

## Being Frank? Breaking the 'fourth wall' in Netflix's *House of Cards*"

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It is pitch black. We hear a car skid, then crash and the yelp of an injured dog. Centre screen, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) appears from behind the grand front doors of his Washington townhouse with a look of concern. He hurries to the site of the hit-and-run where, sending his security guard off to find the owners, he squats down to soothe the whimpering animal. He muses aloud: 'There are two kinds of pain: the sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain, the sort of pain that's only suffering.' He looks straight to camera: 'I have no patience for useless things' - and with that he breaks the dog's neck. He continues to talk to the audience, as his theme music emerges from sounds of the street: 'Moments like this require someone who will act. Do the unpleasant things, the necessary thing.... There,' he reassures us, as the dying dog ceases to struggle, 'no more pain'. In that moment we know everything we need to know about Frank, from his Machiavellian pragmatism to his overweening self-regard. We have also been introduced to the dramatic device of direct address that is stylistically central to *House of Cards* and focus of much critical debate. We have been inducted, moreover, into the conflicted audience position that the text creates for us, largely by means of this same device, which makes us the confidants of a morally abhorrent protagonist. The device works here on a number of levels. On one level it provides a simple and effective introduction to his character: we see both the kind of man he is and the kind he pretends to be (with his expressions of condolence to the owners). On a rather more complex level, it allows Frank to tell us how he sees himself - how he rationalises his actions - so contextualising the many future occasions on which he will put the human victims of his machinations out of their misery. At the same time it serves a metanarrative function, foreshadowing the events of the first episode and indeed establishing a key theme of the series as a whole. The storyline is predicated on pain that makes one stronger (specifically Frank's pain at being denied promotion, which will galvanise him to higher ambitions) - as opposed to pain that does not (represented by the suffering he will inflict on others). Thus, simplicity and complexity are intertwined in the way Frank's opening speech 'sets up' the drama that will ensue.

### Introduction

*House of Cards* charts the rise of ruthless politician Frank Underwood from Chief Whip to Vice-President (Season 1), then President (Season 2), and subsequently his immoral exploits in that role, until his impeachment forces him to step down, passing the mantle to his wife at the end of Season 5. In an uncanny instance of life imitating art, Spacey was accused of sexual abuse while Season 6 was in production: Netflix reacted, announcing the end of the show, killing off the character and editing him out of the final season, which limped to an ignominious end, dogged by continuity gaps and critical opprobrium. This chapter will focus on the (largely well received) first season of the show, and in particular the first two episodes which set up Frank's character, along with the stylistic tropes that shape his relationship with his audience. At the beginning of the show, Frank, having been instrumental in the election of Garrett Walker (Michel Gill) as the new Democrat President, expects to be nominated for Secretary of State. When the

President's new Chief-of-Staff Linda Vasquez (Sakina Jaffrey) informs him that there has been a change of plan, he is wounded and furious. With the support of his wife Claire (Robin Wright), and his aide Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), Frank sets out to destroy Walker and take the Presidency for himself. Along the way he recruits a company of unwitting and dispensable foot-soldiers whom he manipulates into supporting his campaign. Chief among these are Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), an ambitious young journalist to whom he feeds regular leads that serve his interests, and Peter Russo (Corey Stoll), an alcoholic senator, whom he blackmails into becoming his political puppet. Having served their purpose, each will eventually become a liability, and be summarily murdered by Frank.

*House of Cards* is a show of considerable cultural, historical and industrial significance.<sup>i</sup> Released in 2013 to great excitement in the popular and trade press, it represented 'a lot of firsts' (Satell 2013) in television history. It was the first 'Netflix original', directly commissioned by a streaming service without network involvement; it was the first series to be released a whole season at a time; it was the first show developed and marketed with the help of an algorithm. A cynical antidote to NBC's idealistic *The West Wing* (1999-2006), *House of Cards* was uncannily prescient in foreshadowing both Trump's tumultuous Presidency and impeachment, and the fall from grace of its star. The show was adapted from the Michael Dobbs novel (1989), and the UK mini-series of the same title (1990-1995) scripted by Andrew Davies. Both Dobbs and Davies were given writers' credits for the Netflix series, and Davies' creative influence is evident in the plotting of the first season and, most significantly, in the critically controversial dramatic device of breaking the notional 'fourth wall,'<sup>ii</sup> in order for the antihero to directly address the audience.

It is this narrative device of direct address that will provide the focus for this chapter. Operating on both simple and complex levels, the device is key to the characterisation of the anti-hero and to the viewer's relationship with him. On a simple level, it gives us access to Frank's character and provides some much needed exposition to help us navigate the byzantine labyrinth of Frank's political sphere. On a more complex level it offers degrees of reflexivity and metanarrative, and a shifting tone that subtly informs the dynamics of the narrative and of our engagement with the show.

