraine against the Russian invasion remain uncontested. In a highly mediated war, this defence includes a skilled reframing of many of the simplified binary tropes of 'us vs them' and masterful use of old and new media that harken back to Zelensky's campaign practices. The media appearances of the president and his allies have undoubtedly contributed much to uniting the Ukrainian population and a substantial part of the international community behind the cause of the country's defence.

Historically, populist narratives arguably fare well in times of war with their lamentable but perhaps unavoidable tendency towards binary simplification. One would, given the circumstances, commit an injustice if one were to blame Zelensky for using what means he has at his disposal to ensure his country's safety. However, while his current efforts are doubtlessly admirable, it remains for history to decide – and future studies to discern – how to draw the balance of Volodymyr Zelensky's presidency.

7. Modelling Malfunction and Inverting the Populist Quest

BARON NOIR

There is a remarkable moment in “Satanas”, the fifth episode of the third and final season of the Canal+ production *BARON NOIR* (France, 2016–2020, BN). It shows the assault of the fictional French president Amélie Dorendeu, who is hit in the face by a protester.¹ Released on February 24th 2020, the scene became notable in the summer of 2021 when, on June 8th, a man slapped the historical French President Emmanuel Macron, allegedly yelling a royalist battle cry.² Entirely unrelated to one another, both the fictional and the historical slap come in the wake of heightened social tensions and an increasing detachment between the French polity and part of the country’s voting public.

BN tells the story of the Socialist Party functionary, Dunkerque mayor, and power broker Philippe Rickwaert (Kad Merad) as he rises and falls through the ranks of French politics during a time of extreme social tension. This chapter will examine how BN presents politics and politicians and how the series constructs a diegetic political climate that, in presenting the physical assault of a sitting president as a plausible (if condemnable) event, shows such striking similarities to the structural affordances of historical French politics.

A narrative analysis will demonstrate that BN’s plot revolves around the threats facing representative pluralist democracy through systemic dysfunction, the rise of populist agitators, and the decline of the ‘front républicain’ [*Republican Front*]. The term denotes the traditional rallying of moderate left- and right-wing parties during the runoff of the French presidential elections in order to block the extremist right-wing Front National from electoral victory. In its model of the malfunction of its diegetic polity, the series presents a vision of teleological realpolitik unusual for popular polit-fiction: in BN, it is the Machiavellian strivers charged with saving democracy from destructive idealists and

1 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, “Satanas”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 11.25”.

2 Rc/aw, “Protester slaps French President Emmanuel Macron in the Face”, *Deutsche Welle*, June 8, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3uaeS>.

populists. Thus, I will show that the series, in many ways, present an inversion of the populist quest discussed previously.

In analysing BN's fictional polity, this chapter will demonstrate that the series constructs politics as an emergent diegetic actor-network of rare complexity. Politics, in BN, is by its very nature a product of multipolar systemic interaction. Analysing the various components of BN's diegetic polity, this chapter will show that, in the series, the nature of politics as an ongoing negotiation of the distribution of power equals the pluralist vision of realpolitik as the consolidation of dispersed legitimate interests by morally ambiguous means. In BN, politics equals pluralism as the process of navigating legitimate dissensus. The populist vision of a unified populous, on the other hand, appears as an illegitimately reductive rendering of the dictum of the 'end of politics', with its linear notions of self-evident *a priori* governance.

It will become clear that the series' notable narrative focus on the political left results from *pragmatic* rather than *intradiegetic* logic as a concession to the assumed discursive preferences of its various audience functions. As a production of the subscription-based channel Canal+, BN's audiences tend to belong to classically urban populations with an above-average higher education background and income and a tendency toward liberal, progressive left political positions.

Analysing its use of political spaces, I will show that BN evokes the historical French practice of using the names of government residences as *pars pro toto* metonymies for political institutions (e.g., the Elysée Palace for the French Presidency). Thus, it formally emphasises the dispersed distribution of power and acknowledges its audiences' political and cultural literacy.

I will subsequently analyse the various micro and macro actors that constitute the series' diegetic political actor-network. Starting with the institutionalised actors, I will illustrate that BN breaks an established taboo in French fiction by presenting a decidedly critical portrayal not only of French presidents but of the previously sacrosanct institution of the presidency itself.

I will demonstrate that BN shuns polit-fiction's traditional executive bias by focussing much of its narrative on power struggles within the fictional *Partie Socialiste* and, to a lesser degree, on interactions with other bodies of institutionalised, civil, and unofficial pluralist governance. The struggle for dominance within the PS and the fight to unify the political left constitutes a major story arc in BN. Other plotlines explore the function of parliament, trade unions, student movements, and even the European Union, the latter being a rare appearance in polit fiction.³

I will subsequently analyse the series' central characters and their function as pluralist or populist players in BN's political games. I will show that, with their dedication to self-advancement and readiness to circumvent established procedure and morality in their navigation of the political actor-network, the series' protagonist, Philippe Rickwaert, and deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeau, appear as the incarnation of pluralist re-

3 Mentioned with regards to British polit-fiction in Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", *LSE (blog)*, March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

alpolitik. As a born *homo politicus*, Rickwaert embezzles money, betrays friends and allies alike and still ends up saving French democracy through his very ability to compromise both his ideals and extra-political norms in order to do what is necessary.

A subsequent analysis of the series' tritagonist, Michel Vidal, will show that, in its presentation of uncompromising left-wing populism, BN illustrates the dangers of idealpolitik [idealistic politics] that would rather see a flawed but functional polity destroyed than compromise what it knows to be the right path forward.

Examining the series' main antagonists, the anti-systemic conspiracy theorist Christophe Mercier and the right-wing agitator Lionel Chalon, will demonstrate how BN presents the various guises of populism and their way to power through systemic malfunction.

A structural analysis will demonstrate that BN constructs a compositionally *dispersed antagonist* supporting the series' vision of a multipolar political actor-network. Instead of a personified cause and effect chain, the series divides its overarching plotlines (e.g., the protection of pluralist democracy) into various struggles and sub-plots featuring a variety of challenges and players. It will become clear that this narratively complex plot device creates the impression of a systemic origin of the series' populist antagonists. Likewise, it reduces their agency, featuring Chalon and Mercier primarily as spectres with relatively little active screen time, thus avoiding the agenda-setting dominance that the polarising nature of extremist positions usually has on political discourse independent of their affirmation or rejection.

This chapter will subsequently examine how BN models the fictional malfunction of its elaborately constructed diegetic political actor-network as a complex, emergent system that functions according to its own interior logic. It will become clear that populist success, in BN, is the result of an interplay of various miscalculations resulting in the decline of the front républicain: (1) the insoluble division of the political left and their abandonment of traditional voter groups; (2) a dangerous tendency towards uncompromising idealpolitik and a yearning for systemic overhaul that creates a paradox discursive blindness in which right- and left-wing extremist can ally against the system; (3) the acceptance of a cosmetically altered extreme right through the established conservative centre either because of the false assumption of reform or because of the equally false idea that an instrumentalisation of their destructive dynamic for constructive purposes is possible.

The analysis of BN will demonstrate that polit-fiction's predominant way of dramatising politics and political structures through a simplified, often binary, narrative focus on senior members of the executive branch is by no means inevitable. Instead, BN constitutes an example of a complex dramatisation of the interplay of various parts of official and unofficial governance under the leadership of a protagonist who holds no government office at all for the greater part of the series.

It will become clear that, with its pluralist, multipolar vision of politics, BN is an inherently political series with significant potential to create effects of authenticity – by no means to be confused with immediate, undistorted 'accuracy' – in its portrayal of contemporary French political discourse. With its run from 2016 to 2020, BN extended over a particularly tense period in recent French history. Starting with socialist president Francois Hollande still in power, it stretched across the collapse of the established party land-

scape in France. Its more easily quantifiable events saw the formerly presidential PS fall to 5,2% in the 2017 French legislative election and the rise of political newcomer Emanuel Macron to the presidency with his newfound party La République en Marche gaining 53% in the legislature.

It also saw an increase in the popularity of populist movements, particularly on the far right, with the leader of right-wing Rassemblement National (formerly Front National), Marine Le Pen, gaining 33% of the votes in the 2017 presidential election's second round. Likewise, it is a period of increased political alienation all over the political spectrum, a time that saw profound social unrest and even violent escalation in the 2018 and 2019's Gilet Jaune [yellow vest] movement.

As this chapter is being edited in the summer of 2022, The threat of systemic malfunction of the French political system seems, once again, an all too real possibility with an arguably controversial, moderate candidate Emmanuel Macron winning the 2022 presidential election against right-wing-candidate Marine Le Pen by a 10%-reduced margin as compared to 2017, various political leaders on the left and right refusing to endorse the front républicain against the extreme right ahead of the election's decisive second round, and French society demonstrating a growing degree of refraction. Two years after its conclusion, BN's fictional modelling of systemic malfunction has, thus, seemingly gained a troubling immediacy. The series' unusual presentation of politics thus certainly merits a closer look.

7.1 Politics as a Fictional Actor-Network

Politics, in BN, appears as a complex actor-network of diverse micro- and macro actors who wrestle for dominance, that is, the legitimate power to rule⁴ and realise often mutually exclusive interests. The series thus marks a decisive turn away from the AM series discussed in chapter 6, with their exposition of a unified – anti-political – populist political realm.

With its pluralist vision of politics, BN, other than most polit-fiction, does not show an executive bias, that is, a focus on the personified upper echelons of simplified government. BN's various political players come from all levels and branches of government and involve political parties (the fictional *Partie Socialiste* features extensively), trade unions, public initiatives, and interest groups alike. The central power base for protagonist Philippe Rickwaert, e.g., is not a particular office (such as a fictional presidency or even a crown) but his role as a skilled navigator of the broader diegetic political actor-network. While he remains in contact with the executive – either as mayor of Dunkerque at odds with the president, as an official or unofficial advisor, or as cabinet minister – Rickwaert, for extended stretches of the series, holds no official elected position at all.

4 See Klaus Schubert, Klaus and Martina Klein: *Das Politiklexikon*, 7th ed., licensed edition Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, s.v. "Herrschaft" (Bonn: Dietz, 2020), via *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, accessed 28.08.2022, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/17608/herrschaft/>.

In BN, this pluralist state of affairs appears to be congruent with the very nature of politics as the continuous process of negotiating the distribution of power⁵ between various actors with diverging but legitimate views. The left-wing politician Michel Vidal, one of the series' central characters and its primary meta-exegete, expresses this sentiment while discussing a populist antagonist, stating: "Mercier is perfectly adapted. Every problem resolved with one answer. That is the real new world, the end of politics".⁶

The term 'end of politics' referenced by Vidal is a well-established, albeit controversial, concept, particularly in left-leaning political theory and sociology, discussing the consequences of neoliberal capitalism's supposed 'inevitabilities'. Pronounced by the fictional left-wing commentator Vidal in BN's negotiation of political discourse, it references the series' view of the destructive simplifications of populism.

In a pluralist democratic world, as Jacques Rancière notes with regard to the 'end of politics', "the essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself".⁷ It thus relies on the "political litigation over the partition of worlds".⁸ However, in unified visions of politics, e.g. those conveyed by the populist quest discussed in chapter 6, the idea of a singular body of the populous, with one discernible will, renders such consolidation of varying interests unnecessary. What 'the people' need and want is evident and discernible to the populist leader alone, who, accordingly, holds the sole right to representation.⁹ At the end of politics, be it capitalist or populist, there exists, to say it with Rancière,

a theoretical idyll of a philosophical determination of the good that the political community would then have the task of achieving; a political idyll of achieving the common good by an enlightened government of elites buoyed by the confidence of the masses.¹⁰

Such consensus thus marks the end of politics by annulling dissensus, nullifying "surplus subjects", and reducing "the people to the sum of the parts of the social body".¹¹ The consensus-based end of politics, as Rancière notes, "posits the existence of a state of the social in which politics no longer has any necessary reason for being".¹² For a populist,

5 See Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.

6 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 44.08". My translation: "Mercier, lui est parfaitement adapté. Tous les problèmes résolus en une seule mesure. C'est ça [...] la fin de la politique".

7 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed./transl. Steven Corcoran (London/New York: Continuum, 2010), 42.

8 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 43.

9 See Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 188f., <https://doi.org/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>.

10 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, transl. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 93.

11 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 42.

12 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 43.

negotiating the distribution of power between different legitimate poles – the central vision of pluralist politics held by BN's protagonists – is not a necessary societal function but a betrayal of the will of 'the people'. In BN, however, while threatened by several populist antagonists throughout the series, the pluralist order remains a diegetic reality.

Accordingly, the complexity of the diegetic polity in BN is as remarkable as the breadth of represented political agendas and moral dispositions. Characters' motivations vary from personal ambition to reach a position of power (*power politics*) to implementing change through administrative compromise (*realpolitik*) to opposing visions of a fundamental societal overhaul (*idealistic politics*). The result is a fictional political realm of rare complexity about which the fictional Amélie Dorendeu, discussing the convoluted alliances necessary to navigate the labyrinthine French electoral system, states: "In politics, one plus one rarely equals two".¹³

Figure 37 provides an overview of the central actors involved in BN's political struggles. The nodes represent central macro actors and their respective position on the political spectrum (in a binary left-right configuration). Connections between the nodes indicate an active and direct association that is visible in the narrative. The personal names outside the nodes represent the series' central characters, and their position indicates their respective association with the various macro actors as well as their position on the political spectrum. The margins indicate the diegetic Overton Window, that is, the range of acceptable political discourse within the series' diegetic mainstream.¹⁴ Some characters find themselves clearly within the series' diegetic Overton Window (such as protagonist Rickwaert or deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu). In contrast, most of BN's primary antagonists (right-wing extremist Lionel Chalon and the anti-systemic populist Christophe Mercier) remain outside these margins.

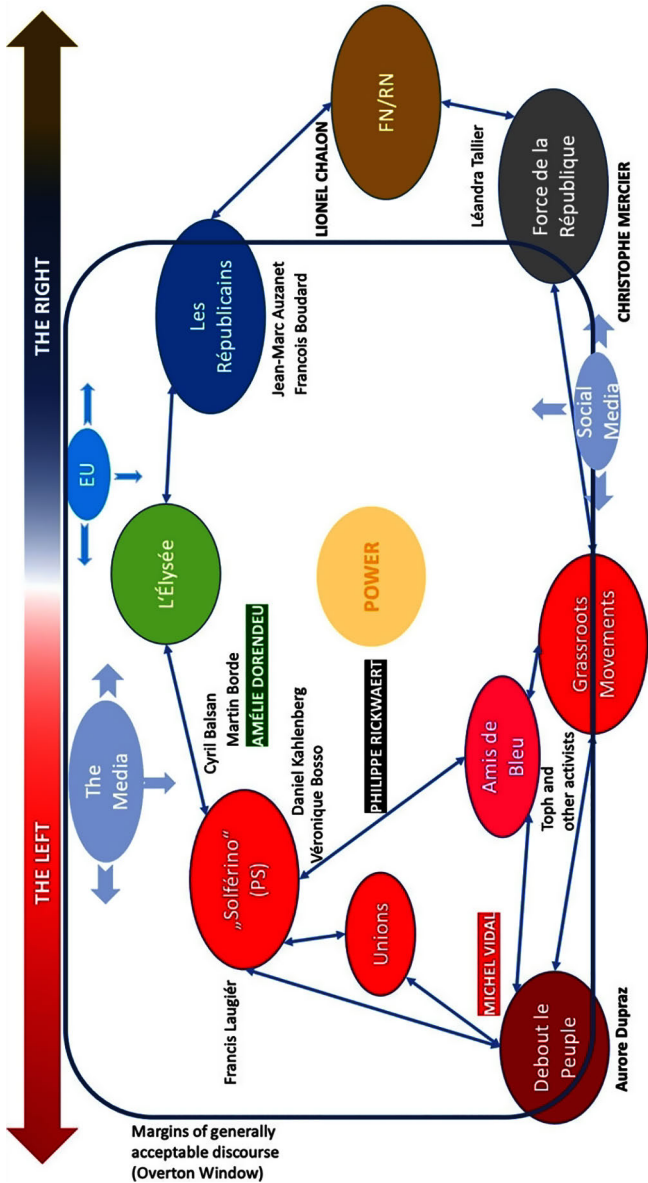
As the number and distribution of actors and actor-connections and the general position of the diegetic Overton Window indicate, there is a clear focus on the political left in BN, both concerning the series' characters and the represented political discourse. Most actors in the series' pluralist polity are historically associated with the political left. Examples include a traditionally obstinate and internally belligerent PS party structure, confident trade unions, the socialist international framework, and various grassroots movements surrounding progressive causes. Most characters are members of either the socialist PS (based on its homonymous historical role model) or the left-populist 'movement' Debout le Peuple (modelled after the historic leftist party La France Insoumise). Apart from the fictional party Les Républicains (referencing the homonymous historical French conservative party), a similar set of actors on the French right remains largely invisible in BN. Following historical precedent, it may include the organised Christian faiths, a more extensive consideration for moneyed interest, the so-called "Deux cent

13 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 2, "Diaspora", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17.22". My translation: "En politique un et un fait rarement deux".

14 See Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "The Overton Window", accessed August 28, 2022, <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>.

familles”¹⁵ (the 200 wealthiest French families), and a more conservative set of interest groups.

Figure 37: The multipolar diegetic actor-network in *Baron Noir*



15 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 06.10”.

BN's notable left-wing bias is partly due to Eric Benzekri, the series' credited showrunner function, who looks back at a notable career as an advisor and functionary on the French political left. Benzekri served as a political activist, an advisor of long-time PS-functionary Julien Dray, and member of the shadow cabinet of left-wing politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon from 2000–2002. As of 2022, the latter is the leader of the leftist party La France insoumise and has been a repeatedly unsuccessful yet disruptive contender for the French presidency. Serving as the series' showrunner function, Benzekri's intimate knowledge of the political process, especially within the French political left, has been extensively highlighted both in marketing and criticism of the series. At one point, even the prominent socialist politician Julien Dray himself claimed – and later disclaimed – to be the role model for Philippe Rickwaert.¹⁶

However, it would be a fallacy to suggest that Benzekri's political experience automatically guaranteed a more authentic portrayal of political processes or that any fictional character in BN is an 'accurate' representation of any supposed historical role model. Following long-standing procedures of prestige TV, BN's focus on the political left is ultimately due to the series' *pragmatic* logic as a 'prized' cultural commodity. As a high-profile production of the subscription-based channel Canal+, BN targets French-speaking prestige audiences and thus well-educated, urban, and progressive/left-leaning populations. Therefore, BN's ideological landscape is designed to appeal to its target audience functions and enable them to easily identify with the main characters and their ideological sphere.

BN's comparatively complex fictional model of politics is decidedly different from most other fictionalisations of politics that often rely on easy-to-follow personalised agonal conflicts with transparent cause-and-effect chains. The series' structural complexity makes frequent introductory comments necessary that, following *dramatic* logic, also serve to acquaint audiences with the intricate mechanisms of French politics. In "1932", Rickwaert's assistant, Cyril Balsan, for example, lays out the convoluted French electoral system to a *dramatically* naïve first-order activist, laying out both the systemic reasons for their actions and the stakes involved (a daunting victory for the far right)¹⁷ for the benefit of the audience.

7.1.1 Zero-Sum Politics?

In BN, all players within the acceptable political spectrum are happy to break codified law and common conceptions of moral conventions. Politicians conduct themselves in a less than becoming manner; campaign activists steal flyers; Presidents search for "room for manoeuvre" in their attempts to influence the judicial prosecution of their minis-

16 "Finalement, Julien Dray dit qu'il n'est pas le 'Baron Noir'", *Le Monde*, March 17, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2016/03/17/finalement-julien-dray-dit-qu-il-n-est-pas-le-baron-noir_5991934_4832693.html.

17 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17:35".

ters;¹⁸ oppositional politicians organise a burglary in order to find incriminating evidence against their opponent.¹⁹ Characters likewise often discuss the merciless nature of politics, e.g., asserting that “Your responsibility to the country supersedes friendship”²⁰ or that “There is no friendship in politics”.²¹

Deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu, describing her vision of politics, states: “Doing everything I can it takes to win is the rule. I didn’t make it”. In the French original, she adds: “C’est la règle du jeu en politique” [*It is the rule of the game, in politics*].²² While the trope of the ruthless and uncompromising power game is commonplace in polit-fiction, Dorendeu’s claim is false, or at least incomplete in the case of BN. So, what are the actual rules of the series’ ‘game of politics’?

Despite widespread ruthlessness, Politics in BN is by no means the uncompromising zero-sum slaughter it appears to be in other cynical polit-fiction of the 2010s (see, e.g., VEEP and Eichwald in chapter 6 or HoC in chapter 8). Politics, in BN, is a notably uncooperative game, that is, a game in which no force of higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. However, there is a substantial set of political players on all sides who, while being ruthless in their pursuit of personal power and majorities, do not seek to ultimately dismantle or destroy the system and indeed work to save it despite their differences. As a clear reflection of realpolitik, Dorendeu, for example, justifies her uncompromising attitude by pointing out the stakes of the political game: “What’s the alternative? The FN is high, the system is out of breath. I’m not waiting for it to collapse and take democracy with it”.²³ Dorendeu ultimately even agrees to sacrifice her presidency and reputation in order to give Rickwaert the chance to defeat Mercier in a renewed presidential bid.²⁴

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- 18 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 32.24’. My translation from the official German translation: “Welche Möglichkeiten haben wir?”.
 - 19 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, “Pardon”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 14.03’.
 - 20 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.15’. My translation from the official German translation: “Wer für eine Nation verantwortlich ist, kann sich keine Freundschaft leisten”.
 - 21 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.14’. My translation: “il n’y a pas d’amitié en politique”.
 - 22 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 5, “Chouquette”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.15’.
 - 23 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 5, “Chouquette”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 22.48’. Translation from the official German translation: “Was ist die Alternative? Der FN ist stark, das System ist ausgeblutet. Ich sehe mir nicht an wie es auseinanderbricht und die Demokratie gleich mit, weil ich nichts mache”.
 - 24 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49.40’.

