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.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.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.

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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 assumption[7] 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 Switek (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, *Humor 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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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 transgressiveness 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] Stock[28] 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.

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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 mediatised "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.

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> 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 induvial 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]

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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.

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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, Gilberg 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,

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 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. 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 Gilberg, 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", *INDES: Zeitschrift Für Politik und Gesellschaft* 3, no.4 (2014): 87.

55 Gilberg, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", 113. My translation: "fließende Grenze zwischen Politik und Boulevardberichterstattung".

56 Gilberg, et al., "Eichwald, MdB. Überleben im Haifischbecken Berlin-Mitte", 119. My translation: "Die politische Krise und der Umgang mit einem Skandal dienen bei Eiwchald, MDb als zentrale Qualitätsmerkmale für die Bewertung der Fähigkeit eines Politikers".

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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 mishandled teleprompter.[58] Harjo Eichwald likewise accidentally body-shames an influential industrial heiress[59] 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 bySimon Blackwell & Tony Roche, aired June 2, 2013, HBO, 12.28".

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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]

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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.

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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 figurating 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 lobbyists[74] 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

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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, 2015, 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.

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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

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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".

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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 postmodernity, 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.

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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.

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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*herself, 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 Arbour: 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.

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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 breakdown[98] 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 McLintock, 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.

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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.

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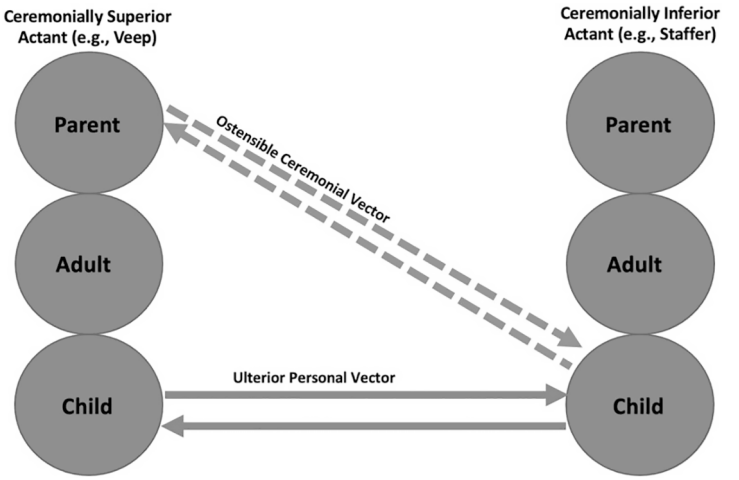
Figure 23: The President's two Bodies game – exemplary configuration



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.

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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".

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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?".

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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".

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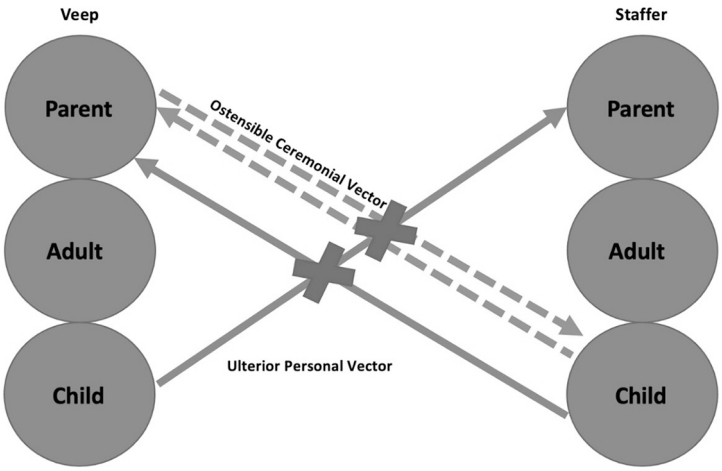
Faithful to the *dramatic rule of general omnishambles*, the P2B game's transactions usually fail. Bagman Gary, e.g., continuously misreads Veep's nonverbal demands supplying her with unwanted whispered names or context in awkward moments. Having asked her staff to determine her Senate vote, Veep likewise receives two opposing opinions from her co-players[110], 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".

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Figure 25: First Dissolution of Tension