### **Complexity and Simplicity in *House of Cards*.**

Jason Mittell, in his book *Complex TV* (2015), positions his subject as a twenty-first century phenomenon, defined primarily by the intertwining of episodic, seasonal and series-long story-arcs; 'narrative pyrotechnics [that call] attention to the narration's construction' (2015:43), ranging from temporal shifts to metanarrative commentary; and elaborate characterisation supporting the contemporaneous rise of the antihero. Eschewing the repetition and exposition that make wallpaper TV a convenient secondary activity, 'complex TV' demands close attention and rewards repeat viewing with a wealth of conceptual and expressive detail. From an institutional perspective this

development is underpinned by generous production budgets, manifested on screen in high production values and stellar cast - often persuaded to 'cross over' from the more prestigious world of cinema. It is also underpinned by the advent of the 'box-set', initially a DVD collection but latterly the backbone of streaming, subscription and catch-up services, which has been instrumental in establishing television as a substantial rather than an ephemeral cultural form.

These criteria provide a useful starting point for reviewing the interplay of complexity and simplicity in *House of Cards*. In institutional terms the show bears many of the hallmarks of 'appointment to view' television: Netflix's promotional strategy relied heavily on the star status of Spacey and of Hollywood director David Fincher, who was an executive producer on the show and directed the first two episodes. Data harvested from systems designed to track the viewing habits of their 33 million users (Leber 2013) gave Netflix sufficient confidence to invest \$100 million (Davies 2019), 'a considerable percentage' of the company's quoted value at the time (Anderson 2011) in the first two seasons. Its 'box-set' release, coupled with the literary conceit of naming each episode a 'Chapter', represents a statement of intent on the part of a company confident not only in its market knowledge but also in the quality of its product.

The narrative of *House of Cards* is relatively simple compared with many of the shows Mittell discusses. It is entirely linear, structured around a single lead, and devoid of temporal complexities. Subplots revolving around secondary characters eventually (and often predictably) converge on the central strand. Indeed the show has been criticised for its slow pace and a dearth of the plot 'twists' sophisticated audiences have come to expect (Stanley 2013). The viewing pleasures offered by the show, however, reside less in the 'what' than the 'how'. The interlocking story-arcs, which can last from a single scene to several seasons, resonate with one another as the scheming protagonist repeats signature strategies, offering the pleasures of recognition and prediction as we follow his progress. Mittell suggests that the self-conscious flourishes that often characterise a complex narrative produce an 'operational aesthetic' (2015: 43), inviting the viewer to marvel at the virtuosity of the storytelling.<sup>iii</sup> It is a voyeuristic fascination with the 'operational aesthetic' of Frank's elaborate confidence tricks and cynical manipulations, as much as any emotional investment in his success that keeps audiences engaged with the ongoing narrative of *House of Cards*.

As an antihero, Frank Underwood is also a relatively simple creation compared with the complex psychological portraits discussed by Mittell. Starting out bad and staying that way, he has more in common with the malcontent of early modern drama,<sup>iv</sup> or even the 'Vice', the allegorical personification of wickedness found in medieval morality plays.<sup>v</sup> Morally, he has no redeeming qualities, and the show employs none of the usual strategies to keep an audience 'on-side'. Unlike the eponymous antihero of *Dexter* (2006-13), Frank has no explanatory backstory. Unlike Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), he experiences no personal journey to the dark side. Unlike the much-therapised lead in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), Frank reveals no special insights to explain (away) his misdeeds. Moreover he rarely has recourse to the fig-leaf of moral relativism, as has Dexter for example, who is positioned as less culpable than other

serial-killers. While Frank's victims may be less than exemplary, even the nastiest political operators among them are no worse than Frank himself.

If the character of Frank is in many ways very straightforward, however, the audience's relationship with him is anything but. The show invites us take on a range of positions: to be seduced by Frank's superficial charm (and Spacey's charismatic performance), amused by his witty turn of phrase, intrigued by his Machiavellian connivances, and appalled by his utterly unscrupulous behaviour and the havoc he wreaks in the lives of anyone unfortunate enough to fall foul of him. Murray Smith (1994) proposes that audience engagement with a character is shaped by a 'structure of sympathy' which works to align us with that character, in part by affording us 'subjective access' to his or her inner life, and in part by our 'spatial attachment' to his or her actions and experiences within the narration (1994: 41). This alignment informs an allegiance which rests on our moral evaluation of the character – and necessarily presents some challenges in the case of the antihero. Critically, as Smith explains, this evaluation is as much affective as it is cognitive – music and iconography can be as salient as action, for example, in influencing our response to a character – and complex texts have an armoury of narrative devices at hand to render their immoral protagonists, if not exactly sympathetic, then certainly attractive to an audience. For *House of Cards*, a key weapon in this armoury is Frank's ability to breach the fourth wall and directly address the audience. But this is a weapon that, in terms of sympathy for the protagonist, seems rigged to backfire, for while Frank's confidences may 'trick' us into a position that would be untenable in our real lives, they also expose the cynicism and sheer wickedness of the speaker.