Nevertheless, why does the emergent actor-network of politics in BN constantly verge on the brink of collapse? The reason is (1) the series' dramatic logic, which requires high stakes to create high-intensity plotlines that make a suspenseful narrative capable of engaging audiences. However, the series (2) introduces this *dramatic* requirement through an unusually coherent intradiegetic logic that merits a closer look.

7.1.2 Multipolar Leadership

Political power, in the pluralist world of BN, rarely comes automatically to any political office. In the series' multipolar political actor-network, slick behind-the-scenes operators like Philippe Rickwaert often exert significantly more influence than less savvy political officials. At a PS party function, Dorendeu's clumsy prime minister, for example, is reprimanded for trying to assert his office's ceremonial precedence. An obstinate party leader promptly reminds him of the difference between a ministers' council (in which officers of state act according to their nominal ceremonial function) and a party committee (in which these nominal functions are ultimately assigned).²⁵

As I have mentioned previously, popular polit-fiction is often seen to avoid presenting the "slow, powerful drilling through hard boards"²⁶ that constitutes the political process, according to Max Weber. Remarkably, BN's fictionalisation of politics, while selective and reductive as all fictional narratives must necessarily be, focuses primarily on the procedural elements of politics. Many of the series' conflicts revolve around the political business of securing the support of the population, the political parties, parliament and the republic's institutional framework. Politics, in BN, ultimately appears like a mixture of agenda-setting through campaigning and orchestrated media appearances, the negotiation of parliamentary majorities and debates,²⁷ and the obtaining of stakeholder support through complex backroom deals. President Dorendeu's commitment to renounce the use of the constitutional (and historically precedented) paragraph 49.3, which enables the French president to force the passage of a bill without parliamentary consent, e.g., results in elaborate attempts and underhanded deals to secure legislative majorities.²⁸ The plot in "Satanas" primarily revolves around rallying political support from diverse sources for a referendum on the reform of the powerful presidency,²⁹ with the plotline turning

25 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 19.30".

26 Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 93.

27 See, e.g., *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 4, "Bleu", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.00".

28 See, e.g., *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 3, "Haram", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 30.45".

29 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

into a comparatively differentiated discussion of the Fifth Republic's overall power structure.

7.1.3 The Metonymic Corridors of Power

The seat of power in BN is fluid and multicentred. The question of where exactly power is situated in the series' fictional polity formally manifests in its portrayal of politicised spaces as symbols of access and insider knowledge. Following an established custom in historical French political discourse, BN's fictional seats of power often appear as metonymic toponyms, that is, the names of the ministries' physical residences serving as *pars pro toto* signifiers for the political institutions they house. Crucial metonymic seats of power are the Elysée Palace, the seat of the French president ("L'Elysée"), "Matignon" (seat of the prime minister), "Quai d'Orsay" (the foreign ministry), and "Bercy" (the ministry of economy and finance). A central metonymic seat of power in BN is the PS's headquarters, "Solférino" – often referred to as "Solfé" – which derives its name from the historical party's famous former residence in the Parisian Rue de Solférino. The series' liberal use of these toponyms as metonymies for institutionalised power hints at the relatively high degree of French cultural and political literacy that the series presupposes for its audiences.

In BN, the distribution of power appears as an implicit discussion (and relativisation) of Carl Schmitt's concept of "corridor formation"³⁰: the management of access to political officials as a means to determine power. As Schmitt would have it, the distribution of power in BN is often represented by a character's physical access to a metonymic place. The *pars pro toto* toponyms thus serve as a remarkably poignant representation of a character's political power. A character's access – or non-access – to these metonymic places often – but not always – indicated their position in the series' various political power games. The fictional PS, e.g., loses its metonymic headquarters in season 3 together with its political power and in accordance with the historical PS' loss of "Solférino" in 2017 following major electoral defeats. The series often features president Amélie Dorendeu wandering through the splendid interiors of the presidential residences. After his release from prison, the convicted felon Philippe Rickwaert, on the other hand, must meet President Dorendeu after hours at a swimming pool³¹ because the gilded corridors of "L'Elysée" are no longer (and not again) accessible for him.

The totality of BN's metaphorical 'corridors of power' is more varied than in most other series, partly owing to its status as a subscription service's prestige production and the resulting comparatively high number of locations. The ultimate negotiation of power can occur in kitchens and private gardens, hotel rooms in Spain, swimming halls, backrooms at union strikes, or via phone calls and text messages sent from prison via an ille-

30 Carl Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 25. My translation: "Korridorbildung".

31 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, "Twins", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Oliver Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 07:37".

gally obtained cell phone.³² However, sovereign use of the various metonymies of power serves as a clear indicator of a character's degree of initiation.

7.1.4 Dismantling the Presidency

Historically, the personified *body politic* of the French Presidency serves as a focal point for the French national imaginary. Since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958, the French President possesses an extensive array of competencies that exceed those of most other republican heads of government/state. As a symbol of the nation, he*she furthermore fulfils wide-ranging representative functions accompanied by elaborate furnishings usually reserved for monarchical rather than democratic heads of state. Reflecting historical circumstance, BN's Amélie Dorendeu accordingly assures her predecessor, President Laugiér, "You're the face of national unity".³³ During her own presidency, she states: "Moi, j'incarne l'état" [*I incarnate the state*].³⁴

The presidency and its metonymy, the Elysée Palace, occupy a central position in the series' political narrative both as a narrative focal point and physical locale. BN thus breaks with established French cinematic tradition, which traditionally maintains a ceremonial sacrosanctity of the office of the President and, by default, those who occupy it.³⁵

Breaking this taboo, BN not only shows ambivalent portrayals of the characters who occupy the Elysée (season 1's President, Francis Laugiér, e.g., embezzles money to pay off his divorced wife)³⁶ but features extensive criticism of the institution of the presidency itself, going so far as to question its very existence. Taking offence with its sizeable powers and splendid representative furnishings, BN's meta-pragmatic Michel Vidal, e.g., denounces the presidency as the "monarchie présidentielle"³⁷ [*the presidential monarchy*]. In a similar vein, the fictional Marxist Aurore Dupraz comments on a planned referendum on the reform of the presidency, stating:

32 For the latter see *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, "Pardon", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 55.32".

33 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 08.50". Translated from the official German translation: "Sie verkörpern ab jetzt Frankreichs Einheit".

34 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 15.09".

35 See Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles: Commander in Chief et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis", *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no 1 (2012): 38, doi: 10.1080/09639489.2011.631701.

36 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 48.07".

37 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 46.53".

And on Sunday, we have the duty to see it through to the end. Just as in 1793, Sunday is about voting for the death of the king. The end of oligarchy. The end of cast privilege. The end of the system.³⁸

In BN, the distrust of the polity is caused, in no small part, by system-inherent flaws as identified by prevalent historical left-wing discourse. Accordingly, the main reason for the fictional actor-network's malfunction is the overly powerful office of the president. Its reform not only serves as the central motif in the political struggles of season 3 but is used to elaborate, in some detail, on the systemic conditions of the Fifth Republic. In "Inventaire", Amélie Dorendeau lays out the potential democratic deficit caused by the unusually powerful presidency (historically introduced in 1958 to provide Charles de Gaulle with a stronger constitutional position), citing it as the leading cause for the estrangement between public and government.³⁹ This manifests in a systemically caused alienation of any sitting government, shown, e.g., by the presidents' traditionally bad subsequent election results.⁴⁰

Describing the severe consequences of the Fifth Republic's inherent systemic flaws, she states:

With inevitable disappointment after inevitable disappointment [in the presidency], we turn to fortuitous profiles which increasingly turn against the system. Counter-powers are challenged. The entire democratic system will end up as the victim of presidentialism.⁴¹

Discussing the consequences of such political alienation – the rise of populism – the series' left-wing exegetes Michel Vidal and Aurore Dupraz state in one of their frequent theoretical excursions: "When history has no great men, it invents them".⁴²

38 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.05". Translation from the original: "Et dimanche nous aurons le devoir de la conduire à son terme. Dimanche il s'agira comme 1793 de voter la mort du roi. La fin de l'oligarchie. La fin des privilèges de la caste. La fin du système."

39 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 02.05".

40 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 6.17".

41 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 4.32". Translation from the official French version: "[...] et d'espoir forcément déçu en espoir forcément déçu on se tourne vers des profils providentiels de plus en plus antisystèmes. On remet en cause tous les contre-pouvoirs. C'est tout le système démocratique qui finira par être victime du présidentielisme".

42 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 36.26". Translation from the original: "Quand l'histoire n'a pas des grands hommes elle les invente" (with explicit reference to G.W.F. Hegel).

While material inequalities and discriminatory practices are often cited as reasons for political tension in BN, the question of systemic malfunction surrounding the presidency lies at the heart of the series' final conflict.

7.1.5 Parties and Non-Governmental Macro Actors

Political parties, particularly the PS, occupy a central role in BN. Itself an actor-network, the system consisting of the various formal and informal power structures within the party, appears as an unwieldy yet vital vehicle for the continued exercise of power. The fictional president himself needs to consider the dispersed landscape of varying interests and political currents within his/her party in the process of decision-making. Frequently defying their respective presidents, Francis Laugi r (season 1) and Am lie Dorendeu (season 2 & 3), the PS, e.g., refuses to sabotage Rickwaert and other socialist MPs by sacrificing their constituency to political opponents⁴³ and cannot be relied upon to uphold retribution measures against dissidents within its own ranks.⁴⁴

The PS appears to be a well-oiled machine within the political and civil systems of administration and government. As a long-reigning political force in the north, it, e.g., controls – and abuses – the region's vast social housing funds.⁴⁵ Its numerous activists ("militants") are an essential resource that can be called upon at a moment's notice to, e.g., plaster over an opponent's campaign posters⁴⁶ or steal their flyers from mailboxes.⁴⁷ The far-left around Michel Vidal's *Debout le Peuple* and populist Lionel Chalon's extreme-right RN possess a similar network of readily available activists. The latter's followers are prone to racist violence frequently instrumentalised by Chalon, e.g., during an attack on a student gathering on racism and racist violence.⁴⁸

The power struggles in BN primarily play out within the PS' established systemic party structures. Philippe Rickwaert devotes most of his energy and most of the series' narrating time not to achieving a political mandate but to (1) gain and retain sway over his party and (2) reunite the political left in France. In the episode "#MeToo", Vidal and

43 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.16".

44 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 9.10".

45 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

46 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 10.45".

47 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 22.50".

48 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 00.45".

Rickwaert, likewise, court representatives from associated Southern European socialist parties to further establish their personal dominance within the left.⁴⁹

Parties and their cumbersome structures are omnipresent in BN. Amélie Dorendeau attempts to achieve a unification of the political centre. Extremist Chalon struggles to retain the support of the far-right. Even the anti-systemic, anti-establishment Christophe Mercier ultimately depends on the support of the well-organised party machines of the far-left and far-right, respectively, e.g., using activists mobilised by Aurore Dupraz and Debout le Peuple to mount public pressure for his destructive cause.⁵⁰

Dominance, in BN, ultimately depends very much on “the *accord* of the dominated”.⁵¹ The PS, for example, depends on the support of the trade unions, which are themselves led by shrewd second-order players not easily manipulated by Rickwaert’s otherwise convincing machinations.⁵² Political activism (within and outside political parties) forms another visible part of BN’s vision of the pluralistic democratic system. In the series, civil movements appear primarily tied to politicians, their agendas, and party resources. However, they also need to be constantly humoured, seduced, and considered.

The influence of civil organisations on institutionalised politics is exemplified by a diegetic student movement founded by Rickwaert and his associates as a tool to mount public pressure.⁵³ There are high-school strikes with their own intrinsic structures and logics that are encouraged, instrumentalised and manipulated by Rickwaert but ultimately prove to be yet another obstinate actor-network that must be continuously humoured, convinced, and seduced. The left-wing populist Michel Vidal, together with Rickwaert, similarly supports and instrumentalises the ostensible grassroots movement “Les Enfants de la République” for their own ends.⁵⁴

49 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 24.44”.

50 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 11.00”.

51 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73. My translation: “[...] dass Herrschaft der *Zustimmung* der Beherrschten bedarf”. Original emphasis.

52 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, “1932”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.00”.

53 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 5, “Grenelle”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 00.56”.

54 See *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 7, “Diprotodon”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.50”.

7.1.6 A Rare Fictional Appearance: The European Union

A remarkable feature of BN is the role of the European Union. The inclusion of the multi-national and highly complex construct of the EU in a simplified fictional polity is a rare feature in polit-fiction. As Steven Fielding remarks, it usually either does not mention the EU at all or refers to it in simplified tropes as a dystopian technocratic bureaucracy.⁵⁵

In BN, on the other hand, the EU plays an essential and highly differentiated role. European structures, treaties and interests continuously limit fictional France's national sovereignty. In "Shutdown", the French government, for example, struggles with a debt that exceeds the European deficit limits.⁵⁶ In the episode "Solférino", President Laugiér attempts to divert EU funds from Dunkerque in order to hurt Rickwaert's political base.⁵⁷ Likewise, the EU and individual European partners and institutions continuously feature as a crucial discursive and political influence, e.g., in a cross-partisan fight around French fiscal politics. As president, Amélie Dorendeau cites "hatred of Europe" as the force driving France's populist movements.⁵⁸

The EU, in BN, appears as a "critical mass" that enables post-colonial European nations to remain a factor in a hostile world full of self-confident old and new powers.⁵⁹ As one of the traditional pillars of historical European politics, the French-German alliance features heavily in season 3, where Amélie Dorendeau and the German chancellor plot a "great federal leap", a unification of France and Germany to "Franceallemagne".⁶⁰

7.1.7 The Media and the Political Soap Opera

Another crucial part of BN's diegetic actor-network are the media. They occupy an ambivalent position in several central political plotlines. On the one hand, traditional media, above all the fictional counterpart of the historical online magazine *Mediapart*, fulfil their attributed function as fourth estate and democratic watchdog, e.g., by releasing infor-

55 See Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", *LSE* (blog), March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

56 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

57 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, "Solférino", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 39.20".

58 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 38.50".

59 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 25.17".

60 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 39.21".

mation that reveals President Laugiér's involvement in an embezzlement scandal (season 1).⁶¹

Social media, on the other hand, appears both a vital part of political agenda-setting and a dangerous, disreputable, and unreliable realm in which populists do the bulk of their damage. Both the populists Michel Vidal and Christophe Mercier reach a vast percentage of their power base outside established media. In the episode "Diprotodon", misdirected public outrage leads to the social media slandering of a technocrat who gets caught in the spotlight.⁶² Moreover, Amélie Dorendeau deals with – and ultimately dismisses – highly questionable representatives of an agency that uses social media to influence targeted public opinion.⁶³

While both traditional media and social media play an essential role in the political games of BN, the series, other than most examples in this study, focuses little on the construction of the mediatised simulacra of the *body politic* of its protagonists. In BN, the moderate politicians of the political centre are ultimately concerned with campaigning for or against policy. Unconditional self-marketing, in BN, is reserved mainly for the populist margins of the political spectrum. Acceptable political self-presentation, in BN, always appears like a mixture of personal *mise-en-scène* and more or less constructive policy proposals. Accordingly, Amélie Dorendeau states:

The presidential election is a soap opera, a TV series in which image and personality are more important than ideas. Look how this over-personalisation impoverishes debates.⁶⁴

Dorendeau, here, cites a common – though oversimplifying – claim that has often been made with respect to more current developments in contemporary political discourse surrounding the 'gamification' or 'ludification' of simulative spectacle politics and "politainment"⁶⁵ (as discussed in chapters 2, 4, and 5). In its increasing reliance on media spectacle, contemporary politics has often been said to produce oversimplified and distorted images of complex political issues in order to appeal to audiences schooled in the affordances of mass media consumption. Van Zoonen points out that the very trope of

61 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.31".

62 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 7, "Diprotodon", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.45".

63 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.07".

64 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.20". Translation from the original: "La présidentielle est devenu un feuilleton, une série télévisée dans laquelle on confronte plus les images et les personnalité que les idées. Vous voyez comme cette hyperpersonnalisation appauvrit les débats".

65 Term coined in Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001).

“politics as soap opera” – evoked by Dorendeu – is a common platitude in the discourse surrounding the perception of contemporary gamified politics.⁶⁶

BN demonstrates populist success as a partial result of the ability to turn the media’s inherent logic of focusing on the new and scandalous – rather than the regular and constructive – against the system. Accordingly, BN’s fictional media outlets afford significant attention to polarising populists like the polarising but otherwise entirely unremarkable Christophe Mercier.⁶⁷

7.1.8 The Dispersed Antagonist

BN’s presentation of the diegetic polity as a complex, emergent actor-network manifests in the composition of its protagonist-antagonist structure. Structurally speaking, the role of the antagonist in BN is not personified by one or several discernible characters, as is usually the case in fiction. Instead, the narrative derives its agonal dynamic from a dispersed systemic setup in which the interplay of several more or less unrelated plotlines creates favourable or unfavourable conditions for the protagonists’ own goals.

In BN, protagonist Philippe Rickwaert and – starting in season 2 – deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu always face more than one potential opponent. As political alliances in BN are in constant flux, almost all characters within the series (barring the antagonistic extremists Mercier and Chalon) are allies at one point in the series and adversaries at another.

In a break with popular fictional tradition that usually features discernible conflicts between identifiable personalised actors in a tangle of cause and effect chain, many of BN’s main arcs (e.g., its primary conflict: pluralism vs populism) involve several dispersed struggles across the political actor-network. Rickwaert and Dorendeu’s primary task to prevent the rise of the right (season 2) and a populist, anti-systemic alliance (season 3), for example, involves far more direct on-screen conflict within the political left and the wider front *républicain* than visible confrontation with right-wing leader Chalon or populist-leader Mercier. Season 3’s main antagonist, Christophe Mercier, notably appears as late as its fifth episode, “Satanas” (out of a total of eight).

In BN’s comparatively complex diegetic polity, victory, accordingly, never just involves winning an election. Instead, it entails various subordinate tasks, e.g., achieving and retaining a firm standing within one’s own party and larger political denomination, gathering majorities for various legislative propositions, accommodating various political and social interests, and neutralising diverging voices within one’s own camp.

The variable nature of an individual player’s position in the narrative’s ally-antagonist configuration and the dispersed nature of the seasonal struggles that play out on a variety of changing battlefields serve to make visible the emergent actor-network of BN’s political system. Interestingly, in this multipolar configuration of narrative conflict, the

66 See Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 19–35.

67 E.g. throughout *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, “Satanas”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

central antagonists (Chalon and Mercier) rarely appear as the tangible orchestrators of the respective political struggle. Their screen time and visible agency remain notably limited throughout BN.

While the racist Chalon and the conspiracy theorist Mercier remain personally reprehensible, their potential to inflict systemic damage appears as a product not merely of their political talent – Mercier is a comparatively clumsy political operator reliant on the ill-conceived support of his right- and left-wing allies – but of the system's overall inability to neutralise destructive influences. Chalon and Mercier become threats not because of sinister Machiavellian plots that would reveal their sovereign agency. In BN's emergent political actor-network, they become dangerous because (1) the left is divided and uncertain about how to approach pressing political and societal concerns and (2) because other, more established political forces believe themselves able to instrumentalise these destructive forces for their own gain. I will examine this further in the coming section.

BN's dispersed antagonist reduces the agency, screen-time, and consequently the discursive influence of the series' extremist characters. By partly withholding central antagonistic agency from Chalon and Mercier while retaining the impression of their destructive potential, the series avoids legitimising these characters as dominant participants of political discourse. In historical reality, well-intentioned repetitive vilification of political extremists has often produced the unintended effect of providing these extremists with an unwanted dominance of the political agenda. Through BN's fictional refocusing on the systemic structures that provide the conditions for extremist developments rather than the extremists themselves, the series ensures that the thread posed by Mercier and Chalon remains tangible while their extremist, racist discourses never attain an equally dominant status within the narrative discourse. The fact that the left-wing antagonist Michel Vidal, with his far less destructive socialist agenda, becomes a dominant presence in much of season 3 illustrates this further (as the coming sections will show).

In its highly complex narrative composition, BN creates a tangible climate of suspense without directly linking a conflict's resolution to the neutralisation of individual characters. Where, in most polit-series, the elimination of an opponent usually spells the end of his*her plotline, BN's dispersed antagonist makes a satisfying resolution much more complicated. The series' finale, accordingly, offers reprieve but not relief. While Rickwaert wins the presidential election by a thin margin,⁶⁸ both the political alliances and the societal currents that had enabled a mad, anti-systemic populist to almost take the Elysée remain in place. Only one person ends up truly vanquished in the finale of BN: the disgraced former president Amélie Dorendeu commits suicide as a martyr for the democratic cause.⁶⁹

68 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 48.35".

69 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 52.25".

7.1.9 Pluralists and Populists

BN presents a highly politicised France that is unable to reroute its unsettling energies into constructive channels of political participation. Part of the reason for this critical state of affairs is a dangerous diegetic intolerance of systemic complexities and imperfections. While the pluralistic protagonists struggle for the consolidation of various interests across their respective political target audiences, their populist counterparts offer simplified visions of categorical political reasoning (on the left) and an incoherent emotional vision of a unified ‘people’ with a clear set of enemies (on the right).

In the complex moral universe of BN, no character is unambiguously positive, few are entirely reprehensible, and all commit crimes or transgressions for political gain. However, as the series progresses, it features an increasingly clear normative division between the pluralist protagonists’ morally sound goals and the categorical delusions of their populist counterparts. In BN, *realpolitik* thus becomes tasked with saving the system from the onslaught of power politics and destructive idealistic politics.