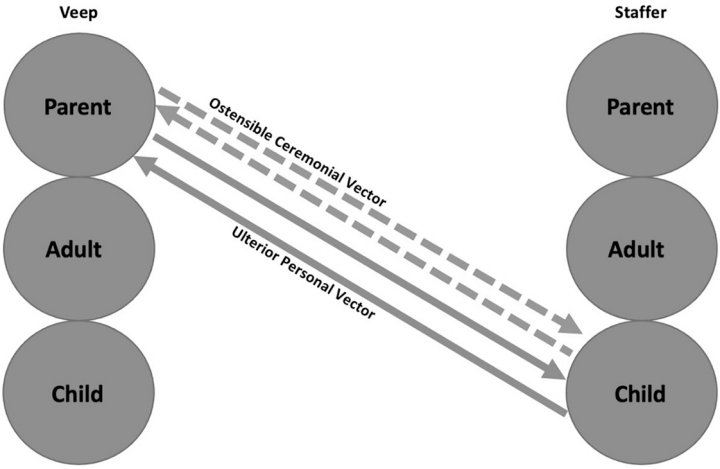
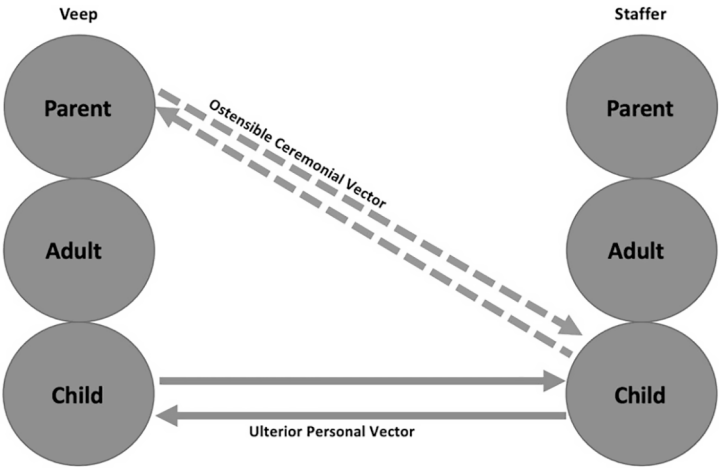


Figure 26: Second Dissolution of Tension



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".

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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".

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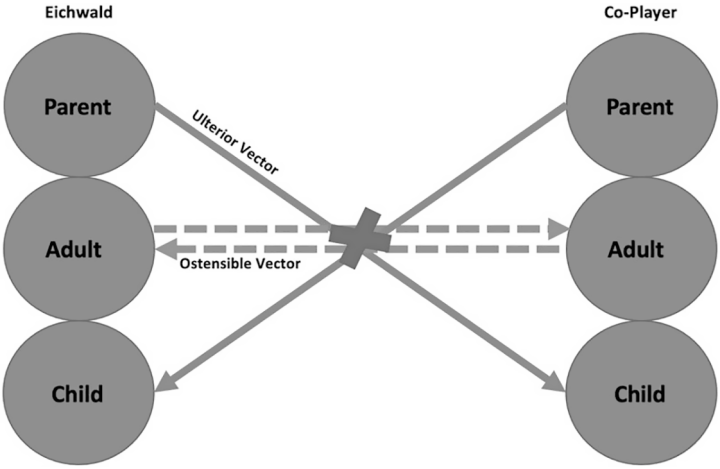
strative Adult-Adult transactions on the ostensible vector and a struggle over Parental dominance on the personal vector.

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".

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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.

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[…]
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.

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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.

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> 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*@king 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-

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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.

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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 refering, here, to Holm's more critical discussion of Mindess and homour 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".

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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".

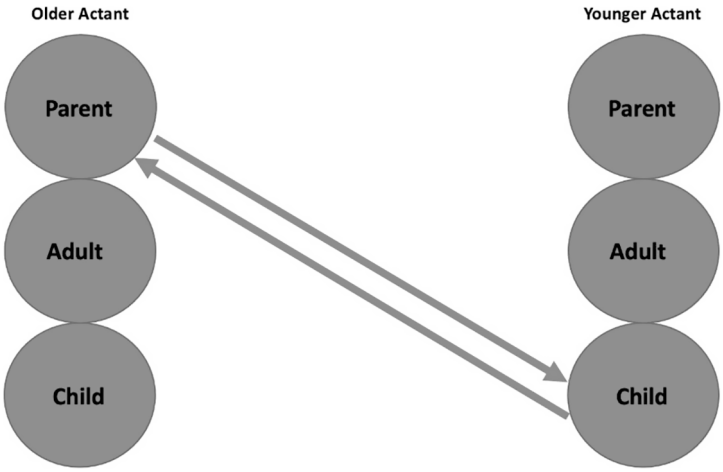
137 Nicholas Holm, *Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 105.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:48. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

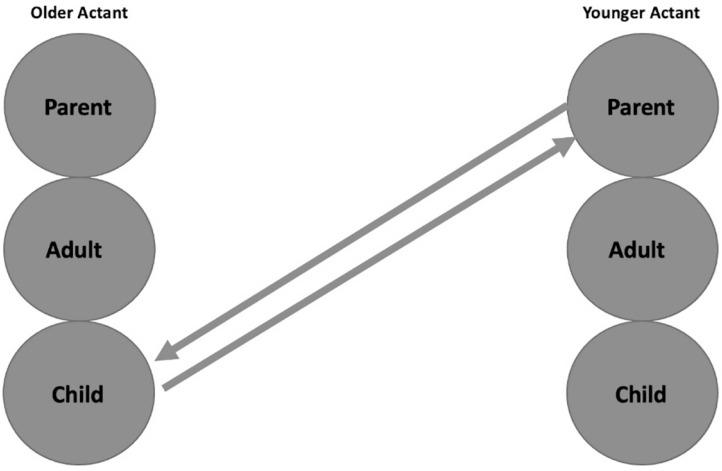
138 *The Politician*, season 1, episode 7, "The Assassination of Payton Hobart: Part 2", directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ian Brennan and Brad Falchuk, aired September 27, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81013583?trackId=255824129&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 01.33".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:48. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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. Uppercut 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&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2Cunknown%2C%2C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094%7C1%2CtitlesResults%2C80241248, 31.25".