Frank's shifting tone during these moments suggests a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward us - his unseen confidants – and one that does not always inspire our allegiance. John Scott Gray (2016) notes three very different readings of this relationship. At times, Frank speaks to his audience as though addressing a friend - indeed this is how Spacey himself describes his performance (Molloy 2014). More often he adopts a didactic manner, dispensing object lessons and aphorisms as though instructing a political apprentice. And sometimes he seems intent on manipulating us as he manipulates other characters on the show, conjuring a perverse understanding of right and wrong. The tension is exacerbated by the fact that he is not an entirely reliable narrator, as Mario Klarer has observed (2014); while Frank does not actually lie to us, as he does to his fellow players, he nevertheless edits his narrative to ensure we are at best kept 'outside' of his confidence at key moments,<sup>vi</sup> and at worst misled alongside his adversaries.<sup>vii</sup>

The use of direct audience address in *House of Cards* is, at its simplest level a convenient storytelling device, combining as it does the potential for character insight, plot exposition and moral commentary. It is also a form of 'narrative pyrotechnics', a complex artifice that calls attention to itself and thus to the constructed-ness of the narrative as a whole. The emotional distance this can produce may account for the fact that, in film and television, the device is almost unknown outside of comedy. Indeed in his discussion of the ways in which 'complex narration often breaks the fourth wall', Mittell's examples of 'visually represented direct address' are exclusively comedic, while the dramas are described as featuring a 'more ambiguous voice-over that blurs the line

between diegetic and nondiegetic.’ (2015: 49). Frank’s direct address to camera in *House of Cards*, then, is unusual, combining the arch, subtly distancing effect of the ‘asides’ that provide a comedy such as *Fleabag* (2016-19) with its distinctive tone<sup>viii</sup> with the seductive, boundary-blurring effect of the inter-diegetic voice-overs that justify the actions of the antihero in *Dexter*. The degree to which *House of Cards* is considered sophisticated and innovative drama, or stylistically fussy and overly theatrical in its approach, depends a great deal on the viewer’s attitude to the show’s use of direct address. In the following section we will demonstrate that the device is in fact extremely effective in its elegant simplicity, while also working at more complex levels of metanarrative and audience engagement – and that, despite its apparent theatricality, it is utilised in a particularly televisual manner.

### **The Education Bill**

The moment selected for detailed analysis is the scene in Chapter 2 in which Frank tricks Education Secretary Donald Blythe into sacrificing himself to save ‘his’ Education Bill. The scene portrays a virtuoso piece of manipulation by Frank - what a confidence trickster would call a ‘short con’. This in turn provides a pattern book for the many ‘long cons’ Frank is to perpetrate over the course of the series. Because individual scenes in *House of Cards* are typically brief, this moment will be contextualised by a number of associated moments that serve to ‘set up’ the scene, both in terms of the ‘Education Bill’ story-arc and in terms of the metanarrative that is such an important feature of the show.

The Bill is first mentioned in the scene near the start of Chapter 1, where Frank learns that the President will not make him Secretary of State – indeed it is part of the rationale given for keeping him in Congress. It seems fitting, therefore, that it is co-opted by Frank as a weapon of revenge. From the administration’s point of view, the Education Bill is a key plank in the political agenda; from Frank’s perspective, it is a key plank in his plot to take over the administration. His plans are set in motion a little later in Chapter 1, when Linda Vasquez requests his help with the Bill. The scene is framed by ‘asides’ that work at their simplest level to alert the audience to the gladiatorial subtext of what might otherwise seem an innocuous, even dull, conversation. On a more complex level they also work with the studied staging and composition to place us as Frank’s co-conspirators, passive but explicitly present participants in the drama.

Frank is seated at his desk when he is informed that Linda is about to visit. He turns to confide in us that it is ‘rare for the President’s Chief-of-Staff to climb the hill’ which he interprets as an act of ‘desperation’. Frank’s eye-line and the camera angle, suggest that we are seated beside him - an impression reinforced in the next moment as he gets up to cross to the door. He predicts, ‘She’ll say Donald Blythe for Education,’ drawing us into his little guessing game with a backward glance to camera: ‘Let’s see if I’m right’. The downward angle of his eye-line maintains the illusion that the viewer, his unseen companion, has remained seated beside the desk.