7.1.9.1 Philippe Rickwaert: *The Red Baron Noir*

Philippe Rickwaert is the series’ uncontested central protagonist and appears, from the start, as a born *homo politicus*. Following BN’s vision of *realpolitik*, Rickwaert is a politician who, in determining his course of action in a complex and morally ambivalent world, weighs necessary negative against desired positive effects and decides accordingly, bearing the consequences of his decisions. As an astute political operator, he can deduce an opponent’s tactics merely by glancing at a stolen leaflet.⁷⁰ As an experienced activist of the PS, he effortlessly channels and manipulates public engagement. Even as a convict, he encourages political organisation amongst fellow prison inmates.⁷¹ In “Bleu”, a newspaper accordingly portrays him as the puppet master of an ensuing youth movement christening him “Le Baron Noir”, the black baron.⁷² The epithet that references the series’ title is not only a play on the slightly sinister motif of the “*éminence grise*” – Rickwaert will, throughout the series, remain most potent as an operator behind the scenes – but also on the influential and venerable set of socialist party functionaries sometimes colloquially called the “*barons rouges*” [*Red Barons*].

Initially, the ruthless machinator Rickwaert appears to follow the cynical tradition of polit-fiction, treating politics as a highly agonal *Zero-Sum* game for personal advancement. Watching a presidential TV debate, he states: “This isn’t about politics now. It’s just two men, a winner and a loser.” Rickwaert subsequently affirms a bystander’s remark

70 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, “1932”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.20”.

71 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, “Twins”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 01.19”.

72 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 4, “Bleu”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 47.55”.

about the “Darwinian” quality of his view on politics.⁷³ His political philosophy seems, at this point, to revolve mainly around personal advancement. The fact that the Black Baron is involved in an embezzlement scandal and attempts to frame an old family friend⁷⁴ further supports this early impression of Machiavellian power politics.

BN’s first season quickly establishes the central plot around Rickwaert’s criminal activities as mayor of Dunkerque. By 07.45” in the season’s first episode, “Jupiter”, audiences learn that Rickwaert embezzled funds to support his party comrade Laugiér’s successful presidential campaign, that the police are on his heels and that he has seven hours to replace the money.

However, while the series starts by showing Rickwaert as a ruthless and highly efficient political operator, he also appears as a politician with ideals (albeit not illusions). In the somewhat expository episode “Solférino”, the protagonist Rickwaert has his critical ‘Save the cat’-moment, that is, a defining diegetic incident serving the *dramatic* purpose of demonstrating the nature of his character to audiences.⁷⁵ After a boy almost dies during a cruel prank involving his teenage daughter, Salomé, the self-proclaimed political Darwinist Rickwaert scolds her, calling the mistreatment of the weak “barbarism”.⁷⁶ In season 2, Rickwaert, accordingly, instructs fellow prison inmates not to racially stereotype and avoid using derogatory terms for LGBTQ* people.⁷⁷ In “Shutdown”, he states: “I became a politician to defend minorities. I’m proud of it, but I want to go beyond that”.⁷⁸

In the expository episode “Solférino”, Rickwaert lays out his materialist views on the increasing refraction of French society, citing a generation-spanning wealth gap as the main reason for decreasing national unity.⁷⁹ However, while Rickwaert has firm opinions on what a better world would look like, as a follower of *realpolitik*, he has no illusions about what it takes to get there. In his quest to achieve his political goals, Rickwaert is undeterred by morality or law, applying extensive moral licensing by citing ‘good’ reasons

73 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 3.48”.

74 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.30”.

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

76 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, “Solférino”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 25.40”. My translation from the official German translation: “Barbarei”.

77 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, “Twins”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 01.30”.

78 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, “Shutdown”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.50”. From the official German translation: “Ich bin hier als Verteidiger der Schwarzen und Araber und darauf bin ich sehr stolz. Aber darauf will ich’s nicht belassen”.

79 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, “Check Up”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 8.25”.

for his transgression. Rickwaert's embezzlement, e.g., takes place through a scheme initially set up by Dunkerque's socialist government to secretly reroute money into social housing. Applying the teleological morality of *realpolitik*, Rickwaert asserts: "We stole nothing. We are activists. We get dirty to help others".⁸⁰

BN quickly problematises this attitude by showing just how severe the consequences of the PS' excessive moral licencing can be. Joel, a socialist activist, protégé and family friend of Rickwaert's, commits suicide after having been manipulated to take the blame for the embezzlement.⁸¹

A big part of Rickwaert's political vision is tied to his own advancement, for which the Black Baron is willing to go to great lengths. President Laugiér, e.g., mentions that Rickwaert slashed his tires at a party conference in order to be able to offer him a ride and thus make his acquaintance.⁸²

However, Rickwaert is distinct from the 2010s classically cynical fictional power politicians in that his actions usually take a creative rather than destructive direction. He manipulates youth movements and helps them organise and make their views heard. He instrumentalises parliamentary debates and the procedures of his party but also helps to advance socialist causes. He mercilessly neutralises political allies and opponents but, in the process, preserves democracy. In a representation of teleological political morality, Rickwaert's morally ambiguous methods and ambition thus appear ultimately justified by his morally sound goals.

This impression increases as the series progresses. By the end of season 1, audiences are aware that politics is a profoundly dirty business with established structures for corruption, manipulation, and embezzlement in every political camp. However, with Rickwaert serving a prison sentence and atoning for his former machinations, the embezzlement arc and the previous antagonist, Francis Laugiér, all but vanish with season 2's recalibration. Starting in the second season, Rickwaert, still interested in his return to the metonymic corridors of power, appears increasingly motivated not by ambition but by the vital contributions he wishes to make. As the series progresses, venerable political goals (i.e., preserving the democratic order) become his main driving force. As of season 2, the purpose for which Rickwaert is ready to get "dirty" is no longer a personal but a decidedly political one: to unify the left and the extended front *républicain* in the struggle against the advance of right-wing agitator Lionel Chalon. To the newly elected President Dorendeu, he accordingly explains: "You know that your five years as president will

80 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.00". Reference the official German: "Wir haben nichts gestohlen, wir tun etwas. Wir machen uns schmutzig, um Menschen zu helfen".

81 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 27.29".

82 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 53.30".

be measured in terms of how far the right progresses".⁸³ Continuing this development, Rickwaert's attempt to gain the presidency appears as a direct result of his wish to prevent the imminent decay of the pluralist democratic order itself by the end of season 3.

Interestingly, as his goals attain a more universal scope and selfless legitimacy, Rickwaert's "dirty"-work increasingly returns to the bounds of (fragile) legality. After season 1, his methods fall much less in the category of criminal activity and become much more a matter of fierce negotiation and skilled tactical manoeuvre. The higher the stakes, the more Rickwaert appears as an astute fighter for the established pluralist system. He is willing and able to stretch the system to its limits but rarely goes beyond its breaking point. The more Rickwaert struggles for the system, the more he is extradiegetically aligned with its rules. Nevertheless, Rickwaert's relative return to legality is a matter of recalibration rather than character development. Its reasons lie in the compositional aim to set Rickwaert's character apart from the destructive right-wing antagonists.

Philippe Rickwaert, in many ways, personifies the patriarchal ideal of a powerful political alpha male. In politics, he is a lone wolf who forces his own will against obstinate external forces. His friend and part-time adversary, President Francis Laugiér, even admits to being more afraid of his former ally than the political opposition.⁸⁴

Throughout the series, the decisive, at times, brisk go-getter Rickwaert retains a Parental position within every transactional configuration in which he is involved. As a classical alpha male with visible traits of internalised gender privilege, he retains this attitude even in defeat. His superior confidence remains undeterred even by arrest and potential ruin, and he continues to assert his political influence on President Dorendeu even from prison.⁸⁵

The series' transactional configuration emphasises Rickwaert's unconditional self-confidence, decisiveness, virility and dominance in line with patriarchal conceptualisations of masculinity. Most of the Black Baron's allies and opponents take complementary Child-states in any transaction involving Rickwaert. Even when opposing or contradicting him, they show an almost compulsive need to explain or justify their deviant behaviour to Rickwaert. Rickwaert's transactionally implied superiority is supported further by the fact that, despite temporary setbacks, he is almost always proven right by diegetic developments.

Rickwaert's powerful masculine presence is underlined further by the fact that the women in the world of BN find him extremely attractive. Rickwaert usually engages in relationships that implicitly follow a configuration I want to call the *Patronage for Pleasure* (P4P) game. This dramatisation of the traditional older male-younger female relationship

83 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 2, "Tourniquet", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49.50". Reference also the official German translation: "Du weißt, das einzige das während deiner Amtszeit gemessen wird ist die Stärke des Front National".

84 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 48.04".

85 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, "Pardon", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 55.32".

usually entails a Parent (him)-Child (her) transactional setup akin to a sexualised *Mentor-Student* game. The P4P configuration is one of the most prevalent motifs of patriarchal storytelling and has, until recently, been an omnipresent trope in mainstream fiction. It works under the sexist assumption that a man's attractiveness stems from his intellectual qualities and material dominance. In contrast, a woman's attractiveness stems from her physical desirability (usually defined by a highly discriminatory collection of attributes such as whiteness, a slender frame, a tall build and long hair).

The P4P game usually comes with the objectification of female bodies. The explicit sexualisation, particularly of women, had, until discursive changes primarily brought about by the MeToo movement in 2017 onwards, been considered an integral part of the "cultural logic of gentrification"⁸⁶ that governed almost all notable TV series aimed at prestige audiences.

However, it is interesting to note that Philippe Rickwaert is one of the very few fictional examples of a fictional politician who ends up with a happy private life. In season 3, Rickwaert marries the political pollster Naïma Meziani, although the relationship – due to the narrative's focus on external action rather than personal development – never actually gains much narrative weight.

7.1.9.2 Amélie Dorendeu: Dying for Realpolitik

BN's deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeu, is the second *homo politicus* and personification of realpolitik in BN. She is a comparatively young, brilliant politician who is part of the PS's liberal, progressive wing. With her deep smoky voice, her chic, her cool demeanour, dark hair, slender figure, and excessive chain-smoking (the latter trait falling victim to a recalibration after season 1), Dorendeu is a striking presence within BN's character ensemble. She is clearly designed with reference to post-war images of what a chic, detached female Parisian intellectual looks and behaves like – so much so that she is almost reminiscent of more contemporary renderings of Marianne, the French national allegory.

As a calculating, unsentimental, realist politician of the moderate centre-left, Dorendeu embodies a version of French and Western European realpolitik that aims to govern and implement policy by harnessing the biggest possible societal consent at the cost of ideologically or conceptually pure solutions. While Dorendeu is a ruthless operator – in one of her stints as Rickwaert's opponent, she goes so far as to divert political support away from her own party to neutralise him⁸⁷ – she also possesses a strong moral compass. In "Pianoforte", Dorendeu, e.g., separates from Rickwaert after learning of his involvement in the embezzlement scandal.⁸⁸

86 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.

87 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 27.00".

88 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, "Pianoforte", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.55".

7.1.9.2.1 Pluralist Realpolitik

As BN's deuteragonist, Dorendeu personifies realpolitik's imperfect yet constructive side. In season 3, she appears exceptionally focused on policy, making her a compositional counterpoint to populism and political gamification. In the episode "#Metoo", she, e.g., responds to the superficial interview questions of a lifestyle magazine, stating:

If some of our compatriots who aren't interested in politics found me likeable, I'll be pleased. But if their vote depends on that, we have a problem. When personality overtakes the political programme, democracy is weakened so badly that it is at risk.⁸⁹

To her lawyers' objection that the French public would never accept a reform of the presidency, Dorendeu replies: "I take care of politics, you of the law".⁹⁰ This is not an acknowledgement of the need for illegal means or tyrannical intervention. Dorendeu's statement betrays a highly differentiated vision of pluralist politics which regards the ongoing process of creating consenting majorities and aggregating diversified agendas through political representation as fundamental mechanisms for legitimate political dominance. Differentiating between the legitimacy granted by procedure and adherence to codified law, on the one hand, and the legitimacy created through public discourse and the negotiation of "the *accord* of the dominated",⁹¹ on the other hand, Dorendeu points out the fundamentally *political* essence of government as a process to *create* a legitimate distribution of power. This is opposed to the populist vision of politics, where legitimate dominance is considered a singular fact of nature at the disposal of the populist leader.

This level of abstraction is uncommon for polit-fiction. A similar scene appears, e.g., in the populist DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (USA, 2016–2019, see chapter 6), with reversed results. The following dialogue occurs between President Kirkman (the series' protagonist) and his lawyers.

Kirkman: I need to know what my legal options are right now.

Lawyer 1: Well, Mr. President, you can invoke the supremacy clause. Issue an executive order saying Governor Royce must force his police to stand down.

Lawyer 2: That's a bad call. EOs can be perceived as very hostile.

89 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwaï/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.44". Translation from the original: "Et si certains de notre compatriotes qui ne s'intéressent pas à la politique m'ont trouvé sympathique je m'en félicite, mais s'il vote en fonction de cela nous avons un problème. Quand la personnalité prend le pas sur le programme la démocratie s'affadit au point de se mettre en danger".

90 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwaï/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.15". Translation from the original: "Alors faites votre travail des juristes. Moi je me charge de la politique".

91 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73. My translation: "[...] dass Herrschaft der Zustimmung der Beherrschten bedarf". Original emphasis.

Kirkman: Then what would you suggest?

Layer 2: A presidential proclamation.

Lawyer 1: Which is nothing more than a symbolic empty gesture. It looks weak, Sir.

Lawyer 2: Bush used a proclamation to secure disaster areas after Katrina. That hardly seems like an empty gesture to me.

Lawyer 1: I wouldn't take declaring martial law off the table either, Sir.

Lawyer 2: If you want this to be the shortest presidency in history

Kirkman: Let me get this straight: An executive order will be perceived as too hostile. A presidential proclamation too weak. Martial law either very, very smart or incredibly self-destructive. Guys, let me ask you a question. Can you agree on anything?

Lawyer 1: Not really

Lawyer 2: Yes"⁹²

In this scene, the inability of President Kirkman's *legal* counsel to advise on a proper course of *political* action serves as proof of the establishment's incompetence. In the populist absolutism of DS US, where the morally proper and rational course of action is easily discernible by any willing idealist with a direct connection to a unified 'people', the confusion of the realms of the law and the *political* is diegetically legitimate. At the 'end of politics', where there is only one legitimate 'will of the people', the need for *political* negotiation of interests that may diverge from the codified dictums of the law ceases to exist.

The equation of the otherwise distinct purposes of the law, categorical morality, and politics is only sustainable in a populist mindset, where such a legitimate division (and thus the legitimate need for negotiation and accommodation) does not exist. However, in BN's pluralist societal vision, politics, as the process of constantly negotiating a feasible division of power in a world of ambiguous morality and endlessly diverse interests, performs a vital societal function.

7.1.9.2.2 Patriarchal Games

Throughout the series, Dorendeu alternates between being Rickwaert's enemy, ally, and lover. In seasons 2 and 3, Rickwaert, at times, becomes the unofficial advisor for the president. The pair transition from the typically patriarchal configuration of the P4P game in the pre-MeToo, 2016 season 1, to a less ostensibly sexualised yet decidedly patriarchal version of the *Complex Macbeth* game (see chapter 2) in the post-MeToo seasons 2 and 3, 2018–2020.

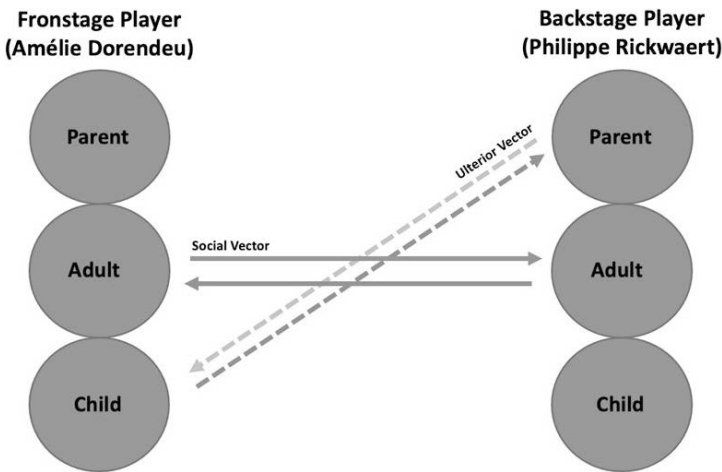
In its initial classic P4P configuration, the couple's asymmetrical relationship rests on exchanging male expertise and power for female beauty and (physical) companionship. For example, the couple's love affair starts when the experienced Rickwaert helps the newcomer Dorendeu in her bid to become the PS' general secretary.⁹³ Dorendeu's appearance, likewise, remains an essential part of her character, with male protagonists

92 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, "The First Day", directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, aired September 28, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=255824129>, 32.10".

93 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, "Solférino", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.00".

frequently remarking upon it. Audiences, e.g., learn early on that while she might not be an ideologically reliable socialist, Amélie Dorendeau is ‘at least’ gorgeous.⁹⁴ At a PS-party conference, she is accordingly noted to possess exceptional “beauty and intelligence”.⁹⁵ In season 1, Dorendeau shares this reductive fate with several other female characters. A powerful female right-wing senator is, e.g., discussed as “an attractive woman”.⁹⁶

Figure 38: The Complex Macbeth game Dorendeau-Rickwaert



The duo's game ultimately takes the shape of a classic *Complex Macbeth* game, in which a dominant backstage player (éminence grise Rickwaert) engages his frontage co-player (President Dorendeau) in duplex transactions featuring ostensible Adult-Adult transactions on the social vector and Parent (him)-Child (her) transactions on the ulterior vector (see figure 38). While this configuration seemingly diverges from the *Macbeth* game's usual (decidedly patriarchal) “behind every great man is a great woman”-dynamic, it ultimately upholds the uneven distribution of dominance in the duo's otherwise fluctuating relationship. With BN's *dramatic* emphasis on the political backstage, Rickwaert's *intradiegetically* secondary position as the ceremonially subordinate player in the *Macbeth* game ends up making him the narrative focus and thus restoring his implicit, gender-based dominance. Thus retaining Rickwaert's transactional dominance despite his seemingly subordinate position, the series avoids turning the protagonists' interactions into a *Reverse Macbeth* game, which usually suggests itself as the traditional – albeit highly

94 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, “Pardon”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 56.10”

95 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, “Solférino”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 36.56”.

96 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 5, “Grenelle”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 4.09”.

problematic – narrative convention for the conflictive *preeminent female-subordinate male* configuration (see chapters 3 and 4). Accordingly, the characters' transactional configuration retains its patriarchal Parent (him)-Child (her) configuration, in some form or other, throughout much of the series.

Throughout BN, Dorendeu appears unconditionally attracted to Rickwaert's rude intellect, patriarchal confidence, and evident tactical superiority. Even in times of disagreement, the basic Parent-Child pattern of their relationship remains intact, with Dorendeu feeling the need to explain and justify her diverging actions in front of her (former) lover. Following the patriarchal configuration of their relationship game, President Dorendeu always takes Rickwaert's call and ultimately remains dependent on his advice throughout the series.

Whenever she acts without his consent or against Rickwaert's advice, Dorendeu is ultimately punished for it by extradiegetic intervention that assures the continued dominance of its (male) protagonist. As president, Dorendeu, e.g., undergoes a temporary emancipation from the P4P configuration when she issues the illegal order to assassinate two terror suspects arrested in France without consolidating Rickwaert.⁹⁷ She subsequently abandons the attempt to reunite the left to form a moderate government against Rickwaert's explicit wishes, thus seemingly completing the emancipation from the *Mentor-Student* relationship with her former lover. However, Dorendeu's actions end up further dividing the political left, refracting French society, and dispersing the political spectrum. The president ultimately sacrifices herself to prevent unfavourable political developments in the Republic.⁹⁸ Thus, *dramatic* intervention restores the couple's initial power dynamics.

7.1.9.3 Michel Vidal: Hybris, Gesinnungsethik, and Idealpolitik

In the diegetic struggle of populism vs pluralism and BN's compositional protagonist-antagonist structure, Michel Vidal, the ultraleft populist and leader of the leftist party *Debout le Peuple*, takes an ambiguous position. In the final two seasons' overarching plot to unify the left against an increasingly powerful anti-systemic force, the ultraleft Michel Vidal becomes one of Rickwaert's primary antagonists. In both experience and tactical prowess, Vidal is a worthy opponent of Rickwaert's. Starting as a secondary character, Vidal's role in the overall narrative increases parallel to the series' focus on the complex political actor-network. In season 3, the left-populist quickly becomes the tritagonist behind protagonist Rickwaert and deuteragonist Dorendeu. With his mixture of idealism, political cynicism, vast intellectual properties and hybris, Vidal grows into a highly complex and fascinating character and one of the central players in the game to prevent (or enable) the rise of the extreme right.

97 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 4, "Conversion", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 29, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 47:39".

98 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49:40".

A savvy political operator, Vidal's uncompromising vision of a single political path for France – a complete systemic (socialist) overhaul – nonetheless renders him an implicit illustration of what Max Weber described as the dangers of uncompromising “ethics of conviction” [*Gesinnungsethik*] in politics⁹⁹ following the dictum “Fiat Justitia, pereat mundus” [*Let justice prevail, or else the world shall perish*].¹⁰⁰ In the series' modelling of the French political actor-network, Vidal becomes the personification of an extreme left that is, at the same time, well-intentioned, self-righteous to the point of hybris, and deontologically idealistic to the point of destructive irresponsibility.

Vidal's worldview rests on a highly evolved body of socialist theory. Together with his even more ideologically staunch right-hand-woman, Aurore Dupraz, he frequently embarks on elaborate theoretical discourses. In his cerebral and theoretically well-founded manner, Vidal – in season 3 – often serves as the meta-exegete of the season's political events.

Vidal's populism is a direct result of his (not wholly unjustified) awareness of the superiority of his intellect. Like all populists, his uncompromising idea of the ‘correct’ way forward (here: a socialist reordering of the French political system) presupposes the existence of one unified people with one unified interest that only he is able to discern and implement. As a populist, Vidal does not acknowledge the legitimate co-existence of diverging sets of political views. In a rejection of representative compromise in favour of frictionless populist immediacy, Vidal considers opposition to his plans either as a result of unintentional intellectual inferiority or else deliberate misdirection for ulterior motives.

With his categorically populist worldview, Vidal, thus, becomes an opposing figure to BN's much more pragmatic realpolitik characters. Rickwaert and Dorendeu accept negotiated compromise as the way to create political legitimacy. For the populist Vidal, compromise is a betrayal of truth.