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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 suicide[143] 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-ID[146] (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%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%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".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:48. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:48. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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 hyperbolical 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.

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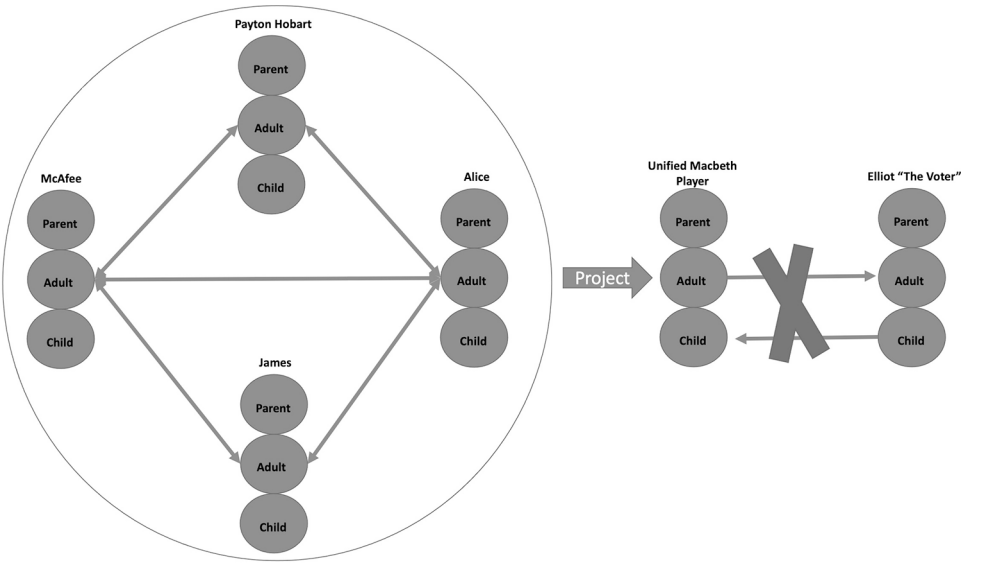
The WH game's rigid Adult-Adult structure serves to portray a highly satirical ideal of what a politician is. Following Bergson's notion of comical unconsciousness, the characters in POLITICIAN's diegesis remain wholly unaware of the incongruity between their satirically mature self-conduct and their 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".

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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 cliffhanger[156] 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&tctx=0%2C0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%2CNAPA%40%40%7C4de64064-b145-4c1a-be7f-bcd1c721da50-25367094_titles%2F1%2F%2Fthe%20politician%2F0%2F0%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".

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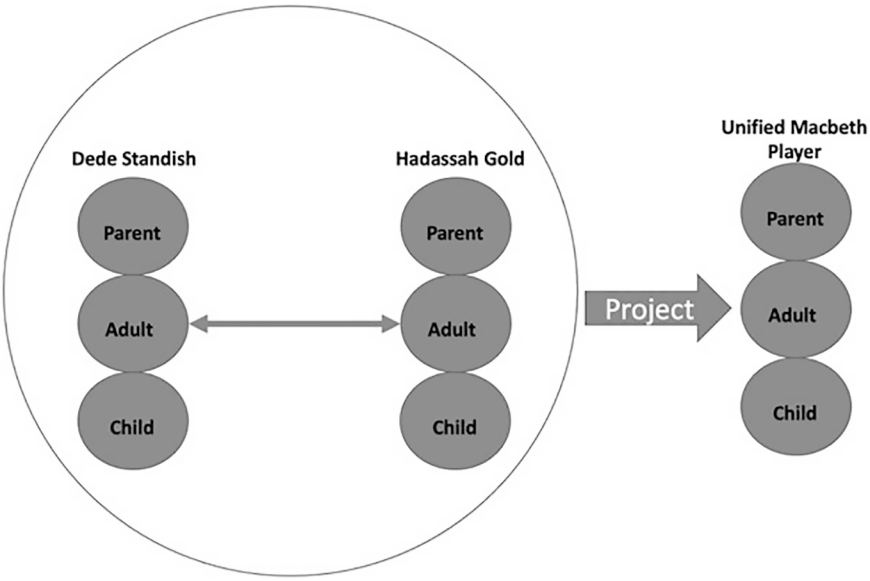
states: "I want to keep going till we go over the cliff. Like Thelma and Louise".[157] That the women's configuration circumvents the *Macbeth* game's traditional (and often sexist) binary gender connotations is no accident. POLITICIAN encodes Dede and Hadassah as a reversal of the patriarchal notions 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".

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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*womenship', 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".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:46. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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".

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839475683-009 - am 14.02.2026, 10:38:48. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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-

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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".

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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 postmodern 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,

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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 Arbour: 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 occurence 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.

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> 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 mediatised 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 Grundprinzpien 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 Arbour: 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.

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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 WING[186] (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.

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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 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.

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".

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> 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".

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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-

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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.

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