Underwood's Underhandedness: Moral Ambiguity in *House of Cards*

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In the television landscape, there are many characters that are not unequivocally good or bad but instead behave in morally questionable ways, which raises questions about how the audience evaluates this ambiguous behavior. This thesis uses House of Cards' Frank Underwood as a case study to examine how viewers assess the behavior of such a protagonist. It begins to theoretically explore the various processes that fuel this evaluation, which can eventually lead to moral disengagement. It then turns to House of Cards itself, by exploring how Frank Underwood's ambiguity is expressed through the breakdown of the fourth wall and by analyzing his dubious actions during the series' first season. Finally, it concludes that there is a wide spectrum in terms of ambiguity and with the entirely self-centered motivations of Frank Underwood. This is reflective of a current move in the television landscape towards the spectrum's far end.

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1. Introduction

The opening scene of the *House of Cards*' series premiere starts with the sound of a dog getting hit by a car in front of Francis Underwood's house. Disturbed by the noise, he and his bodyguard rush outside to discover the neighbors' pet lying critically wounded on the sidewalk. While his bodyguard notifies the next-doors, Francis delivers his very first monologue: "There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain. The sort of pain that is only suffering. I have no patience for useless things. Moments like this require someone who will act. To do the unpleasant thing. The necessary thing..." (Season 1, Episode 1). He, then, strangles the dog with his bare hands, making this scene emblematic for his dubious personality.

Before delving deeper into Underwood's psyche, some understanding of *House of Cards* is useful. The first original content produced by US-based streaming service Netflix, the first season of *House of Cards* was released in February 2013. The show is partly based on the eponymous BBC miniseries which, in turn, is an adaptation of a novel by the British author Michael Dobbs. Currently encompassing four seasons, the Netflix version follows power-thirsty Francis 'Frank' Underwood, Democratic Majority Whip in the U.S. House of Representatives, who is played by Kevin Spacey. He is married to Claire, portrayed by Robin Wright, who supports her husband in his quest to rise through the ranks of Washingtonian politics. Although *House of Cards* primarily revolves around the Underwood couple, other forces in The Capitol also play significant roles. In the series, Garett Walker is the President of the United States. Before the period depicted in *House of Cards,* Frank made considerable efforts to ensure Walker would acquire this position and Walker, in turn, promised Frank to appoint him as Secretary of State. At the last moment, however, Walker nominates someone else. Important members of the president's cabinet are Linda Vasquez, the President's Chief of Staff, and Douglas Stamper, who is the Director of Strategy. Peter Russo is a Congressman for whom Frank appears to have a soft spot. There is also room for entities that are not directly related to the White House. The press, for instance, is embodied by the *Washington Herald* journalist Zoe Barnes, with whom Frank has several romantic endeavors. As it will turn out, all of these relationships and actions are part of Frank's masterplan. In short, all these characters contribute to the complexity of the Washingtonian political climate portrayed in *House of Cards* and they, in turn, are to a greater or lesser extent victimized by Frank's

schemes. He indeed stops at nothing to achieve his aims, especially after being declined the position of Secretary of State.

This brings us back to the opening monologue of the series premiere, in which Frank states he is willing to "act" and shows he is not afraid to do "unpleasant," "necessary" things. With this kind of behavior, he is part of a practice that has become increasingly popular on television since the late 1990s. In series that are part of this development, characters are not straightforwardly 'good' or 'bad' anymore. Instead, their behavior skirts the law and sometimes even entirely breaks it, which makes them morally ambiguous. This trend can be related to two developments. Firstly, ambiguity is an appealing plot element because it makes these kinds of characters more realistic. As Donovan puts it: "We are living in a morally ambiguous world where most of the solutions to life and death problems — like crime, terrorism, national security — do not have clear-cut answers. It is really difficult to decide what is the right thing to do" (qtd. in Polatis 9). This view is shared by Krevolin, who argues morally ambiguous characters are "appealing to us because all of us are neither pure saints nor pure sinners. Hence, we can connect most easily with those characters onscreen who are like us. And when these characters deal with moral ambiguity, it helps us deal with similar ambiguities in our lives" (qtd. in Polatis 11). This is reminiscent of the rejection of straightforward good/evil dichotomies in postmodern culture in general. Secondly, the emergence of cable-television in the early 1990s, with HBO being one of the frontrunners, gave producers much more creative freedom. Indeed, cable broadcasters could "do what they pleased", for their channels were much less concerned with ratings but all the more with subscriptions. What is more, cable is less subject to the influence of advertisers and less bound by federal regulations than public television (McCabe and Akass, xviii). Not surprisingly, many series with moral ambiguous characters, including the ones discussed below, are produced by cable companies. One of the first series to incorporate these kinds of personalities is *The Sopranos*, which aired from 1999 to 2007. Its main protagonist Tony Soprano is the head of a New Jersey-based mafia family but, at the same time, also the patriarch of a household with two teenage children and a wife. Particularly through conversations with his psychiatrist about his own troubled childhood, viewers are intended to develop a soft spot for this mobster.