Like the alpha male Rickwaert, Vidal, too, aligns the implementation of his political ideals with the success of his personal leadership. He, e.g., states: “Ma personne, c'est mon programme” [*my person is my programme*]¹⁰¹ in a play on Louis XIV's famous quote “L'état c'est moi” [*I am the state*]. Acknowledging the largely charismatic nature of his authority, which orientates from his mastery of the mechanisms of gamified political spectacle, he exclaims: “Welcome to the Fifth Republic, my friend. I embody. I personify. I haven't become coquettish, but I'm riding the waves”.¹⁰²

99 Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 83f.

100 See David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, “Introduction: Max Weber's Calling to Knowledge and Action”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), xlv.

101 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 35.45”.

102 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 35.37”. Translation from the original: “Bienvenue dans

His assumption of an absolute 'greater good', and a historically determined ideal future for an imagined unified 'populous, initially enable Vidal to accept high levels of collateral damage. For long stretches throughout seasons 2 and 3, he refuses a unification of the left even if it means the dissolution of the front républicain and the ascent of extremists to the presidency. His deontological hybris takes Vidal to a point where he is willing to court systemic collapse in order to realise his vision of a "citizen's revolution".¹⁰³ Reflecting on the tense state of French society and President Dorendeu's attempts to consolidate the political centre, he rejoices: "We are experiencing the agony of the liberal disorder. This world is collapsing, and Dorendeu will fall with it".¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, his ideals save him – albeit too late – from supporting anti-systemic agitators as they begin to show their racist true colours. Vidal considers himself a staunch anti-racist¹⁰⁵ and is unwilling to cooperate with the political right in any way, stating that red and brown should never mix "because brown will always win".¹⁰⁶

7.1.9.4 Christophe Mercier – The Anti-Systemic Populist

Christophe Mercier is the clearest representation of radical populism in BN and arguably one of the series' most sinister antagonists. With his first major appearance coming relatively late in BN's final season, Mercier becomes the personification of the prevalent anti-systemic currents in the series' diegetic actor-network. He is a vlogger, spreading convoluted conspiracy theories and anti-establishment rhetoric and starting to gather diegetic attention as the force that inspires a discontent, radicalised citizen to slap President Dorendeu in the face.

Having been disappointed by both the left and right, he finds himself on the side of aimless, destructive opposition. Accordingly, his attitude is initially neither right-wing nor left-wing and, instead, demonstratively oppositional. Taking ideological loans from both the extreme left and the extreme right, Mercier ends up cooperating with both sides in an attempt to gain the presidency.¹⁰⁷ However, Mercier is – the series' *dispersed antago-*

la cinquième république mon ami. J'incarne, je personnifie, oh c'est pas que je sois devenue particulièrement coqué mais en fin je chevauche".

103 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.28". In the original: "La revolution citoyenne".

104 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.29". "Nous vivons l'agonie du désordre libéral. Ce monde s'effondre et Dorendeu va tomber avec lui".

105 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 6, "Oui", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17.35".

106 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 34.44". Translation from the original: " [...] car si on mélange le brun et le rouge c'est toujours le brun qui l'emporte".

107 Throughout *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode; and *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahoul!", directed by Thomas

nist makes this very clear – less the creator and more the product of an increasingly tense and dysfunctional political climate.

As a populist, Mercier presupposes a simplified fictional vision of a unified people with a clear directional – and thus legitimate will – that he alone can discern. Unlike the left-wing populist Michel Vidal, however, Mercier's vision is not based on complex – if arguably ill-conceived – theoretical conceptualisations but on extreme simplification.

As Niklas Luhmann points out, purely moral categories contradict the fundamental principles of the democratic system because they serve primarily to delegitimise political opponents.¹⁰⁸ In a functioning democracy, however, participants must concede each others' general (moral) ability to compete. With recourse to Chantal Mouffe and Michel Foucault, Sandra Nuy likewise points out the difference between constructive political agonism, that is, the “democratically regulated [...] dealing with dissent”, and destructive antagonism.¹⁰⁹ With legitimate dissent being unthinkable in a unified populous, Mercier's struggle against the series' protagonists becomes decisively antagonistic and destructive. Towards Rickwaert, he accordingly states: “I do not consider you my opponent but an enemy, an enemy of the people”.¹¹⁰

In the populist vision of a unified ‘people’, known to and represented by the populist leader alone, dissent is thinkable only through ‘external’ forces. Following the populist notion of othering dissent, Mercier accordingly refers to Amélie Dorendeu as “l'Autrichienne”¹¹¹ [*the Austrian*] – a disparaging nickname famously used for Queen Marie Antoinette (who began her life as an Austrian princess) during the French revolution. Echoing the cries of an array of historical populists (past and present), Mercier claims that France's elites are, in fact, not part of the unified body of the unified French ‘people’. About President Dorendeu, he, for example, states: “This woman is no longer one of us. She sides with shadows and secrets, manipulation, and agreements between the powerful, behind the people's backs”.¹¹²

Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series.

108 See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 170f. For more on this see also my discussion of populist logic and narrative in chapter 6.

109 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 28. My translation: “ein demokratisch regulierter Umgang [...] mit Dissens”.

110 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 53.34”. Translated from the original: “Je vous ne considère d'ailleurs pas comme mon adversaire mais comme un ennemi, un ennemi du peuple”.

111 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 8.24”.

112 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.34”. Translated from the original: “Cette femme n'est plus de notre. Elle est du camp de l'ombre et du secret, des manipulations et des arrangements entre riches et puissants dans le dos du peuple”.

7.1.9.4.1 Evoking Populist Precedent

The fictional Christophe Mercier references several well-known tropes from prominent populist ‘movements’ of the late 2010s. In his seemingly aimless and destructive anti-systemic impetus, he is, e.g., reminiscent of the French Gilet Jaune movement, which shook the country in 2018 and 2019 with partially violent protests. Mercier’s demands to “banish evil” personified by Amélie Dorendeau¹¹³ and his refusal to accept electoral defeat¹¹⁴ reference two of the many infamous utterances of former US President Donald Trump. Trump had made the chant “lock her up” one of his campaign slogans in the 2016 presidential election, referencing his opponent, Hillary Clinton.¹¹⁵ Mercier alleging to have been “robbed” [*spolié*] of his victory and accusing the victorious Rickwart of a “coup d’état”¹¹⁶ clearly references Trump’s previously announced refusal to acknowledge his electoral defeat. Having lost to contender Joe Biden, the outgoing US President consequently started an unsuccessful campaign to assert his unfounded claim that the election had been ‘stolen’ from him.

Mercier’s campaign platform, furthermore, cites the predominantly populist British Brexit movement with its slogan “Reprenons le Contrôle”¹¹⁷ [*Let us take back control*]. British Brexiteers used the identical slogan in their ultimately successful campaign to lead the United Kingdom out of the European Union between 2016 and 2020.

7.1.9.4.2 Inverting Fictional Precedent

The character of Mercier shares many traits of polit-fiction’s idealistic populists. However, serving as a destructive antagonist, his normative evaluation is an inversion of populist saviour-heroes like Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko (SLUHA NARODU – SN), Elizabeth McCord (MADAM SECRETARY – MS), and the two DESIGNATED SURVIVORS (DS US and DS 60) Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin. Mercier is a former teacher in a play on the idealistic saviour-hero’s mentor motif. Like his positive fictional counterparts, Mercier is seemingly independent of established political players such as political parties or the established media, using independent means (a vlog) to connect with ‘his’ people. Like his fictional counterparts, he appears as a play on the binary *inside-outside* juxtaposition.

113 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.34”. He demands: “Nous devons la bannir [...] bannir le mal”.

114 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 51.23”.

115 See Monica Hesse, “What do ‘Lock her up’ and ‘Send her back’ have in common? It’s pretty obvious”, *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-do-lock-her-up-and-send-her-back-have-in-common-its-pretty-obvious/2019/07/19/74bc4790-a999-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html.

116 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 51.25”.

117 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 38.20”.

Mercier has no political experience and appears as a demonstratively naive political operator with no understanding of political or societal complexities and a distorted idea of political procedure. He likewise shares his fictional colleague's disdain for the (*inside*) elites and, like them, believes in a unified populous with a one-directional will. However, while the saviour-heroes in SN, MS, DS US and DS: 60 DAYS were diegetically correct in their dismissal of the political establishment as a sinister Other and their assumption of being the only representative of a unified people, Mercier's similar vision, in BN's complex vision of the diegetic polity, appears as a clear misrepresentation of the ambiguous complexity of diegetic political reality.

7.1.9.5 The Extreme Right

The sleazy power politician Lionel Chalon personifies the far-right in BN. Chalon leads the fictionalised Front National, later Rassemblement National, a racist, jingoist party referencing a homonymous historical role model (the series even mirrors the historical FN's name change in 2018). Throughout the series, Chalon and his party serve as one of the main spectres for the political left, even though he himself appears infrequently in accordance with the series' *dispersed antagonist*.

Chalon is a slick political operator who, while sharing the racist and nationalist sentiments of his party's base, wishes to lead the FN/RN out of political isolation and onto social acceptability. Superficially, he appears as the opposite of the seemingly vulgar, violent right-wing nationalists that essentially constitute his movement. He is wealthy and cultivated and often appears in the context of his family, for example, while playing with his little son.¹¹⁸ The frame of the loving family serves as a counterpoint emphasising Chalon's otherwise despicable nature, which is visible both in his sinister physical appearance and his frequent open allusions to racist policy and even violence.

Throughout the series, Chalon attempts to move the RN into the fold of socially acceptable political forces through cosmetrical (rather than programmatic) concessions to the political mainstream. A scene that shows Chalon flying a drone with his little son becomes a metaphor for his political schemes and a meta-commentary on the French extreme-right's general recipe for success. Explaining to his child how to operate the toy, Chalon states: "You see; one has to ascend softly. A tilt to the left, a tilt to the right; we'll rise very high this way".¹¹⁹

While initially successful, his attempts to regain some ground in the political centre ultimately make Chalon lose the support of his own party's more extreme factions. Disappointed by yet another political leader, they defect to the camp of the anti-systemic populist Christophe Mercier in season 3.

118 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 26.00"; and *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.56".

119 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 26.41". Translated from the original: "Tu vois, il faut monter doucement. Virage à gauche, virage à droite, on va monter très haut comme ça".

With his personal wealth, his repeated near-successful attempts to become president, and his aim to move his party into the more accepted folds of the moderate political right through cosmetic rather than ideological alteration, Chalon's character is a thinly veiled allusion to the historical FN/ RN leader Marine le Pen. Like her fictional counterpart, she renamed the FN in 2018 in order to superficially distance it from its openly racist and antisemitic past and make the newly baptised RN more appealing to disappointed mainstream voters (a change, it is safe to say, that has to date done little to alter the party's extremist positions).

7.2 Modelling Malfunction

In "Brüder", Philippe Rickwaert once more lays out the stakes of season 3, stating:

Amélie, we're not in competition. It's your last term. We must succeed, period! Show that representative democracy can still change things. If not, the last damn will break, and that madman Mercier or a Nazi like Chalon will blow up everything.¹²⁰

With rising social tensions in historical France, right-wing extremist Marine Le Pen reaching the runoff in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, the experience of the anti-systemic Gilet Jaune movement vandalising the streets of Paris in 2018 and 2019 and the continued success of populist movements on the political left and right throughout the global north, BN may well appear as a fictionalised model of potential ways to systemic collapse. The fact that the fictional President Amélie Dorendeau's slap in the face aired roughly one and a half years before Emmanuel Macron met the same fate seems to suggest, for BN, a certain level of structural insight into French political and social developments. Of course, the fictional events in BN are by no means an 'accurate' reflection of French historical conditions. However, they can be regarded as an authentic fictionalisation of how a similar set of conditions in a complex emergent system that follows its own functional logic rather than a central guiding agency might amount to catastrophe. It is, therefore, instructive to more closely examine the series' recipe for systemic malfunction.

7.2.1 Alienation, Left-Wing Division, and The Dangers of *Gesinnungsethik*

Referencing the materialist discourse among much of the French political left, BN's first ingredient for democratic collapse is an increasingly unequal, fragmented society. Rickwaert, taking over as the series' primary exegete, describes the tense diegetic political

120 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.04". My translation: "Amélie on est pas en concurrence. C'est ton dernier mandat. On doit réussir, point! Démontrer que la démocratie représentative peut encore changer des choses. Sinon un jour la dernière digne va sauter et un malade comme Mercier ou un Nazi comme Chalon fera tout sauter".

situation as “A time of populism, a groundswell, a tidal wave.”¹²¹ His comment refers to societal circumstances in which parts of the population increasingly appear to question the systemic conditions that have enabled decades of neoliberal inequality and perceived societal fragmentation. In BN’s diegesis, people, finding no constructive channels to direct their anger, increasingly turn to extra-systemic forces that capitalise on blaming the comparatively small circle of people that traditionally constitute France’s political leadership.

Season 3 goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate the divide between the establishment and the alienated factions of the public. In “Brüder”, rally participants boo a journalist at the behest of populist Christophe after they come to regard the media as a representative of the elitist Other.¹²² In the same episode, political pollster Naïma Meziani introduces Rickwaert to the Brüder scale, a tool to measure belief in conspiracy theories, demonstrating a general conviction, among the diegetic French population, of politicians “concealing the truth”.¹²³ The result, in BN, is the rise of an unlikely and objectively less than grandiose populist idol, Christophe Mercier.

While Mercier is not the only populist in BN, he is by far the most successful. For the series’ diegetic meta-commentator, Michel Vidal, both the successes of right-wing extremist Chalon and anti-systemic agitator Mercier are partly due to their corruption of leftist methods of grassroots mobilisation. They are methods that the moderate left abandoned after its ascent into the societal mainstream. Having turned towards the centre and political mainstream, the left, in BN, is forced to become the conservative reaction to the destructive, pseudo-revolutionary powers on the right. Vidal accordingly states: “The strength of fascism and of all totalitarianism is to steal our words, the words of the popular rebellion”.¹²⁴

Vidal, once again the series’ theoretical neo-Marxist exegete, explains the destructive consequences of systemic disconnect and the material and societal inequalities in France, stating:

121 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, “Check Up”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.28”. Translated from the original: “Un moment populiste, une lame de fond, une immense vague”

122 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 08.58”.

123 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 31.09”. My translation: “La croyance générale dans la dissimulation de la vérité”.

124 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 34.10”. My translation: “La force du fascisme et de tout les totalitarismes c’est de voler nos mots. Les mots de la révolte populaire”.

The humiliation is immense. Since it can't find an outlet, the only way out is to twist reality. Reinvent reality to make it bearable. Humiliation is the force behind political mobilisation.¹²⁵

For him, the system's imminent collapse and its consequences are evident: "A citizen's revolution or barbarism".¹²⁶

In BN, mounting political tensions become an existential systemic threat because of the established political forces' inability to accommodate and direct public discontent into productive channels. With the series' *dramatic* focus on the political left, it is, above all, the internal left-wing division that appears as the main battleground of the diegetic system's malfunction.

It is a battleground that, referencing the well-known precarious state of the historical French left, is in bad shape and exceedingly preoccupied with internal battles. In BN, the young, liberal moderates around Amélie Dorendeu end up alienating much of the PS' working-class voters in their attempt to occupy the political centre. The populist left-wing around populist Michel Vidal and his *Debout le Peuple* movement prefer systemic decline to aligning themselves with a 'treacherous' moderate left, thus abandoning the idea of the front républicain. Under the leadership of the leftist-revolutionary Aurore Dupraz, *Debout le Peuple* even sides with populist anti-systemic forces in the hopes of triggering revolution and harnessing its destructive powers for socialist reform. Accordingly, right-wing extremist Lionel Chalon states: "The division of the left is our life insurance".¹²⁷

BN thus exemplifies the paradoxically destructive potential of rigid political *Gesinnungsethik* and ill-conceived notions of *ideapolitik*. The highly intellectual populist Vidal and, later, his predecessor, Aurore Dupraz, are ultimately prisoners of their own convictions, unable to adapt their chosen path for 'the French people' to political reality. The series plays out the paradox of a rigidly distorted *ideapolitik* which allows an ideologically uncompromising political left to justify siding with anti-systemic and even extreme-right forces to achieve their own ends: "the death of the king. The end of oligarchy. The end of caste privilege. The end of the system".¹²⁸ The danger here is not that the extreme left is betraying its ideals but rather that their populist belief in the impossibility of

125 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 45.47". Translated from: "L'humiliation est immense. Comme elle n'arrive pas à trouver de déboucher la seule issue c'est de tordre le réel. On le réinvente pour le rendre supportable. L'humiliation est la grande force de mobilisation politique".

126 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.50". "La révolution citoyenne ou la barbarie".

127 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 10.12". Translated from: "La division de la gauche, c'est notre assurance vie".

128 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.05". Translation from the original: "la mort du roi. La fin de l'oligarchie. La fin des privilèges de la caste. La fin du système."

intra-systemic reform and the resulting need for systemic overhaul is so absolute that it prevents constructive participation in the democratic process. For the left-wing extremist Dupraz, in her aim to incite revolution, the ‘conservative’ forces of the political centre become the enemy while the margins of the political spectrum and their shared aim to destroy the established system become allies.

7.2.2 Delusions of Instrumentalisation

The multi-faceted abandonment of the front républicain against extremists appears as the primary reason for systemic malfunction in BN. In the series, populist forces gain traction because the established political entities concentrate on the societal centre, leaving the political margins to fend for themselves. Destructive forces (Chalon, Mercier) take over these margins and – with their overly simplified notions of society and politics – mobilise and channel the unharnessed political energy of the discontent masses into their destructive causes.

The attempt of Lionel Chalon and his right-wing extremist RN to simulate a move away from political extremism and thus become a socially acceptable force in fictional French politics, e.g., leads to a partial breaking of the political establishment’s refusal to cooperate with his party. In “Inventaire”, a referendum proposed by the left attains a parliamentary majority through the votes of the RN.¹²⁹

Fatally, for Chalon and the diegetic democratic system in BN, the FN’s move towards the centre ends up freeing extremist forces on the far right of the political spectrum. Personified by the renegade party functionary Léandra Tallier, they ultimately break with their former leader’s course of rapprochement to join the openly destructive anti-systemic forces around Christophe Mercier.¹³⁰

In BN’s fictional model of systemic malfunction, Mercier’s strength derives partly from the fact that both the extreme right (around Tallier) and the extreme left (around Vidal and, after his dethronement, Dupraz) believe themselves capable of controlling and instrumentalising the movement. Both join Mercier’s campaign with the vague title Force de la République believing themselves able to harness the dynamic power of the movement for their respective – diametrically opposed – political goals. Both Tallier and Dupraz provide Mercier with the well-oiled apparatus of their respective parties, with Dupraz organising staged ‘spontaneous’ riots at Mercier’s behest.¹³¹ The rapprochement of the right-wing extremist Chalon is, likewise, aided by the conservative Républicains’

129 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, “Inventaire”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 52.18”.

130 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 6, “Oui”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 10.20”.

131 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 11.00”.

conviction of being able to instrumentalise and profit from the political capital of the extreme right.¹³²

The fallacy that Mercier can be controlled ultimately proves to be near-fatal for his political allies on the left when he displays no interest in adhering to their reformatory plans and instead endorses the right's racist assumptions in his construction of a unified populous. A defeated Vidal, ousted from his party and facing the ruins of his political legacy, accordingly states about Mercier: "One after the other, we gave him a leg up thinking we could use him. One after the other, he annihilated us".¹³³

In BN, Philippe Rickwaert, the savvy *éminence grise* of political France, represents the valid fictional answer to this systemic problem: leave the political centre, unite the left, and recapture the socialists' old power bases, especially the marginalised poor. BN thus clearly references the political and societal debate prevalent in the historical French Left.

The series' forms a compellingly coherent and seductively authentic fictional vision of French political conditions. However, this fictional authenticity should – again – not be mistaken for 'accuracy'. Despite the complexity of its diegetic political actor-network, BN is a fictional narrative that follows *dramatic* and *pragmatic* logic rather than *historical truth*. Its focus on the political left, which, due to *pragmatic* consideration of target prestige audiences, appears as the topos deciding the future of the French republic, and its comparative blindness to proceedings on the political right, are only two of the series' many concessions to its *triple* logic. Thus, while BN presents compelling observations about the French political climate, the series should by no means be considered an analysis or reflection of historical politics. It is, instead, a compelling fictional composition whose interpretation of historical references can serve to illustrate and caution, not, however, to instruct.

7.3 Conclusion: Inverting the Populist Quest and Extending Polit-Fiction

As this chapter showed, politics, in BN as in most popular polit-series intent on creating suspense, appears as an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game. However, other than in many other polit-series, BN's vision of realpolitik as the negotiation of a variety of legitimate interests across a dispersed actor-network does not convey a cynical, dystopian wasteland but a troubled yet desirable realm. In BN, it is up to the morally ambiguous realpolitiker to save pluralist democracy from systemic malfunction and the destructive influences of populist ideological absolutism. The series thus arguably represents an extension (and, at times, conscious inversion) of what has often wrongly been assumed to constitute polit-series' natural storytelling conventions.

132 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 18.20".

133 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 42.10". Translation from the original: "Les uns après les autres on lui a fait la courte échelle en pensant de se servir de lui. Les uns après les autres il nous a liquidé"

Instead of the presentation of a binary narrative construction surrounding the division of *inside* and *outside*, which dominates, e.g., the AM series discussed in the previous chapter, I demonstrated that BN's emergent diegetic actor-network creates a discursive, multipolar vision of power and a comparatively complex narrative ensemble dispersed across various (at times, metonymic) political institutions. In its fictional examination of the French presidency, BN likewise breaks with the established taboo of dramatising the previously sacrosanct institution presenting its overly powerful role as a core for systemic malfunction.