Linda begins by proffering ball tickets for the Presidential Inauguration, a move calculated to keep the slighted Frank on side; Frank graciously accepts – while flicking a glance to camera as though to make sure we’ve spotted the ruse. Linda then goes on to confirm Frank’s prediction that Donald Blythe will take the lead on the Education Bill; Frank feigns surprise, while once again throwing us a conspiratorial look. This time the silent ‘aside’, and the implied relationship with the audience is more marked as Frank turns to look over his right shoulder, a gesture captured by a brief close-up from an angle that again reinforces our privileged position at his side. This particular gesture and shot is to become a standard trope within the series. Whereas the ‘within shot’ glance to camera breaks the ‘fourth wall’ represented by the lens and acknowledges the presence of an audience in general terms, this more deliberate aside, featuring a turn of the head (as though to address another character within the drama) and dedicated close-up (as though from the point of view of that character) places us in the room. The former example renders the ‘fourth wall’ permeable; the latter leads us, the audience, through it and into the action in a particularly televisual way. The visual geometry of the scene suggests that we are not looking on, as if from a theatre seat, but physically present in the moment, like a supporting character in the diegetic world.

As the scene continues, it is established that Blythe’s Education Bill will be too left-leaning to pass unless Frank can ‘guide him to the middle’ and that the President wants to commit, during his inaugural address, to having the Bill on the floor in his ‘first hundred days’. Frank promises to ‘deliver’ (although not without stressing the scale of the challenge) and sees Linda out. At this point another visual trope is established as Frank stands in the doorway to deliver his next soliloquy. The doorway, a liminal space traditionally occupied by Janus the two-faced god of Roman mythology, is a particularly appropriate setting for our duplicitous antihero to deliver soliloquies that directly contradict the assurances and promises doled out to his antagonists. Doors are also, at the simplest level, a means to walk through walls, so an equally appropriate site at which to render permeable the notional ‘fourth wall’ boundary.

Thus Frank stands in his office doorway, to watch Linda leave, lowering his voice to confide in us: ‘Did you see that? The smugness? The false deference? She thinks I can be bought with a pair of tickets!’ The urbane charm on display during the meeting has been replaced by unvarnished contempt: ‘What am I? A whore in post-war Berlin, salivating over free stockings and chocolate?’ The sudden use of such coarse language and distasteful imagery provides a simple dramatic shock, contrasting as it does with the civilised mundanity of the office environment. At a more complex level, the imagery is particularly disturbing because of our implied complicity, reinforced by Frank’s use of rhetorical questions as he invites us to share his opinion of Linda’s amateurish subterfuge. A cut on the word ‘whore’ to a medium close-up from inside the office emphasises the term, while placing us back in Frank’s inner sanctum. Shallow depth-of-field renders Linda’s retreating form small and indistinct among the political minions (although, critically, she remains recognisable in her bright white jacket). At the same time it creates an uncomfortable intimacy with Frank, who refers us back to his masterplan: ‘What she’s asking will cost far more than that.’ This use of shallow depth-of-field to separate the soliloquising Frank from the diegetic background action is

another trope we will see throughout the series, along with linguistic flourishes that are reminiscent of Shakespearean or Jacobean villains, employing a register and a form of imagery very rarely found in Frank's diegetic speech. Both make a simple and immediate dramatic impact, providing much needed relief from the minutiae of Frank's political manoeuvring. On a more complex level, both serve to create an inter-diegetic space offering both insight into Frank's inner world, and access to a metanarrative perspective from which we watch the Machiavellian antihero at work.

The 'Education Bill' story-arc is picked up a little later when Frank visits Donald Blythe (Reed Birney) in his office. The scene sets the tone for their working relationship as Frank performs an elaborate pantomime which both demonstrates his disdain for Donald's 'life's work' and presages the little drama he will enact at their next meeting. As Donald looks on, Frank makes a great show of reading the Bill and consigning it to the shredder – then pulling out the mangled document and dumping it in the waste bin. Having instructed the bewildered Donald to start working on a more acceptable draft, Frank heads for his next appointment, telling us: 'Two things are now irrelevant: Donald Blythe and Donald Blythe's new draft, eventually I'll have to rewrite the Bill myself'. In a reverse tracking shot, Frank strides purposefully along the corridor, sharing his philosophical position on this, and indeed all political causes: 'Forward! That is the battle cry. Leave ideology to the armchair generals; does me no good.'<sup>ix</sup> These two very different kinds of 'aside' offer an audience very different pleasures. There is something perversely delightful in the shameless contradiction between what Frank says to us in his first statement, and what he has said to Donald – a simple pleasure akin to that offered by the gleeful confidences of the medieval stage villain. A more complex set of pleasures is offered by the 'cod' philosophy of his second utterance - expressed here, as throughout the show, in heightened language, to create memorable aphorisms as though for an audience of eager students. We recognise in these pronouncements a kind of truth about the art of realpolitik – but, for the reflective viewer it is at the same time apparent that the 'superficially sensible' maxims that serve to justify Frank's actions are in fact untenable, illogical or fundamentally amoral, running counter to actual moral aphorisms (Dressen and Taliaferro 2016: 250). Frank paints himself as the practical man of action, in contrast to the despised 'armchair generals' of popular discourse - but at the expense of any principles whatsoever.