The late 2000s has seen a surge of television characters with morally ambiguous personalities. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, *House* (2004 – 2012), *Dexter* (2006 – 2013) and *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013). The main protagonists in these series, however, differ from Frank Underwood in one important aspect: they have valid, humane reasons to

justify their behavior. In other words, they act, at least in part, for the greater good. In the case of *House,* the titular hero Dr. Gregory House constantly breaks ethical rules and professional norms, but does all this to cure his patients. By the same token, *Dexter'*s eponymous Dexter Morgan is a blood spatter analysist for the Miami police and secretly a serial killer at the same time. He does, nonetheless, maintain a moral code in his murders by only targeting other serial killers, as well as those criminals not caught by the law. In *Breaking Bad,* Walter White in diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and, therefore, starts cooking crystal meth in order to provide his wife and two young children with enough financial resources in case he succumbs to the disease. In this regard, Frank is more similar to the protagonist from another recent series, *Boardwalk Empire* (2010 – 2014), in which Nucky Thompson, the treasurer of Atlantic City during the Prohibition Era, secretly produces and distributes alcohol. Thus, Gregory, Dexter, and Walter all have a personal mission that vindicates and legitimizes their actions. Nucky and Frank, however, manipulate, deceive, and murder solely out of self-interest.

The moral ambiguity of Frank's behavior is further enforced by a stylistic aspect the show employs: the breakdown of the fourth wall. This stylistic technique basically means that Frank acknowledges the presence of the viewer and he does this in two ways: by directly addressing the viewers and though meaningful glances straight into the camera.

With the United States currently going through a presidential election year, now is an excellent time to discuss Underwood's fictional rise to the White House. What is more, Donald Trump's controversial statements bear resemblance to Frank Underwood's own rhetoric. During a campaign rally in Iowa on January 23, 2016, Trump declared: "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I would not lose any voters" (qtd. in Johnson 2). When a man who disrupted Trump's rally was dragged away smiling in Las Vegas exactly one month later, Trump said he would like to "punch him in the face" (qtd. in Diamond 2). Thus, the rhetoric and campaigning of Trump during the 2016 U.S election campaign and the nature of Underwood's political strategies are to some extent uncannily similar. In a trailer promoting the series fourth season, for instance, Frank Underwood gives a public service statement as part of his fictitious election campaign: "I think America deserves Frank Underwood and in your heart, you know I am right" (qtd. in Keating, 5).

The incorporation of characters that are not inherently 'good' or 'bad' has consequences for the ways in which the audience assesses those characters. The complicated, dubious personalities of such characters, with Frank Underwood being a pivotal example, evoke elaborate processes of moral evaluation. Therefore, the main question addressed in this thesis is: How do viewers evaluate the morally ambiguous behavior of *House of Card's*

Frank Underwood?

Chapter 1 discusses the considerable amount of theories and methodologies on audience evaluation. Bilandzic's Transportation Theory identifies the ways in which viewers become absorbed in television stories. Active Disposition Theory, developed by Zillman and Cantor holds that audiences of televised drama continually make moral judgements about the characters based on their actions. According to Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel Moral Disengagement Theory, viewers convince themselves that particular moral and ethical codes of conduct do not apply.

The subsequent chapters explore the ways in which Frank Underwood is presented as a morally ambiguous character. Chapter 2 employs a stylistic focus, investigating how moral ambiguity comes to the fore through the breakdown of the fourth wall. To examine Frank directly addressing the viewer, statements made to the audience in the first three seasons are explored. Sorlin's study of the multifarious meanings of the personal pronoun 'you' in *House of Cards* is used as a framework. To investigate the meaning of Frank looking directly at the viewer, scenes from the seventh episode of the first season will be analyzed.

Chapter 3 focuses on Frank's most important morally ambiguous actions in the series' first season, which eventually lead to him becoming the Vice President. References are made to concepts such as Egri's notion of character creates plot, Brady's idea of narrative cycles and the conception of story lines. Likewise, Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel's framework for viewer's moral disengagement is applied to Frank's deeds.

1. Audience's Moral Evaluation of Fictional Characters

As we have seen earlier, moral ambiguity has become noticeably popular in television series. Protagonists of series such as *Breaking Bad, Dexter, House, Boardwalk Empire, Mad Men* and indeed *House of Cards* are nothing short of pop-culture phenomena. According to the French philosopher Émile Durkheim, morality serves as the "strictly necessary daily bread without which societies cannot exist" (51). In societies, then, a great deal of effort is put in defining the boundaries between moral and immoral acts (Grabe 315). This is everything but a simple undertaking, for matters are oftentimes not as black and white as they might seem at firsthand. Reminding us of the notion of moral ambiguity, in 1938, Durkheim put it the following way: "nothing is good indefinitely and to an unlimited extent" (71). Delineating what is deemed good and what is deemed evil, therefore, is pivotal for maintaining moral order in a society (Grabe 315). In times past, the power of morality was often assured by tradition institutions like family, church, and through civic spectacle. Public executions, after all, served to remind civilians to obey the law and to uphold moral values. The crowd itself occasionally took part in the execution process, which created allegiance within the community. (316). Grabe argues that in the present-day, modern society, the mass media have taken over the morality-defining role from traditional institutions, whereas, at the same time, a civilian's crucial role within this process is sustained. She explains: "[t]oday deviant behavior is similarly vulnerable to public scrutiny in the mass media courtyard where viewers and studio audiences participate, at least symbolically, in defining and defending moral boundaries" (316). Viewers, then, seem to carefully evaluate the behavior of their small-screen companions. In other words, when watching fictional content, certain mental processes occur with which viewers develop judgements regarding characters' behavior. As noted before, this is particularly interesting when said behavior is not straightforwardly good or bad. In popular culture, the pivotal example of shows with a distinct line between heroes and villains is the *whodunit*. According to Sumser, who dubs this notion "moral certainty," classic police shows of the seventies, eighties, and nighties offered such certitude (155). Showrunners in fact fervently use this plot element, characterized by indubitable demarcations between the good and the bad guys, to this day. Series such as *CSI* and *Law and Order,* including numerous spinoffs, are amongst the most recent examples. This exemplary line has become increasingly blurred since the 2000s, however, in what Lane labels existential dramas, where the protagonist "must decide every day to act responsibly" (143). Characters oftentimes do not succeed to live up to that responsibility. Walter White leaves a trail of victims while

building up a meth empire, Don Draper cannot always withstand the feminine temptations of 1960s New York and Francis Underwood's sheet indeed becomes besmirched as he rises through the ranks of American politics. As explained above, even though these shows blur the lines between good and bad; they nevertheless have a significant fan base. Protagonists thus do not have to be clear-cut heroes to be rooted for by a television audience. This raises questions about the specific ways in which moral character evaluation works, which will be addressed in the following section.