Considering BN's target audience functions, I showed that the series' *pragmatic* focus on the political left manifests in a *dramatic* emphasis on the inner workings of the fictional PS. Analysing BN's elaborate presentation of parties and other non-governmental actors, I demonstrated that the series shuns polit-fictions conventional executive bias and, instead, concentrates on a protagonist who is, for the larger part of the series, not an official part of the official administration but engaged in navigating the complex backstage of the multi-level system of French government. Similarly, I contended that BN presents the media as an ambiguous macro actor responsible for holding politicians accountable in their role as the Fourth Estate and encouraging and spreading distortive gamified imaginaries of politics.

A structural analysis showed that BN features the unusual plot device of what I called a *dispersed protagonist*. It separates the series' multipolar conflict from the personalised cause and effect chain that usual features in popular storytelling. Political tension thus appears as a systemic rather than an interpersonal phenomenon. This narratively complex *dramatic* configuration served to prevent the discursive dominance of the series' extremist protagonists by reducing their diegetic agenda and overall screen-time and making them appear primarily as a product of systemic malfunction.

Analysing the series' central characters, I contended that BN's protagonist, Philippe Rickwaert, and deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeau, appear as the morally ambiguous but ultimately positive incarnation of teleological realpolitik. Both are flawed, ambitious and ruthless; however, both ultimately apply their morally questionable methods to serve a worthy cause: the preservation of pluralist democracy. Discussing the series' ambivalent tritagonist, Michel Vidal, I showed that BN is a detailed examination of the dangers of a rigid, populist idealpolitik whose aim at systemic overhaul ultimately leads to a potential failure to sustain the compromised yet protective front républicain against extremist political influences and thus potential disaster.

Discussing BN's personified antagonists, Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon, I demonstrated that both characters, clearly referencing historical and fictional role models, build their political personas around variations of the populist claim to sole representation of a fictional unified populous typical for AM narratives constructed around the "populist quest". Accordingly, the character Mercier repeats several motifs of his positively connotated fictional counterparts in idealistic polit-series such as SN, MS, DS US and DS 60 discussed in the previous chapter. However, I demonstrated that, in the pluralist political realm of BN, the same qualities that made Vasyl Petrvych Holoborodko and his fictional colleagues into positive saviour heroes turn Christophe Mercier into a dangerous madman. Therefore, BN is ultimately an explicit inversion of the populist quest.

It likewise became clear that BN ultimately provides a fictional model of the possible malfunction of pluralist liberal democracy. In order for the system to fail, the series introduces various factors that reference progressive political discourse: (1) political alienation of the increasingly marginalised masses; (2) a divided political left; (3) a political establishment no longer willing to support the front républicain against extremism because of (3a) idealistic delusions or (3b) the vain hope of harnessing populism's destructive dynamics for political reform.

As this chapter is being written in the summer of 2022, historical France has once again missed a systemic malfunction akin to the one simulated in BN by a troublingly narrow margin. In the first round of the 2022 presidential election, right-wing extremist Marine le Pen gained 23,1% of the votes entering the runoff for the second time. What is more, with Éric Zemmour, a racist extremist emerged on the far right of the political spectrum, gaining 7,1% of presidential votes on his first try.

Despite forming the NUPES-alliance (Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale) in Mai 2022 (a group that contains many of the major French left parties such as La France insoumise, the PS, and the French Green party Europe Écologie Les Verts), the political left shows many signs of decline and division. Anne Hidalgo, presidential candidate of the formerly presidential PS, for example, gained a mere 1,8% of the votes, a result that was nonetheless high enough to prevent the left-wing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who came in third place at 22% of the votes, from overtaking Marine le Pen and entering the runoff himself.

Likewise, various actors all over the moderate political spectrum notably failed to rally in the traditional front républicain against the RN and endorse the liberal incumbent Emmanuel Macron. While this chapter does not aim to assess historical political conditions in France and certainly does not claim any historical *accuracy* or predictive qualities on the part of BN, the series' unusually coherent fictionalisation of its emergent diegetic political actor-network has undoubtedly produced compelling effects of narrative *authenticity*.

BN demonstrates that popular serial storytelling is well equipped to deal with a variety of complex political systems beyond the narrow confines of the Oval Office with its either depraved or messianic presidential incumbents. With its dismissal of executive bias and reductive binary narrative structures, its dramatisation of a multipolar polity, and its portrayal of pluralist realpolitik as a morally ambiguous but ultimately constructive force, BN is a notable diversion from many other popular polit-series of the 2010s. This chapter's analysis illustrated that the widespread fictional conventions of cynical power politics, on the one hand, and "the populist quest", on the other hand, by no means constitute inevitable laws for the fictionalisation of politics.

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 adaption 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 tangleable 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

- 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 Pragmatic-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 Kaklamaniidou 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 Kaklamaniidou, "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 Kaklamaniidou 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 "emancipation 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-Styletic 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 Autoreroticism”, 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 overall 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:

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 Stikkers 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 Stikkers, 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. Stikkers, "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 Stikkers, "What Will We Leave Behind?", 42.
 - 65 Palm and Stikkers, "What Will We Leave Behind?", 44.
 - 66 Palm and Stikkers, "What Will We Leave Behind?", 47.
 - 67 Palm and Stikkers, "What Will We Leave Behind?", 47f.
 - 68 Palm and Stikkers, "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/10.13109/9783666800092.5>; 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 playwright whose histrionic deceptions 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

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]he theatricality 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-cardss-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-Sobrin, 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-Sobrin, 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-Sobrin, 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-Sobrin, 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-Sobrin, 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-

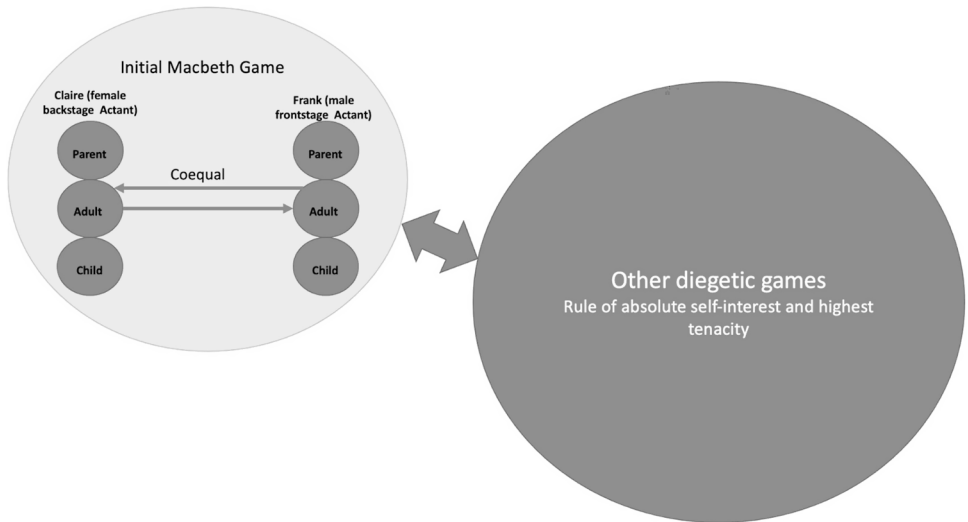
101 Liz Shannon Miller, "House of Cards: What the Final Season Would've Looked Like If Kevin Spacey Hadn't Been Fired", *IndieWire*, October 26, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/10/house-of-cards-season-6-if-kevin-spacey-hadnt-been-fired-1202015443/>.

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

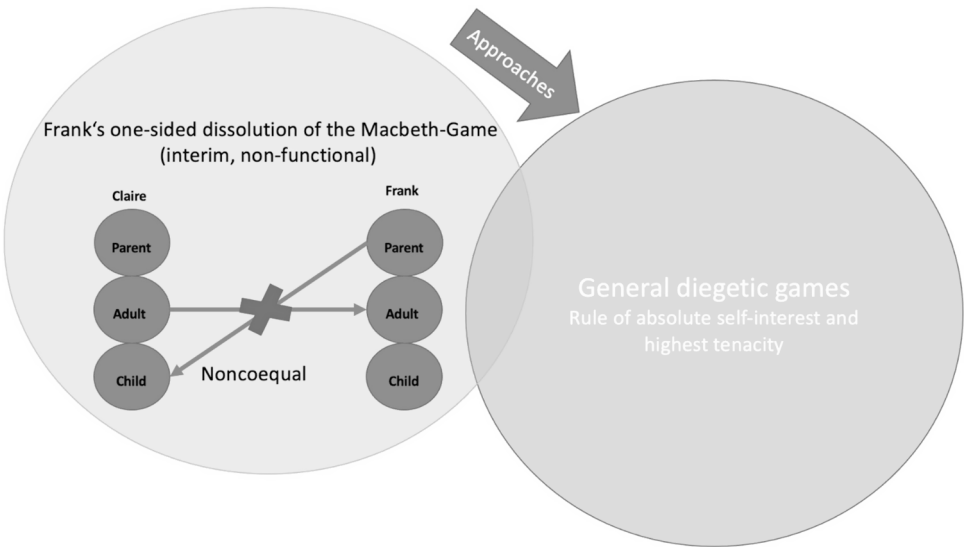


Part of the fascination that the Underwood’s relationship game – and, in fact, many narrative *Macbeth* games across fiction – holds for audiences is that it diverges from the narrative’s basic dramatic rule and thus becomes an irregularity within the series’ general configuration. To a certain degree, 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*



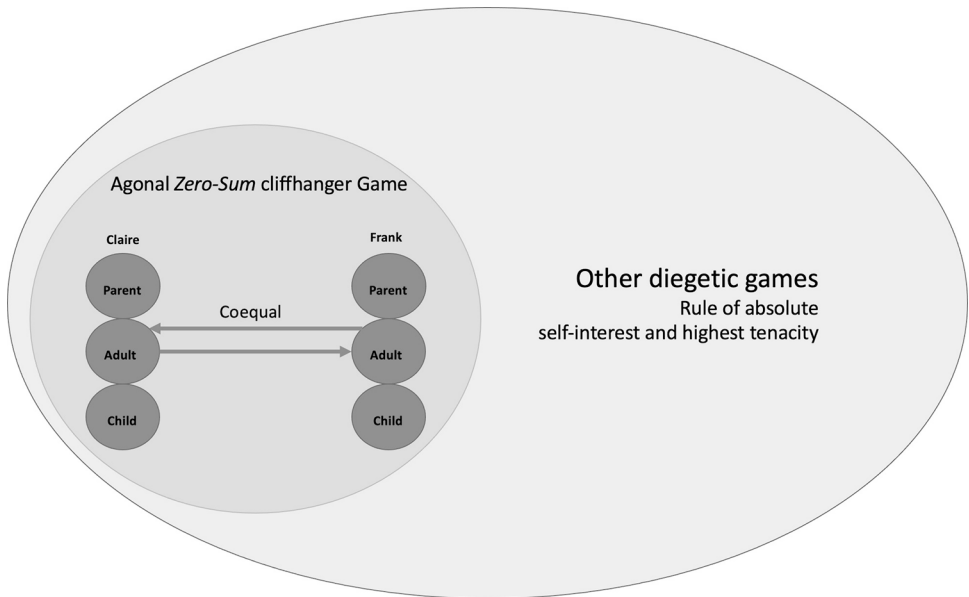
With the couple's structurally privileged game at an end, their unique exemption from the narrative's general rule of absolute self-interest also seizes. Accordingly, Claire and Frank fall back on the narrative's general dramatic rules: In their new agonal cliffhanger game at the end of HoC 5, they re-establish 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, <https://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/de/page/sgb-Open-Access-10104197?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 Clair 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%2Cunkown%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 Schlammé, 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 conmen. 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 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 extra-textually 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.

9. Conclusion

Polit-Series, Politics, and (Progressive) Perspectives

Since I began research for this thesis in early 2019, several of its case studies have gained an, at times, troubling historical immediacy. The most prominent and perhaps most tragic case is undoubtedly that of Volodymyr Zelensky, the star of *SLUHA NARODU* (SN). Having played a fictional president in his TV series, the comedian subsequently rose to his country's real-life presidency in May 2019 and has – as of late February 2022 – become one of the protagonists in Ukraine's defence against a condemnable Russian invasion. In a war that has been mediated to a hitherto unseen extent, President Zelensky's skilfully orchestrated public appearances have made the former actor world-famous and arguably played a crucial role in rallying his own population and much of the international community behind the Ukrainian cause. Remarkably, the simplified moral universe of the almost inevitable – and perhaps necessary – wartime narratives eerily resembles SN's central fictional vision of a united populous and its 'man of the people'-president at war with an existential external threat.

Another example is the French polit-thriller *BARON NOIR* (BN). In its dramatisation of a systemic malfunction of the French polity, the series has its fictional president, Amélie Dorendeau, be slapped in the face by a malcontent protester.¹ Released on February 24th, 2020, the scene came with a surprising – though arguably unrelated – historical echo when, on June 8th, 2021, a man assaulted French president Emmanuel Macron in a similar manner,² following a troubling increase in social and political tensions in France.

In a further instance, an episode of *MADAM SECRETARY* (MS) released in December 2019 shows the fictional US President Elizabeth McCord being saved from illegitimate impeachment by a corrupt political establishment through a people's march on Wash-

1 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 11.25".

2 Rc/aw, "Protester slaps French President Emmanuel Macron in the Face", Deutsche Welle, June 8, 2021. <https://p.dw.com/p/3uae5>.

ington.³ Roughly a year later, on January 6th, 2021, several hundred supporters of the defeated historical President Donald Trump stormed the Washington Capitol to prevent the US Congress from verifying the largely uncontested election victory of Democrat Joe Biden.

The seeming self-evidence of such circumstantial parallelism between polit-fiction and real-life politics may easily tempt one to attest to the series what critics have frequently (and erroneously) termed 'realism'. The term often wrongly refers to the assumption of an instinctive accuracy in the series' portrayal of sociocultural circumstances rather than a narrative's successful creation of an effective compositional illusion of 'authenticity'.⁴

This seductive and common fallacy – its examples across media criticism and scholarship are legion – strikes at the heart of what this thesis set out to do. It examined (1) how contemporary polit-series present politics by (2) discerning the manifold, interconnected, and often contradictory influences that compelled them to do so.

This study's analysis of ten series of varying economic and cultural backgrounds provided several central insights into contemporary polit-fiction.

(1) The series use relatively few recurring narrative patterns, which can be modelled with some precision.

(2) The series' narrative structure and presentation of politics result from the activity of a complex actor-network⁵ that is contingent on various sets of discrete but interdependent influences. This interdependence makes textual networks resist simple analytic reduction to any one set of factors, e.g., the above-mentioned sociocultural perspective. Accordingly, this thesis provided a model of TV series' multi-polar networks to allow a structural perspective on the influences that shape popular serial narratives.

(3) Despite using a relatively simple set of basic patterns, the series' presentation of politics turned out to be surprisingly varied. At first glance, Andreas Dörner's truism of polit-fiction presenting either power politics [*Machtpolitik*], idealistic politics [*Idealpolitik*], or realpolitik⁶ remains accurate. This is unsurprising given that the three types cover 100% of the moral political spectrum. However, the series' portrayals of politics, politicians and the polity proved to be significantly more complex, ambivalent, and, at times, fluid than initially expected.

3 *Madam Secretary*, season 6, episode 9, "Carpe Diem", directed by Felix Alcalá, written by David Grae, aired December 1, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81287034?trackId=200257859,40.43>.

4 Laura Saxton, "A true story: defining accuracy and authenticity in historical fiction", *Rethinking History* 24, no.2 (2020): 127f., <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2020.1727189>.

5 See the work of the "Popular Seriality Research Unit", e.g., in Frank Kelleter, "Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality", in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 22–26; Ruth Mayer, *Serial Fu Manchu: The Chinese Supervillain and the Spread of Yellow Peril Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 19; Lorenz Engell, "Folgen und Ursachen: Über Serialität und Kausalität", in *Populäre Serialität: Evolution – Narration – Distinktion: Zum seriellen Erzählen seit dem 19. Jhd.*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Bielefeld: transcript, 2012), 242.

6 Andreas Dörner, "Politserien: Unterhaltsame Blicke auf die Hinterbühnen der Politik", *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 66, no.51 (December 16, 2016): 7.

(4) The ambivalence and intricacy of the political presentations are, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely proportional to the series' narrative complexity. It, in turn, is subject to the diverse influences of a series' network and much less dependent on the sociocultural effects of a series' national origin context or the complexity of the historical political system it references than has often been anticipated. Indeed, a series' production and circulation background seem to be of much greater importance to its narrative complexity and the intricacy of its political vision. Series produced to fit into the flow of a linear schedule, e.g., seem to present less-complex narratives. In contrast, those produced for subscription channels and SVOD services still seem to target specific audiences with higher cultural capital following much-discussed industry practices going back to the early days of 'Quality TV' in the 1990s.

9.1 Emergent Networks and the Triple Logic of Popular TV Series

Following the realisation that popular TV series (and popular storytelling in general) are distinct narrative phenomena that behave like actor-networks⁷ and according to a complex set of intertwined logics, this thesis predicated that ongoing series possess a momentous double identity as an aesthetic artefact and cultural commodity in "complex multisided markets".⁸ I posited that, seeing that the authorial function of a TV series is dispersed across a variety of distinct actors and as the scope of its textual continuation extends into theoretical perpetuity, an ongoing series is an emergent and contingent, multi-agential system that shows "weakened central control";⁹ with far-reaching consequences. I propounded that, as an emergent, complex actor-network, a TV series possesses an intentionality that exceeds the sum of the assembled individual intentions of its actors. This poses a problem for any symptomatic sociocultural reading of a TV series, as any series' dual nature and the, at times, contradictory activity of its network will necessarily obstruct its ability to accurately 'mirror' societal currents.

I thus postulated that the network of a popular TV series is contingent on three distinct but interdependent poles that highly increase its systemic and narrative complexity.¹⁰ Together they form what I termed the distinct *triple logic* of popular serial fiction. It consists of (1) the extratextual or *pragmatic logic* comprising the historical world's natural, economic, moral, political, or societal norms and laws; (2) The *dramatic logic* of aesthetic narrative and formal composition; and (3) the *intradiegetic logic* as the collection of distinct

7 See above references to the "Popular Seriality Research Unit".

8 David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity", *New Media & Society* 20, no.11 (2018): 4281, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>. Nieborg and Poell primarily use the term in their discussion of commodities such as games and news but it nonetheless applies to TV series as well.

9 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", in *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 12f.

10 See, e.g., remarks on the interplay of micro- and macrosystems and narrative complexity in Grishakova and Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", 13.

natural, economic, moral, political and societal norms and laws that govern the fictional world.

As one of the most notable examples of distinct serial processes influenced by the triple logic within ongoing TV series, I introduced the distinction between *recalibration* and *development*. As a *development*, I described the evolution of a fictional character, event, or circumstance according to intradiegetic logic, resulting from a coherent chain of diegetic cause and effect. A *recalibration*, on the other hand, is a change of plot, a fictional character, event, or diegetic circumstances that primarily follows changing pragmatic or dramatic logic. I posited that both ways of narrative evolution are not only the result of different activities within a series' network but also affect their respective network in substantially different ways.

This study showed that, in order to be able to distinguish the 'how' and 'why' of any popular TV series' presentation of politics, it is essential to take into account its network activity and the varying logics that shaped it.

9.1.1 Modelling TV Series' Emergent Networks

Based on the assumption that capturing the tension between the various "systemic and agentic dynamics" in a series' network constitutes an essential factor for understanding the resulting complex narratives,¹¹ this thesis developed an original model designed to illustrate its various moving parts and their interaction and thus provide a comprehensible (albeit not comprehensive) tool for further analysis.

With its model, this thesis expanded previous approaches, e.g. from historical poetics, that see TV series as "the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities".¹² Going beyond considering 'just' historical factors that influence a series in a one-way communication, this thesis' model describes micro and macro actors and their interactions across ontological planes:¹³ the diegesis and the historical plane (which I called the *extratextual plane*).

I asserted that a TV series is a *hybrid network* whose actors comprise the historical human, institutional, and technological entities involved in production, circulation, and reception, as well as the serial text itself and the diverse textual and extratextual functions created by the network's activity, which include fictional characters but also extratextual discursive agents such as 'showrunners' and 'audiences'.

For my model, all discernible entities that emerge from a TV series are actors if they possess *agency*. I followed the notion that, as contingent, unstable texts, series possess an agency resulting from their particular systemic affordances. A serial text's self-awareness and self-referentiality ultimately result from the unique properties of *seriality*.

11 Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, "Introduction: Narrative Complexity", in *Narrative Complexity. Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*, ed. Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 12.

12 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5.

13 See also Marta Dynel, "'You talking to me?' The Viewer as a Ratified Listener to Film Discourse", *Journal of Pragmatics* 43, no. 6 (2011): 1631f, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.11.016>.

(1) This makes them “evolving narratives”,¹⁴ in which textual evolution is contingent upon the extratextual production entities’ constant observation of the contemporary historical environment. Thus, ongoing serial texts can respond to factors like consumer reactions, current events, or changing cultural sensibilities by incorporating them into the story’s continuation.¹⁵

(2) They are, as Frank Kelleter remarks, “Narratives of Recursive Progression”¹⁶ and, as such, constantly readjust the continuation of their plot “to already established [narrative] information”.¹⁷ Consequently, a series’ diegesis is not merely shaped by the extratextual forces in a mono-directional process. Instead, an ongoing serial text influences the extratextual forces in their determination of its continuation and thus possesses a particular systemic agency of its own.

9.1.2 The Games Fictional Characters Play

Discussing fictional characters’ particular position in a TV series’ network, I argued that all fictional characters and diegetic institutions endowed with agency are likewise (micro or macro) actors. However, considering the “curious ontological status”¹⁸ of fictional characters, I pointed out the discursive nature of their agency within my model. As “communicative artefacts”,¹⁹ they attain the agency required to become actors through their nature as the product of a co-creative discourse between audiences and production entities. Characters thus possess agency as long as they are viewed from within the diegesis. From outside the diegesis, they appear as a limited compositional element but still retain a partial systemic agency as part of the larger serial text.