Returning to the Bill, the next few skirmishes in Frank's campaign go smoothly, and are depicted with a light narrative touch. We witness Doug retrieve the shredded remains of Donald's draft, which Frank 'leaks' to Zoe Barnes, who in turn reassembles the document and persuades her paper to print it. On the morning of publication Frank is seated outside 'Freddie's' rib joint, chatting amiably to us over his breakfast rack-of-ribs. Extolling the virtues of his favourite meal, Frank cuts himself off with delight as he unfolds his newspaper to reveal the incendiary front page, where President Walker's inaugural speech sits side by side with the leaked Education Bill. The simple device of the paper, juxtaposed with the atavistic imagery of Frank's carnivorous breakfasting habits, provides an apt finale to the Chapter. Frank's running commentary has been utilised to render simple (and thus more dramatically effective) the mechanics of his political manoeuvring; at the same time, however, by 'lifting the lid' to expose those

same mechanics, his commentary has highlighted the complexity of planning involved, ensuring that we do not overlook any of the intricate details of Frank's handiwork. We are invited, in other words, to enjoy the operational aesthetic – with the newspaper furnishing the 'Ta-Da!' moment concluding Frank's first trick.

### **Stacking people**

The prologue to Chapter 2 finds Frank still outside 'Freddie's'. A close-up of Walker's photograph shows Frank's finger smearing a blood-red line of ketchup across the President's throat. 'You know what I like about people?' he asks, and looks up at the camera, 'They stack so well.' The idea of 'stacking' (ordinarily something one does with cards) is an explicit reference to the title of the show. Its use here fulfils a relatively simple dramatic purpose, confirming that people, for Frank, are mere objects to be manipulated, as one might manipulate cards. The idea also operates at a more complex level, however, providing the kind of metanarrative commentary that is regularly featured in the show. For card stacking has three distinct meanings, all of which are pertinent to the ensuing chapter: to stack cards is to build a 'house of cards'; to stack the cards is also to manipulate the pack in one's favour – to cheat; finally, in advertising, 'card stacking' refers to the way in which information is used selectively to suggest the superiority of a product, or the desirability of a course of action. Chapter 2 shows Frank assiduously 'stacking' people (including Linda, Zoe, Peter – and of course Donald) to erect the structure that will elevate him to the Vice-Presidency and, ultimately, to the Presidency itself; it shows him 'cheating' at politics to achieve his ends; and it shows him, particularly in his encounter with Donald, 'stacking' information to present an apparently 'inevitable' course of action for his victim to follow.

The scene at Freddie's ends with Frank realising he is late for his meeting: 'Every Tuesday I sit down with the speaker and the majority leader to discuss the week's agenda.' Rising from his seat and walking toward his chauffeur-driven car, Frank is every inch the polished politician; however the words with which he describes his imminent meeting reveal an alarming level of vitriol: 'Well, 'discuss' is probably the wrong word: they talk while I quietly imagine their lightly salted faces fried in a skillet.' This atavistic imagery beneath the veneer of civilisation is another feature we will encounter throughout the series; moreover it endows the subsequent scene with a contrapuntal subtext, mobilised when (during the otherwise routine meeting) Frank glances briefly to camera over the top of his teacup. Once again the dramatic impact of Frank's asides proves to be two-fold, combining the simple and immediate 'shock value' of the imagery with the layer of interpretive complexity it brings to future scenes.

### **The martyrdom of Donald Blythe**

Later that morning, Frank is summoned to a meeting with Linda, who is, of course, furious about the leaked Education Bill. Frank assures her that such set-backs are normal and promises to fix the mess. His strategy for doing so is revealed in the next scene, in which six young lawyers are briefed to write a replacement Bill from scratch: having previously pronounced both Donald and his new draft to be irrelevant, Frank has already taken steps to ensure that this is indeed the case. It is in this context that we witness Frank's second meeting with Donald Blythe, at which he misrepresents his meeting with Linda to suggest that she and the President intend to make a scapegoat of



the hapless Donald. Depicting himself as a loyal ally, disgusted with the way his friend has been treated, Frank begins to enact a charade of honourable self-sacrifice - a charade designed to provide his victim with a blueprint for action. Declaring 'I'll fall on this grenade myself,' Frank picks up the phone and demands 'Get me John King at CNN!' Donald is thrown into a panic, pleading with Frank not to go through with it; he cannot allow Frank to take the rap on his behalf - and besides, he needs Frank to get the Bill through the House. After a show of resistance, Frank 'relents', placing the ball in Donald's court: 'Well then, what do *you* suggest we do?' While Donald struggles with his conscience, Frank turns to camera in a now familiar gesture to invite our appreciation of his card-stacking skills - the 'operational aesthetic' at work. 'What a martyr craves more than anything is a sword to fall on,' he explains, adopting a sardonic, sing-song tone that reflects his contempt for Donald (and martyrs in general) as he provides his recipe: 'so.... you sharpen the blade, hold it at just the right angle, and then...' he counts the beats with his hand, as though conducting an orchestra 'three, two, one.....' At this point he turns, showman-like, to Donald, who, right on cue, declares: 'It should be me!'