  The various processes fueling moral evaluation can be classified into three main categories, which are demarcated by the features of the receiver, features of the text, and an interplay between both text and receiver (Ommen, Daalmans and Weijers 62-63). The theories discussed in this chapter are visualized in Figure 1, in a model termed the Processes Towards Moral Disengagement Model. It should be noted that the concept 'text' refers to the entire mediated message here, in this case a television series. Let us start with characteristics of the viewer. Oud, Weijers and Wester, taking their cue from Roland Barthes' 1967 essay *Death of the Author*, offer a concise definition of this process in the following statement: "[…] texts do not have fixed meanings. Meaning is created in the process of interpretation by readers" (1).

  In order to fully understand the meaning-making mechanism, some understanding of the way in which information is stored in our brain is necessary. In this information-storage – and retrieval – process, schemas play an important role, as they allow information to be saved in efficient clusters. In doing so, these schemas facilitate a relatively easy way to assess our judgements and comprehensions of occurrences (Ommen. Daalmans and Weijers 63).
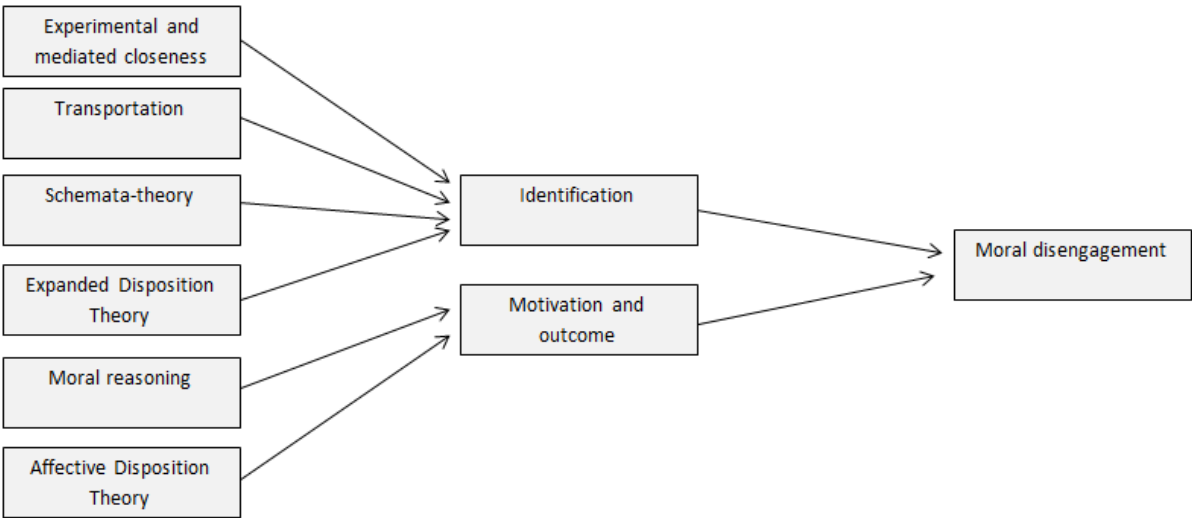

Figure 1: Processes Towards Moral Disengagement Model

This is pertinent to real-world events and people, as well as the fictional television landscape. Ommen et al. recapitulate this in the following manner: "schemas consist of a predictable pattern that individuals can rely on when encountering fictional persons in a narrative" (63). There are two schemas that apply especially to fictional content, namely story- and genre schemas (Busselle and Bilandzic, 258). Story schemas serve to denote a narrative with a causal and a temporal structure. Once the story and its causality have been implied, genre schemas allow viewers to develop certain expectations about the forthcoming narrative (258). A story starting with a corpse in an alley, for example, activates a viewer's schema for a whodunnit. Genre schemas also help viewers to assess the realness of the story world (269). More on the concept of the story world follows later, for now it is sufficient to realize "knowledge about genres helps the viewer find the appropriate story world logic" (Busselle and Bilandzic, 269). With regards to *House of Cards*, aside from schemas reserved for fictional content, schemas about what actual politicians are like or how they should be, as well as schemas about fictional politicians previously encountered in other series, might be activated.

The essential theory to elucidate the viewer's process of interpretation is Zillman's Affective Disposition Theory. The affectionate feelings of the audience, then, can vary in degree from person to person. Raney explains: "Disposition theory contends that viewers form alliances with characters in drama on a continuum of affect from extremely positive through indifference to extremely negative" (350). These reactions are most easily explained as emotive responses; hence Zillman coined the term *affective dispositions*. This, however, is not an arbitrary process, but is instead morally justified. Viewers, more specifically, are "untiring moral monitors" (qtd. in Raney 350) and continuously judge the righteousness or impropriety of a protagonist's actions. Zillman's observation brings us to the core of affective disposition theory, which thus holds that "when viewing a drama, we come to like characters whose actions and motivations we judge as proper or morally correct while we dislike characters whose actions and motivations we judge as improper or morally incorrect" (Raney 350-351). As a result, we root for the success of a character we like but root against disliked characters and hope for their failure. The strength of these affective dispositions, however, varies between viewers, for everyone has a "unique moral makeup" (Raney 351). Not every viewer consequently reacts to a protagonist's behavior in the same manner and dispositions thus differ amongst them. Individual viewers, in other words, can be gratified by other characters for different grounds than their friends (Raney 352). To sum, every viewer decodes a text in their own manner, but the foundation for the final moral verdict is similar: their very

own, personal perceptions.