I argued that, in the demonstrative medium of popular TV, much of the plot and character development is conveyed via externalised, tangible character interaction. Modelling these interactions thus presents a helpful tool for textual analysis. Drawing on illustrative approaches from mathematical game theory, Actor-Network Theory, structural semantics and psychology, I proposed to model character interactions as *games*, that is, as regular and recurring diegetic interactions between two or more fictional actors with agency whom I termed *players* for better distinction. I posited that any distinct game could feature a set of recurring or changing players and remain the same game as long as it features the same interactional patterns between players who figure the same set of actants (I described this as the *configuration* of a game). In popular serial narratives, with their need for recognisable, repeatable patterns, games play a crucial role in ensuring both the continuity of a narrative and a series’ ongoing ability to engage audiences.

14 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 12.

15 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 13f.

16 Frank Kelleter, “Five Ways of Looking at Popular Seriality”, in *Media of Serial Narrative*, ed. Frank Kelleter (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), 16.

17 Kelleter, “Five Ways”, 17.

18 Mark J.P. Wolf, “Virtual Worlds”, in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192.

19 Jens Eder, *Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse* (Marburg: Schüren, 2014), 68. My translation: “Kommunikative Artefakte”.

Following psychological Transaction Analysis (TA), I proposed to model games as *transactions*, that is, as ongoing exchanges of stimulus and response between one or more of the players' respective ego states, or systems "of feelings accompanied by a related set of behaviour patterns"²⁰ colloquially referred to as "Parent, Adult and Child".²¹ Individual players will 'act out' the behavioural patterns determined by the three ego states in different ways, taking on a *role* in a game.²²

Drawing on both psychological game models and mathematical game theory, I introduced several properties of a game that constitute applicable specifications for the analysis. I, e.g., described the intensity of a game which qualifies its impact from zero change to reversible irritation to irreversible alteration (1st – 3rd degree).²³ Following mathematical game theory, I likewise distinguished between *cooperative* and *uncooperative* games in which the rules are either guaranteed by a force of higher order or unenforceable and thus subject to frequent alteration.²⁴

Games mark out narrative patterns and often transcend individual players and even individual texts. Many games turned out to be established narrative templates that are easily recognised by audiences and often serve as narrative shortcuts to inducing audiences' inferences about characters, constellations, events and their normative classification. As crucial examples of such overarching game structures in popular serial storytelling, I identified the *zero-sum* game, the *Coming-of-Age* game, the *Macbeth* game and the *Reverse Macbeth* game.

Borrowed from mathematical game theory, the term *Zero-Sum* game denotes a configuration in which one player's gain must be balanced by a co-player's proportional loss.²⁵ In a narrative game with a *zero-sum* structure, this dynamic of proportional 'gain' and 'loss' can express itself in transactional dominance, a redistribution of soft or hard power or all types of capital (economic, social, cultural or symbolic). I propounded that structural *Zero-Sum* games often occur in popular storytelling because they usually manifest in an *agonal structure*, that is, as an open or hidden, conscious or unconscious competition.²⁶ Therefore, they are an easy way to produce engaging interactional suspense and a straightforward protagonist-antagonist configuration.

As this study has set forth, the dramatic logic of any agonal configuration has a decisive impact on any narrative in a political setting as it almost inadvertently leads to a normative dismissal of the political realm itself. If it is to host a believably agonal conflict, the political realm must almost inevitably appear to be organised as a merciless zero-sum sphere of winners and losers pursuing their self-interest. This easily evokes neo-liberal

20 Eric Berne, *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, 24th ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 23.

21 Berne, *Games People Play*, 23.

22 Berne, *Games People Play*, 45f. and 54.

23 Berne, *Games People Play*, 63f.

24 See Rainer Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, s.v. "Spieltheorie" (Basel, Schwabe & Co, 1995), 1394.

25 See Hegselmann, "Spieltheorie", 1394. For its origins in mathematical game theory see John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 85ff.

26 Roger Caillois, *Die Spiele und die Menschen: Maske und Rausch* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2017), 35ff.

and neo-realist images of the coldly rational conceptual “homo oeconomicus” that often present as cynicism when transferred to (fictional) politics.²⁷ However, this political vision is mainly contingent on dramatic logic and more or less independent of the actual ideological intentions of the historical actors in a series’ network.

I put forward that while this configuration is by no means without alternatives, the narrative conventions of the *Zero-Sum* game have been the predominant fashion for storytellers to present politics, at least in the first half of the 2010s. Nevertheless, the game’s dramatic ability to evoke engaging and highly suspenseful narrative conflicts has often unjustly been equated with a naturally compelling and ‘realistic’ portrayal of politics and, indeed, a deeper understanding of the state of the world when, in fact, it is merely a product of a relatively common narrative convention.

Discussing the *Coming-of-Age* game (CoA game), I asserted that its signature reversal of a transactional configuration from Child (protagonist)-Parent (co-player) transactions to Adult-Adult or Parent (protagonist)-Child (co-player) transactions narratively imitates (and simplifies) the psychological transition from psycho-social adolescence to adulthood through demonstrative interactional patterns. I maintained that, when adapted for narrative purposes, this epigenetic process remains intact regardless of the respective fictional character’s physical age.

Examining the two variations of the CoA game, I demonstrated that its development into a final Adult-Adult pattern usually indicates a protagonist’s peaceful narrative transition into adulthood. In contrast, a final Parent (protagonist)-Child (co-player) configuration indicates a conflictive struggle with authority and a *zero-sum* re-balancing of a protagonist’s ascent with a co-player’s (often a previous mentor-figure) proportional descent.

It emerged that the CoA game is the interactional operationalisation of one of the most popular fictional tropes and has been described in one way or another, e.g., by G.W.F. Hegel as one of the “most common and suitable collisions for the novel”,²⁸ or as part of Joseph Campbell’s fabled Monomyth.²⁹

Discussing the *Macbeth* game, I introduced a protagonist configuration which follows an old Shakespearean trope and usually assigns players’ roles according to binary patriarchal gender norms. In this narrative pattern, a (usually male) frontage actant A and a (usually female) backstage actant B form a co-equal transactional unit in their interactions with other co-players.

As I pointed out with regards to HOUSE OF CARD’s (HoC) infamous power couple, Claire and Frank Underwood, this unit often serves as a fascinating narrative deviation

27 See 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>; and 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>.

28 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: “Eine der gewöhnlichsten und für den Roman passendsten Kollisionen [...]”.

29 See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, commemorative edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.

from a series' general configuration and thus emphasises a protagonist's singular compositional position. Due to historical precedence, the *Macbeth* game conventionally (but by no means necessarily) serves to introduce to audiences a particular type of anti-hero by quickly evoking references to its homonymous Shakespearean role models (even if, as in HoC, this is never explicitly stated).

Discussing the *Reverse Macbeth* game (RM game), it became clear that this narrative pattern rests in a seeming reversal of the *Macbeth* game's binary patriarchal gender roles. It conventionally introduces a transaction in which the dominant frontstage actant A is female while the secondary backstage actant B is male. However, I pointed out that, in conventional popular storytelling, the patriarchal undertones of the *Macbeth* game often remain because the RM game usually serves to cue a problematic imbalance in the power dynamic between two players whose conflictive potential derives from a male player B's involuntary relegation to the backstage and a female player A's usually involuntary occupation of the frontage position.

9.1.3 Historical Actors and their Interactions

This thesis described the extratextual part of a series' network as comprising all micro and macro Actors – individuals, institutions, and discursive functions – that participate in the interdependent collective actions of a TV series' creation, circulation, and reception. I asserted that, as the historical network contains actors and actor-relations of almost infinite complexity, it develops discursive collective functions such as *showrunners* or *audiences*. They personify the dispersed, abstract processes of a series' creation, circulation, and reception and thus reduce complexity and enable the interaction between the various actors of a network. I pointed out that this process has been going on throughout the history of serial storytelling. It includes more recent attempts spearheaded, e.g., by OTT services, to make sense of recipients through the automated collection of user data and the subsequent creation of – still highly imaginary – “algorithmic audience[s]”.³⁰

9.2 Analysing Contemporary Polit-Series

Taking a synchronic and heuristic approach, this thesis examined the presentation of politics in ten selected fictional TV series. It focussed on series that were (1) released throughout the 2010s as part of the developments of the emerging streaming age; (2) series that show a “*basal* presentation of politics”,³¹ that is, a tangible focus on institutionalised political structures and protagonists rather than an underlying political concern;

30 Benjamin Burroughs, “House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore”, *Popular Communication* 17, no.1 (February 2019): 9f., doi 10.1080/15405702.2017.1343948.

31 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild. Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 96. My translation: “*basale* Politikdarstellung”. Original emphasis.

(3) series with ‘strong seriality’ whose eventual end remained undetermined at the time of distribution.³²

9.2.1 The Crown: Basic Themes and the Postmodern Making of Monarchy

This study started its analysis by examining the underlying narrative structure of the Netflix series *THE CROWN* and its vision of the British monarchy as a postmodern polity. The series’ extensive use of narrative games in constructing its largely character-based narrative made it an ideal analytical starting point. *THE CROWN* struggles with a conflict typical for more complex character-based series, which face the task of consolidating continuous character development with the inherent need for structural repetition.

I asserted that, to tackle this challenge, *THE CROWN*, following dramatic logic, draws on a time-tested and almost universally legible narrative formula by presenting its royal characters engaged in a coming-of-age-type struggle between personal need and the requirements of their public role, which Hegel describes as “the conflict between the heart’s poetry and the opposing prose of real circumstances”.³³ In *THE CROWN*, this conventional conflict re-emerges as an identity diffusion caused by a conflict between what Ernst Kantorowicz calls “The King’s two Bodies”.³⁴ It became clear that the series revolves around a struggle caused by the dichotomy between the fictional Queen’s “body politic”, the conceptual, ceremonial body of the sovereign, and her “body natural”, the physical person who wears the crown.³⁵

I demonstrated that this well-established narrative formula serves (1) to condense the complex construct of the British monarchy into an operational narrative and (2) to make a relatable fictional character out of a figure (a hyper-privileged monarch) in objectively unrelatable circumstances.

I postulated that this underlying dramatic configuration significantly affected *THE CROWN*’s evaluation of the monarchy. The *King’s two bodies* (K2B) trope almost inadvertently creates a climate of goodwill towards any protagonist suffering from the idiosyncrasies of a life of royal splendour. No matter how detached or dysfunctional the fictional Windsors might become, the K2B trope ultimately serves to dramatically justify their behaviour by illustrating the irresolvable perversion of their condition. Nevertheless, I

32 See the notion of the “weak serial form”: Aldo Grasso and Massimo Scaglioni, *Che cos’è la television: Il piccolo schermo fra cultura e società: i generi, l’industria, il pubblico* (Milan: Garzanti, 2003), 134. Quoted via Tanja Weber and Christian Junklewitz, “Das Gesetz der Serie – Ansätze zur Definition und Analyse”, *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews* 25, no.1 (2008): 21, <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2008.1.663>. They write of a “schwache serielle Form”. The original calls for “una forma seriale debole” (original emphasis).

33 Georg W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 393. My translation: “[...] der Konflikt zwischen der Poesie des Herzens und der entgegenstehenden Prosa der Verhältnisse [...]”.

34 Andrew Higson has pointed this out as a common feature of monarchy fiction in *ibid.* “From political power to the power of the image: contemporary ‘British’ cinema and the nation’s monarchs”, in *The British monarchy on screen*, ed. Mandy Merck (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 353.

35 For both terms see Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, 7th paperback printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7f.

asserted that the trope, by providing an engaging way to dramatise the abstract and remote concept of monarchy, largely adheres to the requirements of dramatic logic. This may usually result in a positive portrayal of the monarchy but should not be mistaken for the symptomatic utterance of a pro-monarchical stance of a series' network or, even less so, of its individual historical actors.

I propounded that, in *THE CROWN*, the K2B trope emerges as a transactional pattern between a ceremonially superior monarchical actant and a co-player, which I called the *Monarch's two Bodies* game (M2B game). It features ulterior transactions on two distinct vectors: the ceremonial vector, which allows the monarch to hide his*her humanity behind a ritualised parental façade, and the ulterior personal vector, on which his*her personal qualities (or lack thereof) come into play.

It became clear that, in *THE CROWN*, the M2B structure manifests in two basic game types that drive most of the series plot. (1) In CoA games, the protagonists undergo the painful process of sacrificing their humanity to approach their royal body politic by attaining a parental transactional dominance in games with a largely *zero-sum* structure. (2) In RM games, which create narrative conflict by pitting a ceremonially superior actant (usually Elizabeth II) against a secondary player (e.g., her husband and sister) with an unfulfilled personal claim to parental dominance and a subordinate institutional or public role.

Furthermore, examining the series' presentation of the monarchy, this study postulated that, in *THE CROWN*, royal pageantry appears as an extravagant signifier of dominance without an equivalent significate, thus turning the Queen into a hyperreal simulacrum. *THE CROWN*, therefore, implicitly draws on a postmodern expansion of the relatively conventional K2B trope, which Louis Marin has conceptualised as the monarch's mediatised third body.³⁶ This decidedly postmodern concept understands the monarch's two original bodies as becoming unified only in the imagination of his*her subjects/audiences. In *THE CROWN*, with its constant emphasis on highlighting the protective fictions of royal ritual, the imaginary construct of *Queen Elizabeth* comes into being only through performative acts, which serve to unify the individual that wears the crown (body natural) and the concept of the monarch (body politic) in the public's interpretative imagination. The Queen exists only by continuously diverting the gaze of the panoptic public from her all too human body natural through the "smoke and mirrors"³⁷ of royal performance.

Examining the configurational changes in *THE CROWN* throughout its run, particularly in the series' fourth season and following the introduction of a fictional Diana, Princess of Wales, it became clear that the series undergoes something of a structural recalibration regarding its normative evaluation of individual royals (albeit not the monarchy itself). I submitted that this notable increase in the protagonists' moral ambivalence illustrates the changing influence of several conflating logics within the series' network.

36 Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1988), 13ff.

37 Title of *The Crown*, season 1, episode 5, "Smoke and Mirrors", directed by Philip Martin, written by Peter Morgan, aired November 4, 2016, Netflix, Left Bank Pictures/ Sony Pictures Television, streamed TV series episode.

It is partly the result of a dramatic inability of the series' relatively rigid initial configuration to accommodate the character of Diana Spencer. The *Princess of Wales* has long become an established fictional trope in her own right, which evokes, in audiences, expectations of a generally positive character engaged in justified opposition to the Windsor family. In order to accommodate Diana as a character into its *dramatic* and *intradiegetic* logics, the series thus shifts its previously sympathetic portrayal of the royal family to allow for legitimate conflict to take place, thus causing a general reconfiguration of the series' narrative structure.

I likewise pointed out that this change in *THE CROWN*'s portrayal of the monarchy most likely followed *pragmatic* logic too. The series arguably incorporates the notable shifts in the global perception of the historical Windsors' image following several highly publicised scandals and controversies, such as Prince Andrew's alleged sexual abuse of a sex-trafficked minor, Prince Harry's conflictive resignation as a senior royal, and increased attention on the family's role in Britain's dark colonial past.

However, I posited that, while the series breaks a long-standing taboo in presenting a living British monarch – and a decidedly flawed one at that – it is by no means a critical account of the monarchy. In *THE CROWN*, the necessary postmodern accord of the governed is continuously granted to the monarchical simulacra – not least to ensure the series' continuation under established narrative circumstances (a requirement of the dramatic logic of seriality). Thus, *THE CROWN* inadvertently endows its fictional monarchy with a kind of pseudo-democratic legitimacy.

I showed that, despite a growing ambivalence towards royal individuals, the monarchy in *THE CROWN* appears as a legitimate tool of affirmative culture. It is an imaginary intended to prevent the public from pursuing actual change by suggesting a division between the coldness of modern reality and a world of 'higher' ideals represented by royal pageantry with its references to 'national greatness', historical continuity, and a distinct national community. While the series laments the institution's flaws, the monarchy ultimately appears as the only shield against the onslaught of (post)modernity.

I likewise noted that *THE CROWN*, essentially following the controversial tradition of Heritage film, undergoes substantial narrative contortions to preserve its escapist feel. This includes avoiding the presentation of the monarchy's historic role in preserving and legitimising the racist, violent, and exploitative assumptions of empire and circumventing any mention of the institution's unavoidable attachment to destructive discriminatory practices such as inherited privilege, institutionalised inequality, and racialised exploitation (of which the Windsor family has itself profited significantly throughout the centuries).

9.2.2 The Changing Face of Polit-Comedy

To examine the influences of a change in genre on a series' presentation of politics, this study went on to analyse the way contemporary polit-comedies operationalise political settings for their construction of humour. Analysing three examples from the beginning (*VEEP*), middle (*EICHWALD*, *MdB*), and end (*THE POLITICIAN*) of the 2010s, this chapter showed that, throughout the decade, mainstream polit-comedy's presentation of pol-

itics has co-evolved following changing conceptions of what constitutes 'acceptable' humour.

The chapter asserted that the decade's earlier examples, following an established narrative trend of the early 2000s, tend to rely on the transgressive 'uncomfortable humour' of mockumentary-style cringe-comedy and a corresponding presentation of political omnishambles, that is, politics which has "been very badly managed, with many mistakes and a great lack of understanding".³⁸ In the continuous presentation of a seemingly unending downward spiral of dysfunctional yet unchanging politics, both VEEP and EICHWALD gain a highly absurdist component. However, analysing their narrative setup, I pointed out that this absurdism is, first and foremost, the result of dramatic serial logic, which requires the perpetual retention of a narrative base structure.

I followed the assumption that both VEEP and EICHWALD rely primarily on what Nicholas Holm (who also analyses VEEP) has called the "three key modes of contemporary humour – discomfort, provocation and absurdity".³⁹

This study asserted that both VEEP and EICHWALD show a reduced editorial presence, essentially using the mockumentary style to evoke its strong associations with earlier examples of prestige 'cringe humour'. However, I showed that, while VEEP relies largely on transgression and invective to create its humour,⁴⁰ EICHWALD follows more closely in the original mockumentary style's tradition of exploiting the comical potential of unresolved social discomfort.

Analysing the series' dominant narrative patterns, I asserted that, in its presentation of politics, VEEP introduces a variation of the K2B trope⁴¹ and its transactional operationalisation, the M2B game (featured prominently in *THE CROWN*). It applies the uncooperative, zero-sum *President's two bodies* (P2B) game in which a superficial ceremonial vector continuously collides with transactions on the ulterior personal vector to create a maximum of comical irritation that can, in turn, be expressed in colourful invective, the series' main event. In EICHWALD, on the other hand, transactions occur in what I have termed the *Treat me like an adult* (TA) game, in which ostensible Adult-Adult transactions

38 See "Omnishambles", *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, accessed Aug 17, 2020, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/omnishambles>. I referenced earlier mentions of the term by Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television: Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 137–148; and previous remarks by Steven Fielding, *A state of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page: From Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 263.

39 Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 16. For his discussion of VEEP see 75–88.

40 See Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

41 Following the assumption of the series' relying on presenting the discrepancy between high ideals and base humanity voiced with regards to VEEP, e.g., by Marc Edward Shaw, "Veep's Poetics of Omnishambles", in *Politics and Politicians in Contemporary US Television. Washington as Fiction*, ed. Betty Kaklamanidou, Margaret Tally (New York: Routledge, 2017), 143f; also in Nicholas Holm, *Humor as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 82.

collide with ulterior, childish pettiness, thus creating lingering social awkwardness and evoking the series' classic mockumentary-style cringe humour.

The younger *POLITICIAN* presents a paradigm shift in polit-comedy at the end of the 2010s. It became clear that the series moves from 'uncomfortable' to what I termed 'woke' humour, which functions entirely without the previously fashionable transgression of the boundaries of progressive, socially acceptable discourse. As I have demonstrated, this turn constitutes a decisive change in TV's "cultural logic of gentrification",⁴² which previously prized the play with "controversy",⁴³ transgression, relative obscenity and invective as distinguishing features. It has arguably dominated prestige television (especially in uncensored subscription-based services) since the 1990s and until well into the mid-2010s.

Analysing the narrative setup of *POLITICIAN*, I asserted that the series presents a satirical inversion of the conventional coming-of-age progression. Here, the politician-protagonist Payton Hobart moves from the typical moral emptiness established as a common point of reference in earlier polit-fictions (such as *VEEP* or *EICHWALD* and, in a variation, *THE CROWN*) to a more balanced personality that adheres to both political necessity and his personal needs and ideals.

A transactional analysis of the series' central character configurations showed that the evolution of Payton Hobart represents a satirical inversion of polit-fiction's often hyperbolic reading of the Hegelian *poetry vs prose* motif (e.g., present in *THE CROWN*): Payton develops from an unfeeling polit-automaton to a responsible civil servant, friend, husband, and father, thus consolidating a cynical vision of reality's prose with his heart's underlying desires.

It emerged that all three series adhere to the pragmatic logic of changing historical discourse among prestige audiences regarding the acceptability (and comical potential) of transgressive behaviour. However, their varying dramatic logic continued to play a significant role in their respective presentation of politics. In order to plausibly retain a static, omnishambolic narrative setup for several seasons in *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, corrupt incompetence must be a central characteristic of all relevant fictional characters and their interactions to make the continuous presence of the incompetent protagonists believable within intradiegetic logic. In the character-based *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, the characters' ongoing development and several prominent B- and C-plotlines (which at times overshadow the main political plotline) allow for a more nuanced

42 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), 189f. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14; also Katja Kanzler's remarks on the "Characteristic transgressiveness" of prestige TV: Katja Kanzler, "Veep, Invective Spectacle, and the Figure of the Comedic Antiheroine", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 67, no. 2 (2019): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0014>.

43 Janet McCabe and Kim Akass discuss classic HBO-led, linear 'Quality TV' as "courting controversy": Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 62–76.

portrayal of political processes and players without threatening the series' intradiegetic plausibility.

Examining the resulting presentations of politics, this chapter demonstrated that, in the earlier *VEEP* and *EICHWALD*, politics appears as a cynical and highly agonal, uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game in which no rule is guaranteed, and one player's gain has to be balanced by another player's loss. In the later series, *POLITICIAN*, on the other hand, politics is a cooperative and ultimately constructive process with a controlled and temporally limited agonal scope in which competitors can end up having a friendly drink together.