Feigning protest at Donald's suggestion, Frank nonetheless replaces the phone receiver, which has now served its purpose. Sitting down opposite his deflated victim he mirrors his body-language (and, apparently, his emotions) as Donald confides that 'my heart is not in this fight.... I'm not a wheeler-dealer.... I'm no good at this brand of politics.' The irony is not lost as we watch the master 'wheeler-dealer' at work. Frank appears to wrestle with the question of who, aside from Donald, could possibly head up the Bill. 'Well if not you, then who?' he wonders, turning aside, as it seems, in search of inspiration - only to be picked up in close-up from that familiar angle, as he throws us a conspiratorial look. Once more, Donald seizes the bait: 'It should be you, Frank!' At this point a wistful, yet recognisable, variation on Frank's musical theme begins to swell - the arpeggios of wheeling and dealing - as Donald sets about the task of 'persuading' Frank to take over delivery of the Bill.... and persuading himself that he has made the right choice: 'at least people will know where I stand.'

Donald having been dispatched, we find ourselves back inside Frank's office, and inside his confidence. Closing the door on his latest victim, Frank turns to us: 'He has no idea I've got six kids in the next room working on a new draft.' Although the phrase suggests all the simple, self-satisfied glee of a pantomime villain ('little does he know....'), Frank retains his usual veneer of urbanity, delivering his lines at pace as he strides across the room, to perform a virtuoso blend of diegetic dialogue and direct address. He turns away from us to call 'Stamper!', then back to us, continuing with only the faintest hint of sarcasm, 'but why dampen his mood by telling him. We just gave him a great gift: a chance to fulfil his destiny.' Like the dog at the start of Chapter 1, Donald has been put out of his misery - and the use of 'we' here suggests our complicity in the process. This complicity is reinforced by the way in which the next few shots work to situate us in a specific position in the room. The camera angle together with Frank's eye-line, place us immediately opposite Frank, our intimacy marked again by a shallow depth-of-field. From this vantage point we see Doug enter through a door behind Frank, who looks down at the mobile phone in his hand to start texting Zoe Barnes,<sup>x</sup> talking to Doug at the same time: 'Write up a statement for Blythe: stepping aside, fresh ideas etcetera, etcetera. Make it dignified, he's a good man.' Acknowledging his brief without breaking his stride, Doug walks on past us and out of frame to exit behind us, as it seems, with Frank calling further instructions over our shoulder. We remain in the room, where

Frank looks down to send his text, slowly back up at us, with the faintest suggestion of a conspiratorial smile, and slowly down again. We may consider ourselves dismissed.

The simplicity of the 'con' perpetrated in this scene only adds to a perverse sense of satisfaction at its neat resolution – while the complexities of the set-up, and the subtlety of the technique with which Frank misleads and manipulates his victims reward the attentive viewer. The use of direct address serves simultaneously to simplify through explication of Frank's strategies, and to complicate by revealing the number of 'moving parts' involved and by offering the audience a range of subtly shifting subject positions from which to engage with the action and the antihero.

### **Simplicity, complexity and the usages of direct address**

Direct address to camera in *House of Cards* is as variable in form as it is in function, combining elements of simplicity and complexity at both the stylistic and the conceptual levels. The most memorable instances, perhaps, are the relatively protracted soliloquies Frank delivers when we are alone with him or when other characters are relegated to the background - out of focus or out of shot. These moments benefit from a certain epistemic simplicity, making a clear distinction between the diegetic action and the extradiegetic commentary, however they vary considerably in style of delivery and serve a complex array of functions which often merge within a single speech. Thus some are staged in a self-consciously theatrical manner, such as Frank's many static speeches framed by doorways or similar architectural features; others are given on the move, often to a tracking camera, echoing a common trope of political drama. Some take us into Frank's confidence to share his plans, his frustrations and his resentment of others; others adopt a more didactic dynamic, featuring Frank's dubious aphorisms, which, as Sandrine Sorlin observes, use an impersonal register to create a 'convenient' distance between us and Frank's wrong-doing (2015: 138). Some adopt a conversational tone, while others utilise heightened language and imagery - often sliding from one to the other as in the scene outside Freddie's, which takes us from the casual 'Every Tuesday...' to the cannibalistic 'lightly salted faces' in mid-sentence. Overall, they tend to create a degree of affective disorientation, both in terms of our cognitive and emotional alignment with Frank, and in terms of our immersion in his story-world. We are lured into an imaginative investment in Frank – who both seduces us with this cleverness and charisma, and repels us with his cynicism. Simultaneously we are reminded that both he and his world are fictional constructs, enabling us to set aside our own moral judgement and enjoy his wickedness.