Another receiver-based factor influencing moral evaluation is the involvement in the narrative. Using the term "closeness", Bilandzic distinguishes between "experimental closeness" and "mediated closeness". The latter will be discussed later as this process is more of an interaction between text and receiver but experimental closeness, on the other hand, is a perfect example of a receiver-based feature. In its core, experimental closeness holds that viewers can relate more easily to circumstances or scenes they also experience in real life. As Bilandzic puts it: "When watching television, topics that are familiar from real-world experience stand out and receive more attention from the viewer" (339). In the case of *House of Cards*, professional politicians or journalists, for instance, will experience different perceptions than political neophytes, which thus relates to the possible activation of a viewer's relevance structures. It even goes beyond similar real life circumstances and situations, as interpersonal communication and actual fears, concerns and hopes are also covered (Bilandzic 339). According to Bilandzic, then, experimental closeness grows out of "any biological context outside the immediate media experience" (339). Just like affective disposition, experimental closeness is thus a subjective type of moral evaluation.

Text-only features also influence the process of viewer's moral reasoning and thus their moral evaluation. This can happen through moral reasoning, which relates to core plot-related characteristics of a text, such as a protagonist's own background and the motives and rationales behind their actions (Raney 351). A text can either create moral certainty or refrain from doing so. When transgressors are punished, as is the case in the traditional whodunnits mentioned earlier, the text itself creates the moral judgement and thus the moral certainty. Accordingly, viewers easily appropriate this certainty themselves. If, however, unambiguous, well-defined moral distinctions are lacking in the text, moral uncertainty is developed and viewers have to make the moral judgement by themselves (Ommen, Daalmans and Weijers 63). Morally ambiguous drama shows, as the name already suggests, follow this principle. Does Walter White's illness and stirring desire to leave his family financially independent, for example, justify his actions? Is Presidents Walker's betrayal of Frank Underwood good enough a reason for him to embark on a path of vengeance? In both cases, the texts themselves do not offer definite answers to these issues. On the contrary, leaving the transgressor's morally dubious behavior relatively unpunished, it remains up to the viewer to construe moral certainty. The text does, however, offer certain plot points that can facilitate this process of moral reasoning.

The most comprehensive type of moral evaluation is constituted by an interplay of

text- and viewer-based elements. In this regard, Bilandzic's second deliberation of the term 'closeness' needs to be discussed now. She identifies this as "mediated closeness," which, in short, occurs when viewers "let themselves be transported into the story (Bilandzic 340). The notion of transportation thus plays an important role within mediated closeness. Transportation ensues when viewers are completely "immersed in a story to the extent that the actual world retreats as a frame of reference" (Bilandzic 337). Notice the difference with the previously discussed experimental closeness. Viewers, in short, no longer apply their own relevance structures. To be more precise, they no longer use their own frame of reference to make sense of the content but instead become deeply embroiled in the narrative, adopting the protagonist's point of view (Bilandzic 337). Within visual narratives in particular, transportation is promoted by imagery, because the experience becomes increasingly intense and memorable. Imagery thus "promotes transportation and makes the narrative more powerful. With this process, narratives can exert considerable influence because they impose a certain mode of reception" (Bilandzic 338). This reception mechanism is characterized by less inclination to develop counterarguments in response to the content. Viewers are less inclined to rebut in part because they do not have the ability to engage in this process and partly because viewers simply lack the motivation to do so. An absence of the ability to come up with responses occurs because transportation requires the viewer's full cognitive attention. As cognitive resources are scarce and completely allocated to experiencing the content by transportation, there are no resources left to refute. Developing counterarguments moreover, can unsettle the smoothness of the transportation thereby also affecting the pleasure of watching. Viewers thus also refrain from counter arguing because they lack the motivation (Bilandzic 338). Aside from an absence of counterarguments, there are four more mechanisms ensuing from transportation. The first notion is explained by Green, Garst, and Brock who propose that "if [viewers feel to have] been part of narrative events, […] imagined events may be misremembered as real to the extent that the memories have qualities similar to real memories" (169). Due to transportation, in other words, viewers can conceive mediated experiences as actual life-like memories. Second, as viewers engaged in transportation develop enduring feelings for a story's protagonist, this could contribute to a change in their own views and opinions (Bilandzic 338). By the same token, Bilandzic argues emotional responses to the comings and goings of fictional persons are very similar to the way in which viewer's respond to their peers in real life (338). The last mechanism is, like the one mentioned above, related to the notion of distance. Transported viewers, after all, have the perception of experiencing the fictional events in person (Bilandzic 338). To sum,

transportation causes the viewer to be completely absorbed in the narrative.