In the same vein, *VEEP* and *EICHWALD* show politics as a process in which post-democratic deceptive simulation replaces the productive mechanisms of representative democracy. Supported by the pseudo-veristic *mise-en-scène* of the mockumentary style, both series present their cynical vision of politics as a lamentable but unavoidable fact in the reflexively impotent tradition of "Capitalist Realism".⁴⁴

POLITICIAN, on the other hand, offers a highly optimistic image of *realpolitik* and representative democracy as a flawed but ultimately effective way to meaningful change. While acknowledging postmodernity's metaphysical insecurity and the harsh realities of politics, *POLITICIAN* ultimately presents representative democracy as a functional and fertile ground for cooperation, compromise, and productive political action. The series thus follows a modernised version of a more idealistic fictional tradition represented, e.g., by *THE WEST WING* (USA, 1999–2006). *POLITICIAN* likewise rejects the earlier comical tradition of impotent surrender to the gruesome and lamentable absurdity of a cynical political reality that had long formed the basis of what had seemed like the universally accepted formula for a 'realistic' portrayal of politics.

9.2.3 SLUHA NARODU and the Remarkable Tale of a Populist President

With his fierce resistance to the Russian invasion of his country in early 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has become famous the world over. The same goes for the series that arguably launched his political career. At the start of the war, the curious tale of SN and its comedian-protagonist, who rose to Ukraine's real-life presidency in 2019, became a much-discussed media favourite. In the series, Zelensky plays the 'President of the people' Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, who shakes up his country's corrupt polity through common sense and strong moral fibre.

Gathering the essential facts about the unusually close entanglement between SN's fictional portrayals and Zelensky's historical presidential bid, I examined how the show came to (somewhat superficially) be regarded by some as a "three-year political campaign".⁴⁵ Nevertheless, its merging of fiction and reality endowed a previously inexe-

44 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21. See also: Joe Conway's similar discussion of "*political satire vérité*" in: "After Politics/After Television: *Veep*, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 182–207.

45 Stephanie Petrella, "Volodymyr Zelensky: Ukraine's servant of the People?", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/volodymyr-zelensky-ukraines-servant-of-the-people/>.

rienced celebrity comedian with the very real political clout of an entirely imaginary TV President.

I demonstrated how the unusually dominant pragmatic logic of its star producer's political ambitions made SN the most 'political' series in this study, in the sense that it arguably had a far-reaching impact on the historical distribution of power in Ukraine. However, I maintained that, as far as its actual narrative goes, SN remains a largely conventional example of what Liesbet van Zoonen has called "the populist telling of the quest"⁴⁶ in which a morally pure idealist becomes the immediate envoy of a unified populous.⁴⁷ The series largely follows the established "populist tradition" of building an opposition between supposed elites and 'the people'.⁴⁸

Examining SN's populist vision of idealpolitik, I posited that, following populist conventions, the series juxtaposes its morally flawless outsider-hero Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko (played by Volodymyr Zelensky) and a corrupt and illegitimate political elite.

In SN, the antagonistic political *inside* operates according to the cynical laws of an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game, while the upstanding *outside* plays a cooperative game whose morally simplified rules are ensured both by the protagonist's moral superiority and dramatic intervention.

Following this line of inquiry, I contended that Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko is a messiah-type saviour hero in the tradition of the narrative archetype of the *American Monomyth* (AM) whose utopian prowess quite literally ends up covering Kyiv's Maidan Square in a mountain of gold. Despite its Ukrainian origin, SN follows this popular US-American narrative archetype in almost every way. It portrays an individualistic outsider hero who saves a potential Eden after the previous failure of its institutions,⁴⁹ an emphatic endorsement of individualism over institutions and regulated procedures, and a distrust of personal intelligence and human sexuality (both markers of the corrupt outgroup), which culminate in an anti-systemic and anti-democratic impetus.

This thesis demonstrated that SN's narrative construction in accordance with the principles of populist idealism and the AM ultimate leads to the series rejecting notions of pluralism and democratic representation in favour of a simplified vision of organic and immediate leadership as a frictionless translation of 'the people's will'.

However, I noted that this underlying impetus is not primarily a result of ostensible anti-democratic tendencies within the series' historical network but of the narrative requirements for dramatising utopian, idealistic politics itself. Following the assumption that categorical morality as an exclusive benchmark of political legitimacy can only endure in a highly simplified binary moral universe, I argued that this construction almost

46 Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 112.

47 See Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen*, 112.

48 Liesbet Van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 110f.

49 Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), XX.

inadvertently leads to delegitimizing political opponents and, consequentially, a negation of pluralistic principles, despite the series paying frequent lip-service to liberal progressive values. Thus, as a structural foundation for fictional narratives, this paradoxical dramatic construction of idealpolitik usually results in the binary character spectrum of a corrupt elite vs a morally pure 'hero of the people' as it appears in SN and other AM examples.

To further illustrate the common paradox of fictional political idealism resulting in anti-democratic and anti-pluralist narratives, I examined three other sample series from various contexts that closely resemble SN's narrative AM formula down to small compositional details like their protagonist's respective mentor-profession. These examples were: MS, DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (DS US) and DESIGNATED SURVIVOR: 60 DAYS (DS 60). I indicated that the series' anti-democratic and anti-institutional populist impetus, at times, goes so far as to delegitimise even democratic elections (DS US) and the institutions of representative democracy to the point where they legitimise a potential direct intervention by 'the people' in a de-facto revolution (MS, SN).

I illustrated that the AM's inadvertently populist narrative formula – and its ideological consequences for the portrayal of polit-fiction – in many ways coincided with the requirements of linear serial TV and its classic guiding principle of Least Objectionable Programming (LOP) by providing superficially uncontroversial content with an easy-to-follow protagonist-antagonist structure and an unambiguous moral universe. The series' ultimate rejection of pluralism and representative democracy thus appeared primarily a result of established dramatic conventions, which themselves result from *pragmatic* considerations regarding a series' circulation, market placement, and audiences' viewing habits rather than from ideological positions within a series' network.

A final comparison of SN's narrative development with the evolution of Volodymyr Zelensky's historical campaign revealed how the series developed from a relatively conventional AM polit-comedy into a highly biased commentary on the 2019 Ukrainian election, complete with savage satires of Zelensky's political opponents.

I posited that the series thus ran the risk of – and arguably attempted to – transferring its simplified populist undertones and the resulting moral elevation of Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko onto real Ukrainian politics and Volodymyr Zelensky, respectively. As this thesis is finalised in the summer of 2022, the final verdict on Zelensky's presidency is still out. However, I indicated that, while the melange of political reality and populist fictions is a hazardous manoeuvre for any democracy, Zelensky's skilful use of various mediated 'us vs them' narratives has arguably played an important role in rallying Ukraine's population and much of the international community behind the cause of his country's defence.

9.2.4 BARON NOIR: Inverting the Populist Quest

A subsequent analysis of the French canal+-production BN showed that the principles of the AM and the 'populist quest', while common in popular polit-fiction, by no means constitute inevitable dramatic laws for the fictionalisation of politics. I illustrated that BN, in many ways, constitutes a dramatic and normative inversion of the populist quest and a fictional refutation of simplified populist idealpolitik.

Arguably the most structurally complex series in this thesis' corpus, BN juxtaposes populism and pluralism, thus presenting a vision of teleological realpolitik unusual for polit-fiction. As a direct inversion of the previous sample group, in BN, the pseudo-Machiavellian strivers are charged with saving democracy and pluralism from what are now destructive idealists and populist agitators. In BN, politics still appears as a largely uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game in the dramatic convention of earlier conflictive agonal plots. However, the series' vision of realpolitik is not that of a cynical, dystopian wasteland but that of a space fit for consolidating a variety of legitimate interests across a dispersed fictional actor-network.

Consequently, I asserted that, in BN, 'healthy' politics as the ongoing negotiation of the distribution of power can exist only in the pluralist vision of realpolitik with its aim to consolidate legitimate opposing interests through, at times, morally ambiguous means.

I demonstrated that, in order to integrate political pluralism into a narrative structure, BN applies unusual tactics for (French) popular storytelling. The series presents the fictional polity as a complex actor-network with dispersed interests and breaks with the established taboo of dramatising the otherwise largely sacrosanct institution of the French presidency. Indeed, BN goes so far as to present the president's unusually dominant role as a primary cause of systemic malfunction. The series, likewise, bypasses polit-fiction's traditional executive bias by focussing on a protagonist (Philippe Rickwaert) who holds no government office for the greater part of its run and is, instead, primarily engaged in dispersed parallel power struggles within the fictionalised *Partie Socialiste* and other pluralist bodies of institutionalised governance and civic leadership.

At this point, I illustrated that BN's notable narrative focus on the political left results from a pragmatic consideration of the series' target audience functions which – as subscribers to the prestigious cable channel Canal+ – tend to be part of progressive urban populations with above-average cultural capital and a high degree of political literacy.

Analysing the various fictional micro and macro actors that constitute BN's comparatively complex political universe, I contended that the series derives most of its plotlines from relatively complex renderings of the interplay of pluralist democratic institutions and organisations like political parties, parliament, trade unions, student movements, old and new media and even the European Union.

A structural analysis illustrated that BN elaborately comments on the dangers of systemic malfunction and the rise of populism in various guises. Many characters, like the left-populist Michel Vidal, illustrate the perils of hazardous idealpolitik, which would rather see a flawed but functional polity destroyed than compromise its morally stringent path.

Discussing BN's main antagonists, I demonstrated that the series applies the unusual narrative device of what I termed a *dispersed antagonist*. Instead of presenting the plot's antagonistic force as a direct result of a single personified agency, in BN, antagonisms such as political extremism appear mainly as the result of various distinct but interconnected struggles within its diegetic multi-polar actor-network. This narrative device makes the diegetic political tension appear as a systemic rather than interpersonal phenomenon and thus serves the effect of avoiding the toxic discursive dominance of polarising extremist positions.

An examination of the series' personified antagonists, Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon, showed that they, in many ways, mirror the construction of the positive saviour heroes in SN, MS, DS US and DS 60. They are, e.g., explicit representations of populism displaying the inevitable anti-democratic tendencies of othering dissent and a violent antagonism towards political 'enemies'. Christophe Mercier even starts as an unassuming science teacher communicating with 'his' people over social media, thus repeating the recurring mentor-trope and notions of frictionless immediacy typical for AM series in the tradition of the populist quest. However, the same qualities that made Vasyly Petrych Holoborodko and his fictional comrades in MS, DS US and DS 60 into positive saviour-heroes turn BN's Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon into systemically dangerous madmen.

This thesis contended that BN is ultimately a (simplified) fictional model of the decay of representative pluralist democracy, a fictional examination of the dangers of unipolar idealpolitik, and an exploration of the creative possibilities of contemporary realpolitik. Systemic malfunction occurs (1) through the moderate forces alienating the increasingly marginalised masses; (2) through a divided and largely reactionary political left occupied with ideological infighting; (3) through a political establishment no longer willing to support the Front Républicain against right-wing-extremism because of (3a) idealistic delusions or (3b) the miscalculation of being able to harness populism's destructive dynamism for political reform.

With the moderate liberal candidate Emmanuel Macron winning the 2022 presidential election against right-wing-candidate Marine Le Pen by a 10%-reduced margin as compared to 2017, various political leaders on the left and right refusing to endorse the Front Républicain against the extreme right ahead of the election's decisive second round, and French society demonstrating a growing degree of refraction, BN's vision of systemic malfunction shows many troubling parallels to historical French politics. While this is not to suggest any historical clairvoyance on the part of a fictional TV series, I posited that the case of BN demonstrates how a narratively 'authentic' series with a reasonably complex and coherent narrative and diegetic configuration can, at times, unfold significant illustrative – rather than instructive – potential.

This study maintained that, together with *POLITICIAN*, BN is a rare example of a fictional vision of constructive, representative, and democratic realpolitik. The series shows that – contrary to some scholarly opinion – popular serial storytelling is well-equipped to dramatise a variety of complex political systems beyond the mono-directional confines of a personified executive with either morally depraved or messianic presidential incumbents.

9.2.5 Recalibrating House of Cards, Season 6

While this thesis' analysis of BN focussed mainly on the series' diegetic presentation of politics, its final analysis of the sixth (and last) season of HoC aimed to illustrate the many interdependent ways in which pragmatic logic moves to shape a series' narrative. Caused by the highly publicised dismissal of its star, Hollywood celebrity Kevin Spacey, after mounting allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct, the unusual magnitude of

(and public insight into) HoC 6's recalibration constitutes an example of rare clarity for a serial network's extensive and, at times, contradictory dynamic.

Dominated mainly by pragmatic logic, the recalibration of HoC 6 is undoubtedly an example of remarkable operational skill on the part of its historical production actors. However, the series' ultimate collapse also illustrates the many difficulties that come with the contradictory triple logic of serial TV storytelling, which requires a narrative to be at once intradiegetically plausible, dramatically engaging, and pragmatically successful. Given the accumulation of narrative material throughout a long-running series, it is no wonder that even undisrupted serial narratives often fail to end in a satisfying resolution. However, I demonstrated that, with the significant challenges of a major recalibration under public scrutiny of rare intensity, HoC 6 unsurprisingly struggled to overcome the many insurmountable obstacles on its way to providing a satisfying conclusion.

Examining the remarkable extent of HoC 6's recalibration, it became clear that the series (1) faced the almost impossible task of replacing its former protagonist Frank Underwood with the previous deuteragonist, Claire Hale, by creating an intradiegetically plausible reason for her ascent (and Frank's disappearance) and endowing her with sufficient character depth to sustain the narrative. Likewise, HoC 6 had to contend with the extratextual shadow of the historical Spacey scandal. Thus, the series (2) faced the challenge of maintaining enough structural continuity to make its audiences accept the various adjustments as part of its narrative evolution while, at the same time, morally dismissing HoC's anti-hero (Frank Underwood), whose depravity the series had spent its previous five seasons training its viewers to enjoy. Anticipating the fallout from Spacey's alleged historical actions, HoC 6 thus noticeably incorporates contemporary discourses surrounding female empowerment and the overturning of discriminatory and exploitative structures. This marks a significant shift for a narrative that had previously hinged on – and excessively indulged in – showing a privileged, white cis-man manipulating an unjust system for his own benefit.

A structural and formal analysis demonstrated that HoC 6, in many instances, accomplishes this complex undertaking by simulating the required change, continuity, or resolution (sometimes all at once) through formal allusion rather than coherent diegetic development. I, e.g., noted that the season frames Frank's death (the diegetic reason provided to explain his pragmatically motivated disappearance) as a conscious commentary on Kevin Spacey's dismissal and a moral re-evaluation of the formerly popular anti-hero. The episode's frequent use of motifs evoking spiritual cleansing and emotional liberation – e.g., Claire saving and releasing a trapped bird under somewhat sinister circumstances – make Frank's replacement appear almost like an exorcism.

However, Claire's seeming emancipation from Frank and his methods, while frequently alluded to through dismissive commentaries, is not supported by an actual moral reform of the new protagonist. Instead, I asserted that, given seriality's inherent need for structural stability and repetition, any emancipation from Frank Underwood's Machiavellian style ultimately had no choice but to remain superficial in order to preserve HoC's signature serial appeal.

Accordingly, it became clear that HoC 6's recalibration entailed elevating Claire from Frank's accomplice to an independent protagonist who could – in an allusion to historical events – demonstrate believable moral distance while simultaneously retaining the

show's signature ruthlessness. I, e.g., demonstrated how the recalibration of Claire being a survivor of sexual abuse served the *pragmatic* purpose of positioning her (and the series) on the opposite side of any historical associations with sexual misconduct while remaining without significant consequences for the plot.

A structural analysis furthermore revealed a central problem in HoC's narrative premise. With its characters having attained both the peak of their moral depravity and their ambition (the presidency) early in the series, Claire – like Frank before her – becomes a largely reactive, static character unable to create an engaging plot dynamic on her own. This problem is amplified in HoC 6, whose recalibration involved replacing the series' previously central *Macbeth* game. HoC 1–5 had largely hinged on Frank and Claire's extraordinary complicity following the *Macbeth* game's classic patriarchal convention of forming an exceptional transactional unit consisting of a male frontstage player (Frank) and a female backstage player (Claire). In the largely action-based HoC 1–5, the game's frequent evolution and subsequent regression had served to simulate character development while ultimately avoiding any significant 3rd-degree changes in the series' basic configuration. However, with the loss of the Underwood's *Macbeth* game, HoC 6 lost this central means to interactionally simulate character development.

Examining HoC 6's formal composition and especially its most prominent feature, the protagonist's parabasis, it emerged that the series' metaleptic 'breaking of the fourth wall' takes an essential role in creating its various simulations of narrative evolution and resolution. I postulated that Frank's famous so-called 'asides' had served primarily as a means to express himself while doing little to advance the narrative itself. In the recalibrated HoC 6, on the other hand, the protagonist's parabasis takes on a highly complex and decidedly cinematic narrative function by formally linking different spatial and temporal planes within the diegesis and creating formal illusions of development and coherent resolution.

The section illustrated that while pragmatic logic is ultimately a decisive factor in a series' narrative composition, this by no means negates the influence of dramatic and intradiegetic logic. Indeed, the unusual clarity of the circumstances of HoC 6's recalibration made it clear that, while extratextual factors may motivate significant narrative overhaul, in ongoing popular serial narratives, the scope of the change will always be influenced, limited, and redirected by dramatic and intradiegetic requirements.

9.3 Some Conclusive Comparisons

After the structural and narrative analysis of ten series from various cultural, production, and circulation backgrounds, five key comparative insights into contemporary polit-series emerge: (1) Polit-series' limited narrative patterns result in relative, contingent compositional variety; (2) similar narrative patterns can produce disparate normative frames; (3) popular fictional politics is partially globalised and transcends cultural affordances; (4) the "cultural logic of gentrification" is evolving; (5) popular seriality conditions implicit ideological conservatism. I will now detail these in turn:

(1) *Limited narrative patterns result in relative, contingent compositional variety*

It became clear that the series' need to consolidate the opposing requirements of structural repetition and limited innovation result in their reliance on a relatively limited number of recurring games. As I demonstrated, most series drew heavily on variations of the M2B game, the CoA game, the *Macbeth* game and the *Zero-Sum* game to create their plot.

However, my analyses showed significant variation in the concrete design and normative evaluation of these patterns. Few examples illustrate this better than the evolution of gender relations in the series throughout the 2010s and following the ascent of various empowerment discourses such as "Me Too" and "Black lives Matter" into the discursive mainstream. In HoC, e.g., the *Macbeth* structure with its classically patriarchal undertones initially served as the series' central distinguishing feature. Following its recalibration after a sexual abuse scandal and significant historical developments in the discourse surrounding the disadvantaged position of women in popular entertainment (among other things), HoC 6 reframed its previously central *Macbeth* structure as a toxic source for interactional exploitation and transgression.

In *THE CROWN*, the RM game likewise initially followed established patriarchal tradition, starting as a seemingly self-evident source of interpersonal conflict. While the game's narrative position as one of the primary sources of conflict remained, its normative evaluation changed with the introduction of a fictional Princess Diana and the motifs of justified rebellion against royal rigidity historically associated with the historical *Diana* trope.

In BN, the configuration of the *Patronage for Pleasure* game (P4P game) essentially served as the underlying structural formula for dramatising the asymmetrical binary relationships between materially superior, powerful males and reductively 'beautiful' females. In HoC 6 and the last season of DS US, on the other hand, the P4P game appears with reversed albeit still binary – gender connotations as powerful older female players dominate physically attractive younger males. Once again following the various discourses of social empowerment at the end of the 2010s, the P4P game thus evolved its implicit normative evaluation of gender relations while retaining its underlying (binary) structural narrative pattern.

(2) *Similar narrative patterns can result in disparate normative frames*

While Dörner's truism that polit-fiction either presents idealistic politics, realpolitik, or power politics unsurprisingly remains true, the series' presentation of politics and their corresponding normative evaluation turned out to be remarkably varied.

Depending on narrative complexity and the corresponding depth of character portrayals, the narrative construction of populist idealpolitik, e.g., could appear either as a positive ideal (in SN, DS US, DS 60 and MS) or as an undue, systemically dangerous simplification (in BN).

The inversion of idealpolitik: (i) featured as toxic, simulative, and post-democratic power politics. This was especially the case in series from the first half of the 2010s, e.g., in VEEP, HoC, or EICHWALD. However, both types of series, those focussing on populist idealpolitik and those emphasising dystopian power politics (or their satirical inflexion), ultimately share a binary moral universe. The idealist saviour heroes are as categorically

moral as the dystopian anti-heroes are depraved, and the latter could easily serve as the formers' antagonists.

(ii) The second inversion of idealpolitik turned out to be teleological realpolitik, where moral ambiguity and compromise are essential requirements for the correct functioning of pluralist representative democracy itself. The resulting ambiguous moral universe significantly diverges from the previous binary construction (see i). Examples of this were *POLITICIAN*, *BN* and, albeit more implicitly, seasons 3 and 4 of *THE CROWN*.

(3) *Popular fictional politics is partially globalised and transcends cultural affordances*

Having analysed series from various national contexts, it became clear that the cultural background of a series and the historical political conditions underlying its fictional polity are ultimately secondary influences on its respective complexity and normative evaluation of politics. Indeed, the noticeable appearance of similar narrative patterns and motifs across international productions suggests a globalised set of variable narrative formulas for popular polit-fiction. The Ukrainian series *SN*, e.g., followed what has often been described as the narrative archetype of the *American Monomyth*. The American series *Veep* and *HoC* adapted a political cynicism previously regarded as a feature of European fiction. Moreover, the complexity of historical political systems such as the French or the German ones had, until recently, often been regarded as an insurmountable obstacle for engaging popular fiction altogether,⁵⁰ making the successful *BN* a series that should, according to some scholarly opinion, not exist. Likewise, both *BN* and *THE CROWN* paid little heed to previously established taboos of fictionalising their respective sacrosanct head of state. Economic considerations of production and circulation often seem to play a much more immediate role in determining a series' pragmatic logic.