Given their dramatic impact and the way in which they inform the overall tone of the show, it is notable how few of these soliloquies actually feature in the majority of episodes. The number of times when Frank directly engages with the audience in the course of an episode varies from just one to as many as twelve. Most instances of direct engagement, however, consist of a brief comment 'aside' or simple look to camera in the midst of the action. These instances have more of a native televisual aesthetic, integrated as they are into the flow of the drama rather than creating 'time out'; on the whole they are stylistically simpler than the longer speeches but they are epistemically more complex, erasing the clear distinction between Frank's world and ours. Typically,

the verbal asides are informal, often inviting speculation ('Let's see if I'm right') or complicity ('He has no idea I've got six kids in the next room....'), placing the viewer, as Sorlin notes, in the ambivalent position of participating without really interacting, hovering between diegetic planes (2015:35). Frank's 'looks' have a similar effect, varying between casual glances to camera within the frame of the ongoing action, and marked cuts to close-up. Much like the use of 'we' or 'us' in Frank's verbal asides, his 'looks' aside assume our alignment with his perspective – and in doing so reinforce it. Many reference Frank's previous remarks, sharing moments, for example, when his predictions are proved correct (such as 'Donald Blythe for Education') or are about to be (as when we wait for Donald to declare 'it should be you, Frank'). Others are more ambiguous, often arch, simply inviting us to share Frank's particular combination of amusement and contempt towards lesser mortals.

So ingrained is the device of direct address in the fabric of the show, and so central to the dynamics of viewer engagement, its absence becomes tangible – a feature in itself. The show takes advantage of our expectations, offering moments when the occasion and the framing suggest a conspiratorial word or look might be afforded us – only to disappoint. This teasing manipulation of the audience is explicitly acknowledged in Chapter 14 – the first episode of Season 2, in which we witness the murder of Zoe Barnes. Frank fails to acknowledge the audience at all until the final scene, when he catches our eye in the mirror as he dresses for dinner: 'Did you think I'd forgotten you?' This moment encapsulates both the playful simplicity that makes Frank's confidences so seductive and the conceptual complexity that underpins them. Frank's mischievous question erases the distinction between a dramatic device within the text and a deliberate strategy on the part of the protagonist, in a move calculated to produce disorientation and delight in equal measure for the well-trained television audience.

A key achievement of *House of Cards* is to re-invent the theatrical artifice of direct address as a specifically televisual device. In so doing the show creates an inter-diegetic third space, allowing a formal freedom rarely found in television drama, restricted as it so often is by the tyranny of the realist aesthetic. The televisual strategies employed, and their effects, range from the deceptively simple to the technically and conceptually complex. One simple but effective technique is the use of shallow depth-of-field to separate Frank from the diegetic world and create a sense of intimacy; on a more complex level this can also create a sense of background action being suspended to facilitate Frank's longer soliloquies – such as the lengthy commentary 'aside' with which he interrupts his 'sermon' from a Gaffney pulpit in Chapter 3. The use of frames within frames in the visual composition are an elegantly simple strategy to give Frank's extra-diegetic speeches dramatic weight, but often operate at a more complex, metaphorical level - as for example the setting of his speech about the primacy of power over money early in Chapter 2, which is set, quite literally, in Washington's corridors of power, framed by neo-classical marble pillars. Signature shots, (such as the much-repeated close-up on Frank's 'look' aside) fulfil a simple function of highlighting the subtext in a scene, while also luring us into a complex, conflicted state of alignment with the antihero and his perspective. Meanwhile televisual space, delineated by shots and eye-lines, is configured to position the audience as a supporting character in the drama as,

having breached the 'fourth wall', Frank invites us to step through it. We routinely invite the characters of television drama in into our living space: Frank is unusual in returning the courtesy. Finally the simple fact of seriality itself is utilised to build a knowing relationship with an audience prepared to have our expectations undermined, to have the ritual pleasures of serialised drama disturbed by radical variability in the degree to which each episode relies on direct address, and the form it takes. Indeed, the sophistication of the audience becomes another opportunity for metanarrative comment in Chapter 13 during an extended soliloquy in a deserted church. After haranguing God in vain, and before directing his grievances to the Devil, Frank looks straight to camera to speculate 'Perhaps I'm speaking to the wrong audience.' Like so many of Frank's asides the line operates on simple and complex levels: at one level it simply represents Frank 'thinking aloud'; at another the playful '*double entendre*' draws us into his confidence; at still another it challenges us to prove ourselves a worthy audience by engaging with one of the more surreal scenes the show has to offer; while at its most complex it references the extra-diegetic world – our world – in which television commissioners use a range of marketing strategies to ensure that their creations, for the most part, address the 'right' audience. There is no doubt that we are addressed quite explicitly here as a *television* audience.