Busselle and Bilandzic have identified two factors that can contribute to a decreased likelihood of transportation. In fact, the following circumstances even completely prevent transportation of the viewer from taking place. This can happens when a story lacks in external or narrative realism. When a narrative falls short of narrative realism, the story world is not essentially similar to the actual world. Shapiro and Chock offer a more precise explanation of the term: "the degree of similarity between mediated characters and situations and real-life characters and situations" (170). This, in turn, depends on the extent to which deviations from the actual world are explained in the narrative (Busselle and Bilandzic 296) and the extent to which deviations fit within the story's logic. As this still might seem rather theoretical, Busselle and Bilandzic use a straightforward example to illustrate their point. When Yoda, the Jedi master from the *Star Wars* franchise, uses a handgun, viewers will perceive this as unrealistic. He using a lightsaber on the other hand is, even though such a weapon does not exist in the real world, perceived as realistic because it matches the story world of *Star Wars* (Busselle and Bilandzic 271).

We have previously addressed experimental closeness, a process in which viewers relate their own real-life experiences to elements of the televised world (Bilandzic 340). Ommen et al. have further expanded this concept, thereby developing what they designate as "indirect experimental closeness". Taking the basic premise of experimental closeness one step further and combining this with elements of transportation, they argue viewers sometimes connect with protagonists on a meta-level. This basically means events and situations are analyzed in a self-recursive manner, in which viewers "imagine themselves in the situation" (Ommen et al. 70).

Raney has also taken an existing theory and widened its range by adding two observations. His elaborations on Zillman's Active Disposition Theory can be considered as Expanded Disposition Theory. The basic premise of Disposition Theory suggests viewer's moral evaluation of a character leads to an affective disposition towards him or her. Raney's first complement, then, holds that the formation of such dispositions sometimes occurs even *before* characters are morally evaluated (Raney 361). Due to diegetic elements (such as clothes or camera framing) and non-diegetic elements (like background music), viewers frequently have a fairly good idea about a character's good or bad nature the moment, and sometimes even ahead of their appearance on screen. The second addition to Disposition Theory relates to the assumption that affective dispositions might impede a more critical reading of a characters behavior, as actions of liked characters are consistently interpreted as

'good' and vice versa. In Raney's own words, more specifically: "Because viewers expect that liked characters will do good things and disliked characters will do bad things, those expectations lead viewers to interpret character actions and motivations in line with established dispositional valances rather than to morally scrutinize each action and motivation" (361).

So far, we have identified and examined the ways in which the audience assesses a character's behavior through moral evaluation. This process can be subdivided into three categories: features of the receiver (Affective Disposition Theory and experimental closeness), features of the text (moral reasoning), and a synthesis of receiver- and text based features (indirect experimental closeness; mediated closeness; transportation; schema theory, and Expanded Disposition Theory). This becomes particularly interesting when said behavior is actually deemed morally ambiguous, as these processes will, then, to a greater or lesser extent play a role. Because viewers have oftentimes already developed a strong bond with the perpetrator, he or she is motivated to condone the protagonist's disgraceful acts. This can be done through the process of 'moral disengagement', a term originally coined by the Canadian psychologist Alfred Bandura, who identifies it as "the process by which otherwise unacceptable behaviors […] are permitted, accepted, and defended" (Raney 359). Even though the theory is originally devoted to inter-human behavior, Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel have applied moral disengagement to parasocial relations with fictional characters and identified the three main procedures by which it ensues, namely: via the act itself, the act's perpetrator, or the act's consequences (181). There are, to be more precise, eight ways in which a (fictional) character can provoke viewer's moral disengagement:

> "Lying can be referred to as "telling white lies" (euphemistic labeling) and be justified by suggesting that doing so spares others' feelings (moral justification). Implying that everyone lies can minimize the liar's role (diffusion of responsibility), and proposing that lying does not really hurt anyone can minimize its outcomes (distortion of consequences). Immoral actions can also be justified by blaming someone of authority for the action (displacement of responsibility), by comparing the action to something worse (advantageous comparison), by blaming the victim of the conduct (attribution of blame), or by perceiving the victim to be less than human (dehumanization) (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 181).

Moral disengagement can thus be the final result of all the processes discussed in this chapter. These, in turn, relate to either identification with a character, or a character's motivation for and outcome of their actions. When transportation, mediated- and experimental closeness induce viewers to draw resemblances between them and the ambiguous character, they consequently identify with said character. Immoral actions are thereby likely to be justified through moral disengagement (Tsay and Krakowiak 106). What is more, a character's physical appearance can influence judgments about a protagonist's kindness, goodwill and intellect. Appearances can, indeed, activate certain schemas which, in turn, influence the viewer's judgements, causing them to morally disengage (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel 182). This notion can be illustrated with the following example: The fact that the vigilante Daredevil is blind but nevertheless superior in fights against his adversaries might invoke viewer's respect instead of them questioning his vigilantism. Raney's Expanded Disposition Theory follows the principles of schema-theory as well.

　　　　Personal motivations behind a character's actions and its outcomes can likewise cause moral disengagement. This occurs if motivations are deemed humble, such as braveness, beneficence and love (182). This is in line with moral reasoning, as viewers continually evaluate the actual deeds and intentions of characters. Outcomes of the immoral act are another determinant for moral disengagement (183). Hence, the principles of Active Disposition Theory are followed, for viewers root for the success of liked characters' actions but they wish disliked characters to fail.

　　　　The next chapter takes a more stylistic approach to explore how the breakdown of the fourth wall in *House of Cards* can likewise contribute to identification as well as motivation and outcome and thus to moral disengagement.