(4) *The cultural logic of gentrification is evolving*

There is a notable temporal component to the series' general narrative design and their presentation of politics, indicating sensitivity to shifting historical discourse typical for serial TV. The overwhelmingly cynical examples of the early and mid-2010s (*VEEP*, *HoC*, *EICHWALD*) still largely followed the traditional transgressive "cultural logic of gentrification".⁵¹ Established mainly by the uncensored subscription-based 'Quality TV' producers of the 1990s and early 2000s (above all: *HBO*), it traditionally assumed a degree of controversy or transgression (e.g., through sexually explicit content, violence, or invective) as

50 Karl-Rudolf Korte, e.g., has argued accordingly for the German polity in *ibid*, "Warum eigentlich nicht? Über die Unmöglichkeit, deutsches Politikmanagement im Fernsehen abzubilden", in *Politik in Fernsehserien: Analysen und Fallstudien zu House of Cards, Borgen & Co*, ed. Niko Switek (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 364.

51 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. By Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189f. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14.

a unique selling point for prestige audiences.⁵² Traditionally paired with more complex narratives and designed for audiences with high cultural capital, fictional transgression has often been equated to creating authenticating effects of dramatic 'realism'. Accordingly, most of the influential early series presenting a cynical view of politics still originate from a subscription-based production context: VEEP is an HBO production, and HoC is a highly marketed early product of Netflix. EICHWALD is a meritocratic niche production of the German public service broadcaster ZDF.

However, later prestige productions of the decade, while remaining firmly in the hand of typical subscription-based 'Quality TV' providers with high cultural capital, feature a more nuanced portrayal of politics and political morality and a notable decrease in openly transgressive motifs, e.g., THE CROWN (Netflix), BN (Canal+), and POLITICIAN (Netflix). The higher narrative complexity of these series and their typical nonlinear turn away from the LOP principle is unsurprising, given how more flexible ways of reception enable diverse viewing practices. However, the series' noticeable decrease in transgressive material and their turn towards less dystopian politics point toward a potential shift in the "cultural logic of gentrification". It would be worth exploring this further using a larger corpus.

(5) *Popular seriality conditions implicit ideological conservatism*

A final, remarkable feature in the series' presentation of politics is their varying attitudes towards systemic change and representative politics as a means to achieve that change.

(i) A first group, which contains HoC, VEEP, EICHWALD, and THE CROWN, ultimately assumes an iron rigidity of existing structures. Essentially focused on presenting the fictional mechanisms of creating and maintaining the simulacra of political myths (e.g., a presidency or a monarchy), the series implicitly reproduce, in their diegesis, the "conjuring trick",⁵³ which Roland Barthes has described as an essential quality of myth: "overturning culture into nature or, at least, the social, the cultural, the ideological, the historical into the 'natural'".⁵⁴ They make discursive realities (such as a diegetic nation, its symbols or institutions) appear as pre-existing, a priori conditions. By rigidly sustaining diegetic political affordances (in order to maintain their basic *dramatic* configuration), the series in this group, thus, to a certain degree, duplicate the veristic pretensions of the very political myths they claim to unmask.

(ii) In a second group containing SN, MS, DS US and DS 60, reform is possible but must occur outside the political system following the AM's anti-institutional impetus.

(iii) It is only in the visions of realpolitik presented in BN and POLITICIAN that meaningful change can occur within the system.

52 See Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, "Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO's Original Programming and Producing Quality TV", in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 63f.

53 Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press/ Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 142.

54 Roland Barthes, "Change the object itself: Mythology today", in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 165

Interestingly, no matter how pessimistic the vision of their respective fictional polity may be, none of the series ever contends with the notion of a complete systemic overhaul. HoC's ruthless anti-heroes, Frank and Claire, plot to corrupt but never actually overthrow the seemingly inevitable structures of US governance. The idealist messiah-hero Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko, likewise, dreams of redeeming instead of changing the fictional presidency of Ukraine. Notably, those series in group (i), which emphasise the problematic or deplorable state of political institutions and morality, thus portray the "reflexive impotence"⁵⁵ typical of Capitalist Realism with its vision of an inevitably neoliberal state of the world after the alleged "End of History".⁵⁶ In the "apparently real"⁵⁷ defeatist cynicism of their presentation of politics – akin to what Alan Kirby calls "Digimodernism",⁵⁸ which "intensifies postmodern logic insofar as it reinforces and augments antihistorical thinking"⁵⁹ – the series thus, as Conway has argued in his discussion of *VEEP*, lean "toward some overly credulous notion of authenticity"⁶⁰ that seemingly capitulates in the face of and reproduces postmodern refraction.

However, once more, it should be noted that these series' structural conservatism is, ultimately, much more a result of the dramatic logic of serial repetition than of a pervasive neoliberal conviction among their historical actor-networks. As long as a popular polit-series is ongoing, protagonists can neither overthrow nor completely redeem the political system. This would either change its basic configuration beyond recognition (imagine, e.g., Claire Hale rising to be a full-fledged dictator) or remove the foundation for its conflict (What will Vasyl Holoborodko do after having saved Ukraine?).

9.4 Final Remarks and Vantage Points for Future Research

This thesis set out to contribute new insights to the analyses of one of the most controversially discussed TV subgenres of the 2010s: popular polit-series. It revealed a highly complex phenomenon whose extent across a variety of interconnected fictional and on-tic realms made it impossible to grasp using the existing approaches of any one scholarly discipline. Even for those directly involved in a series' creation, these complex and partially independent systemic dynamics are often hard to comprehend and even harder to

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- 55 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), 21.
 56 A term famously coined by Francis Fukuyama referencing the assumption of liberal democracy as the final stage of humanity's ideological development: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), xi.
 57 See Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 140f; also Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: *Veep*, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): e.g., 182 and 186f.
 58 Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York/London: Continuum, 2009).
 59 Joe Conway, "After Politics/After Television: *Veep*, Digimodernism, and the Running Gag of Government", *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2, Special Issue: *American Satire and the Postmodern Condition* (2016): 185.
 60 Conway, "After Politics/After Television", 186.

control. It is a fact that Peter Morgan, credited showrunner of *THE CROWN*, unknowingly acknowledges when he compares his series to a defective supermarket trolley, stating: “The wheels on this show want it to do satire [...], but I’m not remotely interested in that”.⁶¹

The analytic model laid out in this thesis presents a unique new tool for textual analysis that uncovers these – often contradictory – ‘wheels’ by structuring and combining historical and narrative scholarly perspectives on serial TV fiction. The unique agential and systemic dynamic created by the interplay of dramatic composition, economic and political affordances, the logic of the fictional world itself and the distinct characteristics of popular seriality can now be discerned, modelled, and operationalised. This marks a decisive shift from established scholarly practice and a turn away from isolated notions of historical, economic, or narrative determinism or cultural hierarchy.

Accordingly, the possibilities of the approach laid out in this thesis extend far beyond the analysis of *polit-series*. It offers a structured approach to examining all serial TV storytelling and opens new perspectives on the study of popular fiction in general by providing vantage points for various angles of scholarly interest, from textual analysis to inquiries into industry dynamics.

In the volatile third decade of the 21st century, this perspective is essential if one is to make meaningful assertions about current *polit-series*, which, after all, constitute a fictional subgenre with notable influence on the discursive political realities of our time. This thesis provided insights beyond previously self-evident approaches of historical immediacy and misunderstood notions of ‘realism’. They have often been taken for granted due to circumstantial parallelisms between *polit-series* and historical reality, such as physical assaults (BN), impending democratic decline (BN, HoC, VEEP, EICHWALD), or implicit coup d’états (MS).

Instead, the approach developed in this study lays bare the ‘wheels’ that steer a *polit-series* in one direction or another. SN, e.g., proved to be more than a simple product of linear political opportunism and a result of specific dramatic mechanisms that determine the creation of fictional idealpolitik. Despite its featuring exclusively fictional characters, it became clear how BN’s inherent narrative complexity allowed for the series to be read as a surprisingly authentic (rather than accurate) modelling of historical possibilities. *THE CROWN*, on the other hand, despite its featuring characters based on historical personalities, turned out to rest on a formulaic narrative convention to dramatise monarchy that is so established that it easily seduces audiences into (erroneously) reading it as historically accurate. The ‘wheels’ of HoC, while massively influenced by the historical scandal surrounding its former star, likewise turned out to have been steered and veered by the contradictory requirements of the series’ diegetic past and its dramatic structure, thus creating an ultimately insoluble compositional conundrum.

This thesis showed that *polit-series* rely on a limited total of recurring tropes and formulas, which appear and reappear according to various, often contradictory de-

61 Valentine Low, “Writer braces royal courtiers for Netflix series *The Crown*”, *The Times*, September 9, 2019, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/writer-braces-royal-courtiers-for-netflix-series-the-crown-hqgg5g88f?wgu=270525_54264_15682818054572_2607def8c7&wgexpiry=1576057805&utm_source=planit&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_content=22278.

mands that, as a result of my model, can now be discerned. The comparatively few ways to dramatise politics are so established in popular TV fiction that they seem like – and have often been regarded as – unshakeable principles. This perspective might justifiably cause some additional pessimism regarding the subversive possibilities of popular (polit-)fiction.

However, I want to conclude this thesis with some careful words of consolation, as well as encouragement for further scholarly inquiry. The variety of the political visions in this thesis' corpus vividly illustrates that most of these seemingly inevitable narrative formulas are ultimately little more than storytelling conventions applied in accordance with distinct network dynamics. Those networks constitute their own realm in which there is no central agency to approve or deny a request for reform. Therefore, and without indulging in the fallacy of previous notions of the democratisation of capitalist popular culture, there is cause to regard intrasystemic change as a real possibility.

Particularly with regards to the recent notable increase in diversity throughout all areas of popular TV fiction, not least as a result of the changing affordances following TV's nonlinear turn, this gives one grounds for hope (despite polit-fiction notably trailing behind this development). This study showed that a popular TV series' respective network – given the appropriate circumstances – can produce a wide variety of more or less complex portrayals of fictional politics, politicians, political morality, and political systems, as well as diverse and complex visions of societal and cultural realities, that extends far beyond the narrow confines of a dystopian, white, heterosexual and cis-male Oval Office.

However, there is also cause for caution. For now, structural affordances have allowed many networks of serial TV to take a more progressive turn without changing much about their underlying systemic logic. Given the wrong impulses, this systemic endurance enables networks to reverse even the most progressive motion just as quickly if the 'need' arises (or if a reversal appears profitable). Thus, one will do well to keep a continuously close (scholarly) eye on the evolving functionalisms of popular culture and to consider the possibilities for enduring change.

List of Contemporary Polit-Series

Representative Corpus of Series Examined in this Thesis (by date of first release)

- Brennan, Ian, Brad Falchuck and Ryan Murphy, showrunners. *The Politician*. USA. Original release 2019-present on Netflix.
- Kim Tae-hee, writer. 60일, 지정생존자 [*Designated Survivor: 60 Days*]. Republic of Korea. Original release 2019 on tvN (Korea) and Netflix (international).
- James Gibson, Melissa, Frank Pugliese, showrunners. *House of Cards*, season 6. USA. Original release 2018 on Netflix.
- Benzekri, Eric, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, credited head writers. *Baron Noir*. France. Original release 2016–2020 on Canal+.
- Guggenheim, David, cred. creator. *Designated Survivor*. USA. Original release 2016–2018 on CBS and 2019 on Netflix.
- Morgan, Peter, showrunner. *The Crown*. UK. Original release 2016-present on Netflix.
- Stuckmann, Stefan, writer. *Eichwald, MdB*. Germany. Original release 2015–2019 on ZDF-neo and ZDF.
- Zelensky, Volodymyr, cred. creator. *Слуга народу* [*Servant of the People*]. Ukraine. Original release 2015–2019 on 1+1.
- Hall, Barbara, cred. creator. *Madam Secretary*. USA. Original release 2014–2019 on CBS.
- Iannucci, Armando, David Mandel, showrunners. *Veep*. USA. Original release 2012–2019 on HBO.

Fictional Polit-Series: General Overview (by date of first release)

- Cahn, Deborah, showrunner. *The Diplomat*. USA. Original Release 2023-present on Netflix.
- Condal, Ryan, Miguel Sapochnik, showrunners. *House of the Dragon*. USA. Original release 2022-present on HBO.
- Fernández, Verónica, Laura Sarmiento, showrunners. *Intimidación*. Spain. Original release 2022 on Netflix.

- Eyssen, Katharina, writer. *Die Kaiserin*. Germany. Original release 2022-present on Netflix.
- Park Ba-ra, writer. Kim Hyung-sik, dir. 슈룹 [*Under the Queen's Umbrella*]. Republic of Korea. Original release 2022 on tvN (Korea) and Netflix (international).
- Ambjörn, Lisa, Lars Beckung, Camilla Holter, showrunners. *Young Royals*. Sweden. Original release 2021-present on Netflix.
- Angha, Hamed, writer. آقا زاده [*Aghazadeh*]. Iran. Original release 2020–2021.
- Debré, Noé, showrunner. *Parlement*. Germany/Belgium/France. Original release 2020-present on France.tv.
- Kuma, Chandan, writer and Mishra, Deepak Kumar, director. *Panchayat*. India. Original release 2020 on Amazon Prime Video.
- Lee Dae-il, writer. 보좌관 [*Chief of Staff*]. Republic of Korea. Original release 2019 on JTBC/Netflix.
- Soarez, Elena, José Padilha, cred. creators. *O Mecanismo*. Brasil. Original release 2018–2019 on Netflix.
- Zheng, Yu, cred. creator. Zhou Mo, writer. 延禧攻略 [*Story of Yanxi Palace*]. China. Original release 2018 on iQIYI/ Zhejiang TV. Sequel: 金枝玉叶 [*Yanxi Palace: Princess Adventure*]. China. Original release 2019 on Netflix.
- Löhr, Robert, writer. *Das Institut: Die Oase des Scheiterns*. Germany. Original release 2017 on BR/NDR Mediathek and 2019 on Magenta TV.
- Meisen, Zhou, Sun Xinyue, writers. 人民的名义 [*In the Name of the People*]. China. Original release 2017 on Hunan Television.
- Cesarano, Daniele, Barbara Petronio, showrunners. *Suburra*. Italy. Original release 2017–2020 on Netflix.
- Franck, Dan, showrunner. *Marseille*. France. Original release 2016–2018 on Netflix.
- Hoffmann, Niklas, Boris Kunz, Rafael Parente, writers. *Hindafing*. Germany. Original release 2016–2019 on BR/ Arte Mediathek.
- King, Michelle, Robert King, showrunners. *Brain Dead*. USA. Original release 2016 on CBS.
- Koppelman, Brian, David Levien, Andrew Ross Sorkin, cred. creators. *Billions*. USA. Original release 2016-present on Showtime.
- Sorrentino, Paolo. *The Young Pope*. Italy/Spain/France. Original release 2016 on Sky Atlantic (Italy), HBO (USA), Canal+ (France). Sequel: *The New Pope*. Italy/Spain/France. Original release 2020 on Sky Atlantic (Italy), HBO (USA), Canal+ (France).
- Teevan, Collin, Showrunner. *Rebellion*. Ireland. Original release 2016 on RTÉ One.
- Fabbri, Alessandro, Ludovica Rampoldi, Stefano Sardo, showrunners. 1992. Italy. Original release 2015 on Sky Atlantic and La7. Sequels: 1993. Italy. Original release 2017 on Sky Atlantic. And 1994. Italy. Original release 2019 on Sky Atlantic.
- Fathi, Nassan, Naghme Samimi, writers. شهرزاد [*Shahrzād*]. Iran. Original release 2015–2018.
- Haffner, Eric, Markus Weiler, dir. *Ellerbeck*. Germany. Original release 2015 ZDF/ ZDF-neo.
- Schwahn, Mark, cred. creator. *The Royals*. USA. Original release 2015–2018 on E!.
- Nesbø, Jo, Karianne Lund, Erik Skjoldbjærg, showrunners. *Okkupert*. Norway. Original release 2015–2019 on TV2.

- Mirren, Simon, David Wolstencroft, cred. creators. *Versailles*. France/Canada/UK/USA. Original release, 2015–2018 on Canal+.
- Saviano, Roberto, writer. *Gomorra*. Italy. Original release 2014–2021 on Sky Atlantic.
- Higgins, Bryn, director. Charlie Brooker, writer. *Black Mirror*, season 2, episode 3 “The Waldo Moment”. UK. First aired February 25, 2013 on Channel 4.
- Jay, Anthony, Jonathan Lynn, showrunners. *Yes, Prime Minister*. UK. Original release 2013 on Gold. Sequel to: *Yes, Minister*. Original release 1980–1984 on BBC2 and –*Yes, Prime Minister*. Original release 1986–1988 on BBC2.
- McCarthy, Laurie, Stepphanie SenGupta, showrunners. *Reign*. USA. Original release 2013–2017 on The CW.
- Trudeau, Garry, showrunner. *Alpha House*. USA. Original release 2013–2014 on Amazon Prime Video.
- Franck, Dan, Frédéric Tellier, Charline de Lépine et Emmanuel Dauée, cred. creators. *Les Hommes de L'Ombre*. France. Original release 2012–2016 on France2.
- Rhimes, Shonda, cred. creator. *Scandal*. USA. Original release 2012–2018 ABC.
- Benioff, David, D.B. Weiss, showrunners. *Game of Thrones*. USA. Original release 2011–2019 on HBO.
- Jordan, Neil, David Leland, Guy Burt, writers. *The Borgias*. Canada/Hungary/Ireland. Original release 2011–2013 on Bravo (Canada) and Showtime (USA).
- Okay, Meral, Yılmaz Şahin, writers. *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. Turkey. Original release 2011 on Show TV and 2012–2014 on Star TV.
- Safinia, Farhad, writer. *Boss*. USA. Original release 2011–2012 on Starz.
- Xiaolong, Zheng, dir. 後宮·甄嬛傳 [*Empresses in the Palace*]. China. Original release 2011 on Shaoxing News regional channel. Followed by: Zheng Xiaolong, dir. 芈月傳 [*The Legend of Mi Yue*]. Original release 2015–2016 on Beijing TV and Dragon TV. And Wang Jun, dir. 如懿傳 [*Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace*]. Original release 2018 on Tencent Video.
- Zheng, Yu, writer. 宮鎖心玉 [*Palace*]. China. Original release 2011 on Hunan Television.
- Price, Adam, Jeppe Gjervig Gram, Tobias Lindholm, writers. *Borgen*. Denmark. Original release 2010–2013 on DR1. Sequel: *Borgen: Riget, Magten og Ære*. Original release 2022 on Netflix.
- Daniels, Craig, Michael Schur, showrunners. *Parks and Recreation*. USA. Original release 2009–2015 on NBC.
- King, Michelle, Robert King, showrunners. *The Good Wife*. USA. Original release 2009–2016 on CBS. Licensed remakes: (1) Hang San-woon, writer. 굿 와이프 [*The Good Wife*]. South Korea. Original release 2016 on tvN. (2) Eriko Shinozaki, writer. グッドワイフ [*The Good Wife*]. Japan. Original release 2019 on TBS. (3) Suparn Verma, dir. *The Good Wife*. India. Original release 2022 on Disney+ Hotstar.
- Hirst, Michael, showrunner. *The Tudors*. UK/USA/Canada/Ireland. Original release 2007–2010 on BBC2 ((UK), CBC Television (Canada), TV3 (Ireland), Showtime (USA).
- Blumenberg, Hans-Christoph, Martin E. Süskind, writers. *Kanzleramt*. Germany. Original release 2005 on ZDF.
- Lurie, Rod, cred. creator. *Commander in Chief*. USA. Original release 2005–2006 on ABC.
- Iannucci, Armando, showrunner. *The Thick of It*. UK. Original release 2005–2012 on BBC Four/ BBC Two.

- Sorkin, Aaron, showrunner. *The West Wing*. USA. Original release 1999–2006 on NBC.
- Jacobs, Dietmar, cred. creator. *Das Amt*. Germany. Original release 1997–2003 RTL.
- Goldberg, Gary David, Bill Lawrence, showrunners. *Spin City*. USA. Original release 1996–2002 on ABC.
- Shearer, Alex, writer. *No Job for a Lady*. UK. Original release 1990–1992 on ITV.
- Davies, Andrew, Michael Dobbs, writers. *House of Cards*. UK. Original release 1990 on BBC1. Sequels: *To Play the King*. Original release 1993 on BBC. *The Final Cut*. Original release 1995 on BBC.

Additional Selected Mini-Series and Anthology Series

- Tracy, Will, cred. showrunner. *The Regime*. Original release 2024 on HBO Max and Sky Atlantic.
- Jaarsveld, Michiel van, dir. *Het Jaar van Fortuyn*. Netherlands. Original release 2022 on NPO Plus.
- Phelps, Sarah, writer. *A very British Scandal*. UK. Original release 2021 on BBC 1.
- Eik, Alexander. *Atlantic Crossing*. Norway. Original release 2020 on NRK.
- Waller, Dahvi, cred. creator. *Mrs. America*. USA. Original release 2020 on FX on Hulu.
- Davies, Russel T., writer. *A very English Scandal*. UK. Original release 2018 on BBC One.
- Per-Olaf Sørensen, dir. *Nobel*. Norway. Original release 2016 on NRK.
- Fromm, Friedemann. *Die Stadt und die Macht*. Germany. Original release 2016 on Das Erste.
- Ancken, David von, dir. *Tut*. Canada. Original release 2015 on Spike.
- David, Simon, William F. Zorzi, cred. creators. *Show Me A Hero*. USA. Original release 2015 on HBO.
- Straughan, Peter, writer. *Wolf Hall*. UK. Original release 2015 on BBC2.
- Blick, Hugo, showrunner. *The Honourable Woman*. UK. Original release 2014 on BBC2 (UK) and SundanceTV (USA).
- Berlanti, Greg, showrunner. *Political Animals*. USA. Original release 2012 on USA Network.
- Jones, Robert, writer. *Secret State*. UK. Original release 2012 on Channel4.
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