## Conclusion

*House of Cards* offers a range of textual pleasures, simple and complex, to the invested audience - pleasures largely mediated by the device of direct address. At its simplest level direct address offers us privileged access to Frank's thinking; this is critical given that his behaviour towards others is so often misleading. At a more complex level that access allows us to share in Frank's subjective position of knowledge and power, providing us, as Kajtár argues, 'with a feeling of exceptionality.' (2016: 234). As a narrator he may be unreliable, and the degree of intimacy on offer may be variable, but that feeling of Nietzschean superiority may provide more than adequate compensation. By aligning ourselves with Frank, moreover, we can explore the role of Machiavellian villain, imaginatively crossing diegetic boundaries while exonerated from even vicarious responsibility by narrative pyrotechnics reminding us that it is all only a game. Also on offer are the more reflexive pleasures of the operational aesthetic – both in terms of watching Frank's elaborate plans unfold, and in terms of enjoying the artifice of the metanarrative commentary that twists its way around the diegesis. Ultimately direct address in *House of Cards* is far more than a narrative flourish. It is as fundamental to the tone and structure of the show as it is to the character of Frank who is defined by his ability to stand apart from the world he inhabits. Just as the quality of our engagement as audience is dependent on our relationship with Frank, so the delineation of Frank's character, is dependent on his relationship with us – both bound up in our ability to break through the 'fourth wall' and meet somewhere in an inter-diegetic space. There is a complex dichotomy that lies at the heart of this 'house of cards'. We may be alienated, even horrified, by Frank – a cold-blooded, narcissistic sociopath, who will not even stop at murder to achieve what he feels is owed to him. Yet we are fascinated by the fruits of his deviancy, which are laid out for before us like so many corpses - magnified and

dissected by his self-regarding commentary. The simplicity of Frank's didactic transcendence of the fourth wall continually ensures that we remain entangled in a complex and ethically compromised voyeuristic relationship, while we linger to discover how low Frank Underwood is prepared to go.

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## Further Reading

### Television

*Breaking Bad* (High Bridge: 2008 -2013)

*Dexter* (Showtime: 2006-2013)

*Fleabag* (BBC Three: 2016-2019)

*House of Cards* (BBC TV: 1990 - 1995)

*House of Cards* (Netflix: 2013 – 2018)

*The Sopranos* (HBO: 1999-2007)

*The West Wing* (NBC: 1999-2006)

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<sup>i</sup> Industry accolades include a slate of Emmys, and the 2013 Peabody Award, the citation for which praised the show ‘for broaching new possibilities for television storytelling’ (Peabody Awards, 2013)

<sup>ii</sup> On the whole the opening season was well received but critics were divided on the subject of Frank’s ‘asides’ to camera, which some American writers in particular found stagey (e.g., Stuever (2013)).

<sup>iii</sup> The term was coined by Neil Harris (1981) in relation to the shows of P.T. Barnum, and appropriated for film studies by Tom Gunning (1995).

<sup>iv</sup> Critics, both popular and academic, have noted the parallels between *House of Cards* and Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (for example Stanley (2013), Hestand (2017), Reichmann (2017)) – and indeed Spacey, who had played the role on stage, was keen to stress the connection in promotional interviews (Crouch 2013).

<sup>v</sup> James Keller (2015: 114) makes a convincing argument for Frank as a latter-day manifestation of ‘the Vice’, highlighting the ways in which he shares his evil plans with the audience, manipulates characters, and effectively authors the action of play.

<sup>vi</sup> Klarer describes a television interview in Chapter 6, in which Frank mis-speaks, resulting in a humiliating viral campaign by the teachers’ union; for Klarer, the fact that Frank does not confide in us about the incident is a form of bad faith, rendering him an unreliable narrator.

<sup>vii</sup> Earlier in the same episode a brick is thrown through the window of Frank’s house, which serves to turn public opinion against the strikers. We later discover, from a conversation with Doug, that Frank has stage-managed the entire incident – but in the interim we are kept in the dark, alongside the population of the diegetic world.

<sup>viii</sup> This distancing effect is – perhaps counter-intuitively - an important adjunct to the ‘structures of sympathy’ in keeping an audience engaged with the show and its problematic protagonist, for as Margrethe Bruun Vaage (2012) has argued, an audience is better able to suspend moral judgement and form some form of allegiance with an immoral character where the status of the text as fiction is foregrounded.

<sup>ix</sup> This corridor scene is neatly echoed by a similar tracking shot in Chapter 7, just after Frank has used his success with the Education Bill to gain political traction “precisely when I needed it most.”

<sup>x</sup> The show uses the relatively new televisual convention of an on-screen display to share the content of texts with the audience.