2. Moral ambiguity through the breakdown of the fourth wall in *House of Cards*

In the previous chapter, we have explored the various processes through which viewers morally evaluate the behavior of fictional characters on television. Features of the viewer, features of the text, and, more specifically, a synthesis between the two are the prime determinants for moral disagreement. Considerable attention has been devoted to the notion of transportation; the process in which viewers become absorbed into a story to the extent that the real world is no longer used as a frame of reference (Bilandzic 337). This mechanism is important to bear in mind in the upcoming chapter, for it is related to the breakdown of the fourth wall, a narrative device frequently used in *House of Cards.* Frank Underwood's moral ambiguity, to be more precise, is partly expressed through him addressing the viewer.

Before actually examining the ways in which the fourth wall is broken in *House of Cards*, some insight into this concept is necessary. Breaking the fourth wall is a centuries-old narrative device, which originated in the theatre. On stage, actors at pretend not to be aware of their audience and, accordingly, do not address them directly. The fourth wall is thus the imaginary space between the stage and the theatre seats; a "transparent one through which the audience voyeuristically looks" (Auter and Davis 165). William Shakespeare's plays are quintessential for breaking with this convention, as actors acknowledge the presence of the audience by addressing audience members directly in soliloquies. Puck's final speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of the many examples where this happens. With lines such as "If we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended […] and this weak and idle theme, no more yielding than a dream" (Act 5 Scene 1) Here, the actor playing Puck steps out of his role and apologizes in case the audience did not like the play. If this indeed holds, he urges them to interpret it as a mere vision (Davis 3). More recently, in the 1930s, the German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) took this conception to new heights with plays that employed the so-called 'Verfremdungseffect,' a principle he developed himself. Brecht is best known as a founder of the Epic Theatre movement, of which one of the prime aims was to dissociate the public from what was happening on the theatre stage (Innes 66). Frequently used elements within the 'Verfremdungs'-technique are: direct address, orally reciting the stage instructions, deliberately keeping technical theatre instruments such as the lightning or ropes visibly on stage during the play, and projecting texts on placards (Brecht 138; Brooker 193). Brecht himself describes this is as "playing in such a way that the audience [is] hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of […] in the

audience's subconscious" (91). Breaking the fourth wall can thus prevent the process of transportation; which is discussed in greater detail below.

The breakdown of the fourth wall is not limited to theatre, for it occurs on television as well. The situation comedy genre is particularly well-known for its use of this technique and therefore, with the help of some examples, sitcoms can serve to identify the three basic ways in which the fourth wall can collapse on the small-screen.

Firstly, this happens when actors are seemingly aware of the fact they actually live in a scripted universe. NBC's *The Fresh-Prince of Bel-Air* often employed this technique (Sommers 6). To illustrate, in the fifth episode of season five, protagonist Will plays a prank on Carlton who then frantically dashes through all the show's different sets and even completely leaves it to run through the studio audience. Another example has Will going on a vacation to Philadelphia in the season four finale. Because he has such a good time, he decides to indefinitely postpone his return. In the first episode of the following season, however, NBC executives travel to Philadelphia in order to force Will's to go back to Bel-Air.

A second way to break the fourth wall occurs when actors play themselves in fictionalized personifications (Sommers 11). This, again, applies to *The Fresh-Prince of Bel-Air* in which Will Smith plays himself. *Seinfield* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* are other preeminent examples.

The third, most obvious technique is equivalent to the breakdown of the fourth wall in theater: when actors directly address their audience (Sommers 18). In the BBC series *The Office,* for instance, the actors discuss the series' events in short, interview-like sequences, solely intended for the viewers. The same holds for *Modern Family*, in which members of the Pritchett-family are interviewed in a similar manner.

Situation comedies are, nonetheless, not the only genre in which the fourth wall collapses through direct contact with the audience. This phenomenon has been used in qualitative drama too. In *Dexter,* the titular character shares his most intimate thoughts with his viewers in compelling voice-overs. The most recent example is *Mr. Robot*, in which the series' protagonist Elliot, a young computer programmer suffering from an anti-social disorder, speaks to the audience in like manner. These monologues, however, differ from the ones delivered by Dexter in the sense that in *Mr. Robot*, Elliot addresses his viewers directly with either "you" or as his "imaginary friend." He also repeatedly looks dramatically into the camera during these emotional outbreaks. In this way, *Mr. Robot* comes closest to the way in which the fourth wall is broken in *House of Cards*.

In *House of Cards,* Frank Underwood indeed breaks the fourth wall in two ways: by

directly addressing the audience and through his meaningful glances into the camera. It comes as no surprise, then, that lead actor Kevin Spacey acknowledges the Shakespearian elements of the series' source material (Zurawik 5). In terms of talking straight to the audience, this is predominantly done by his usage of the personal pronoun 'you,' which can be effectively illustrated with the following example:

> "Did you think I had forgotten you? Perhaps you hoped I had.
> Welcome back" (Season 2, Episode 14).

Breaking of the fourth wall is related to transportation, a concept extensively addressed in the previous chapter. Within the notion of transportation, Busselle and Bilandzic distinguish the process of a 'deictic shift', whereby viewers "switch to the time and location of the narrative and the subjective world of the characters from whose point of view the story is told" (262). Deictic utterances, then, are utterances in which directional motion is delineated, in the form of adverbs (there, now), demonstrative pronouns (this, these), and personal pronouns (he, you). Viewers are inclined to do this shift towards the protagonist perspective, for deictic phrases are comprehended best from the narrative's central deictic point of view (262). To reformulate, deictic words facilitate, a 'direct experience' of the narrative 'from the inside'. Directly addressing the viewer considerably complicates this process, as we have seen with Brecht's Verfremdungseffect. Because viewers are addressed directly, they are reminded of the fact they are not actually the protagonist. Thus, *full* transportation into the story-world in the sense of completely adopting the protagonist's perspective is prevented by the use of direct address. Viewers are nevertheless aware of a certain relationship between Frank and them. Some sense of mediated closeness, in other words, still develops through what Sorlin calls "a constructed allegiance," placing the viewer in a "particularly close relationship with the addressor, who is the main deictic center" (Sorlin 135). As stated above, the use of the personal pronoun 'you' contributes significantly to the creation of this bond. Sorlin, with a view for nuance, argues the uses of 'you' are actually more dubious and diversified than simply addressing the viewer (127). She has, therefore, linguistically analyzed its use in *House of Cards* and differentiates between three types of usage, namely: theatrical, impersonalized, and ambivalent 'you.' The upcoming section will discuss these three functionalities in greater detail.

'Theatrical you' is the most uncommon form within the series and serves to increase the dramatic undertones when Frank expresses his thoughts. These utterances, then, are

directed towards intangible entities such as God and time, thereby establishing the theatrical aspect. The following monologue, addressed to the Lord while sitting on a church bench, may serve as an example:

> "Every time I have spoken to you, you have never spoken back. Although given our mutual disdain, I cannot blame you for the silent treatment … Can you hear me? Are you even capable of language, or do you only understand depravity?" (Season 1, Episode 13).

In another aside, Frank addresses Jesus in like manner: "Love? That is what you are selling? Well, I do not buy it (Season 3, Episode 4)." Time is the victim of Frank's disdain in a different example: "You have never been an ally, have you? Pressing on with your slow incessant march" (Season 1, Episode 13). The crux of the difference with the other two types, then, is that theatrical you is doubtlessly not explicitly aimed at the viewer. The series, however, deliberately plays with this ambiguity, as viewers might nevertheless interpret it as being indirectly aimed at them.

   'Impersonalized you' functions to create truisms that are nearly impossible for viewers to oppose. As Sorlin suggests: "it hoist[s] particular situations to the level of general truths that are harder to contest, given the level of generality the combined use of generalized you and the simple present breeds" (138). These general statements result in de-personalization, consequently making the utterer significantly less vulnerable to blame and criticism.
To return to the example presented in the introduction in which Frank comments on the dichotomy of pain: "There are two kinds of pain. The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain, the sort of pain that is only suffering" (Season 1, Episode 1). This is indeed rather impersonal, because it is not clear who is meant with 'you'. The indisputable nature of the aside does, at the same time, establish Frank's authority. Therefore, through the usage of impersonalized 'you,' the viewer is assigned the position of pupil. According to Sorlin: "[A]s the recipient in *House of Cards* is only potentially a member of the political class, the nature of involvement is as a learner to a teacher" (139). Take, for instance, the following example, in which Frank elaborates on the prerequisites of being a capable politician: "Shake with your right hand, but hold a rock in your left" (Season 2, Episode 5). In another remark, he similarly explains what constitutes a good liar: "The gift of a good liar is making people think you lack a talent for lying" (Season 2, Episode 6) and he also reflects on the art of persuasion: "You can't turn a 'no' into a 'yes' without a 'maybe' in between" (Season 3, Episode 3).

Likewise, he urges the audience to take matters into their own hands by saying: "If you do not like how the table is set, turn over the table" (Season 2, Episode 2). The teacher-pupil affiliation illustrated by the truisms in these examples, then, also enhances the credibility of Frank's utterances. This might, in turn, play a significant role in the process towards viewers' moral disengagement.

The last form of 'you' recognized by Sorlin is 'ambivalent you.' Note that this is, at least not directly, related to the ambiguous nature of Frank's personality but merely a coincidental resemblance in terminology. Here, Sorlin alludes to film theory to offer a clarification and discusses Dynel's framework of audiences' twofold communication layers: the characters' level and the recipients' level (Dynel 1642). According to Dynel:

> "Each utterance in an interaction is produced by the speaker and directed towards the addressee, and optionally a third party […] all of them being hearers on the first communicative level of film discourse. At the second communication level, each utterance, turn and interaction within a film is directed towards a higher-ordered ratified hearer, the recipient, who does not contribute to the discourse per se, yet actively interprets it" (1642).

This type of you most explicitly emphasizes these two levels (Sorlin 134), hence the term 'ambivalent' is contextually appropriate here in a different way. Ambivalent you is thus the most straightforward form of directly speaking to the viewer. In an excerpt discussed earlier, for instance, Frank welcomes the audience back to the show. This is by far the most exemplary fragment to illustrate the power of ambivalent you, for its effectiveness is clearly manifested in the element of surprise, as it happens at an unpredictable point in the episode. Another remark is again directly addressed to the viewer and even urges the viewer to evaluate Frank's behavior: "Do you think I am a hypocrite? Well you should. I would not disagree with you" (Season 2, Episode 9). Similarly, he presses the viewer to think about the nature of his Vice-Presidency: "There are two kinds of Vice Presidents: door mats and matadors. Which do you think I intend to be?" (Season 2, Episode 3). He also gives viewers a taste of his humanitarianism: "Do you know what I like about people? They stack so well" (Season 1, Episode 2). Sorlin, commenting on these effects, poses that "it always catches the viewer off guard, as it occurs at unanticipated moments" (139). Furthermore, the usually laconic nature of these utterances reinforces the viewers' feeling of astonishment (139). The idiosyncratic feature of direct address, then, is of pivotal importance to the series, for Frank's ambivalent nature is partly expressed through his monologues with the viewer. On a three-

point scale, to sum, theatrical is the least personal form of you, followed by impersonal you and ambivalent you.

The fourth wall in *House of Cards* is also broken when Frank glances right into the camera, almost as if looking the viewer straight into the eye. It has previously been discussed how the usage of the personal deictic pronoun 'you' hinders the transportation process. Bussele and Bilandzic develop this even further by also distinguishing nonverbal deictic markers, such as pointing a finger or looking in someone's direction (262). Looking directly at the viewer, then, is similarly counterproductive in relation to the deictic shift. The main intention behind these glances is to enable Frank to express his true feelings. As will be demonstrated, episode 7 of season 1 is quintessential for this aim. In a particular scene, the much-contested new Education Bill is signed into law by the recently elected President Walker. The promise to reform education had been one of the flagships of his campaign and, as the bill proved to be very difficult to ultimately ratify, he thus explicitly expresses his gratitude for Frank's role in getting the bill through Congress. The camera instantly zooms in to a close-up of Frank's face and he gives the viewer a meaningful look, reminding them it is all part of his masterplan to take over the Vice-President's position, thereby expressing that events are unfolding in his desired direction. This is even more evident in the subsequent scene in which the President kindly offers Frank the fountain pen used to sign the bill. Frank triumphantly accepts and repeats the same look, because this action implies he is valued more than the Vice-President. In this regard, the scene that immediately follows demonstrates in clear manner Frank is the sole user of this technique. Here, Congressman Peter Russo attends an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in order to remain sober so that he can run for Governor of Pennsylvania, as part of Frank's grander plan. Just like the previous scene, close-ups of his face are used. As opposed to Frank, however, Russo looks straight past the camera thereby denying the audience's presence.

Frank also expresses annoyance by means of his camera glance. During a meeting, Frank, Walker, and his Chief of Staff Linda Vazquez exchange views on Frank's plan of letting Russo run for Governor of Pennsylvania. While Linda voices serious skepticism, the camera angle changes in Frank's direction, who subsequently gives the viewer an exclusive look of his severe annoyance. He is clearly not happy with the course of the discussion and to prevent his plan from collapsing, he ultimately has to reveal Russo's drug and alcohol-filled past; a revelation indeed foreshadowed by the flash of his eyes.

To sum, *House of Cards* breaks the fourth wall through direct address and through Frank's glances into the camera. It differs from other series that also break the fourth wall

because of the direct use of the personal pronoun 'you.' It differs, for instance, from Dexter's voice-overs, in which he refrains from direct usage. By using this device, complete transportation is prevented, as viewers indeed do not 'become one' with the protagonist. Complete transportation is deliberately avoided by the use of 'you' to create distance between the viewer and Frank. The perception of distance, which reminds of the principles of Brecht's Verfremdungseffect, might nevertheless still help the audience in the process of morally evaluating Frank's actions and behavior. This is enabled because viewers instead turn into the protagonist's sole confidant. Viewers, to be more precise, feel special, as if they are the only ones to whom Frank is completely honest; the only ones deemed worthy of knowing the truth and thus the only ones who he trusts. This privileged position can arguably have a positive effect on viewers' moral evaluation of his behavior, paving the way towards moral disengagement.

3. Moral ambiguity through Frank Underwood's schemes

The preceding chapter has explored how the stylistic element of breaking the fourth wall through direct address and looking straight into the camera help to reinforce the moral ambiguity of Frank's personality. This chapter enlarges the perspective to investigate the ways in which Frank's actual exploits further enforce the notion of him as a character with a dubious morality by looking at the narrative highlights of the first season. This chapter is limited to the first season, because this particular season chronicles Frank's rise from majority whip for the House of Representatives to the position of Vice President of the United States. When possible, references will be made to the ways in which, according to Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, actions can provoke moral disengagement as discussed in chapter one.

In light of what has previously been established, this might not seem the most obvious approach at firsthand. After all, it might seem to be in conflict with the notion that there is not one single and unequivocal meaning to a text; it is up to the reader to distill its meaning and this can, accordingly, result in diverse readings, following the assertions Roland Barthes made in *The Death of the Author.* This does not mean, however, that textual analysis has become fruitless (Oud, Weijers, and Wester 1). Oud, Weijers, and Wester indeed argue that textual analysis "in its own way can contribute to a better understanding of the construction of meaning … when [the primary text] is interpreted as a collection of meaningful signs that need to be decoded to become comprehensible" (2). Textual analysis, then, is meaningful in a different way than reception studies for "textual analysis can show […] what texts are and how they work in the process of interpretation" (3). This research procedure builds on three important principles (6): Lajos Egri's observation that character creates plot – instead of the reverse, - (Egri 73), Ben Brady's notion of narrative cycles as the basic form of story progression as visualized in Figure 2, and the principle of the story line (6). Together, these three conceptions are pivotal for creating narrative structure. As the upcoming analysis shows in greater detail, these three principles are indeed pertinent in *House of Cards.* Egri's thoughts on characters creating the plot, after all, apply because the plot is moved forward by Frank's self-instigated schemes and the difficulties he encounters along the way towards the Vice-Presidency. Had Frank, then, not been ruthlessly ambitious the plot might very well have moved into a different direction. Brady's narrative cycle theory is relevant too, as there are multiple larger and smaller cycles within the first season. Most prominently, this season chronicles Frank, after being betrayed by the President (1), deciding to take matters into his own hands (2) by embarking on a path of revenge (3), which ultimately earns him the Vice-

Presidency but not quenching his thirst for power (4). Again, as the next section's more comprehensive analysis illustrates, the smaller plots in the season follow a similar pattern.
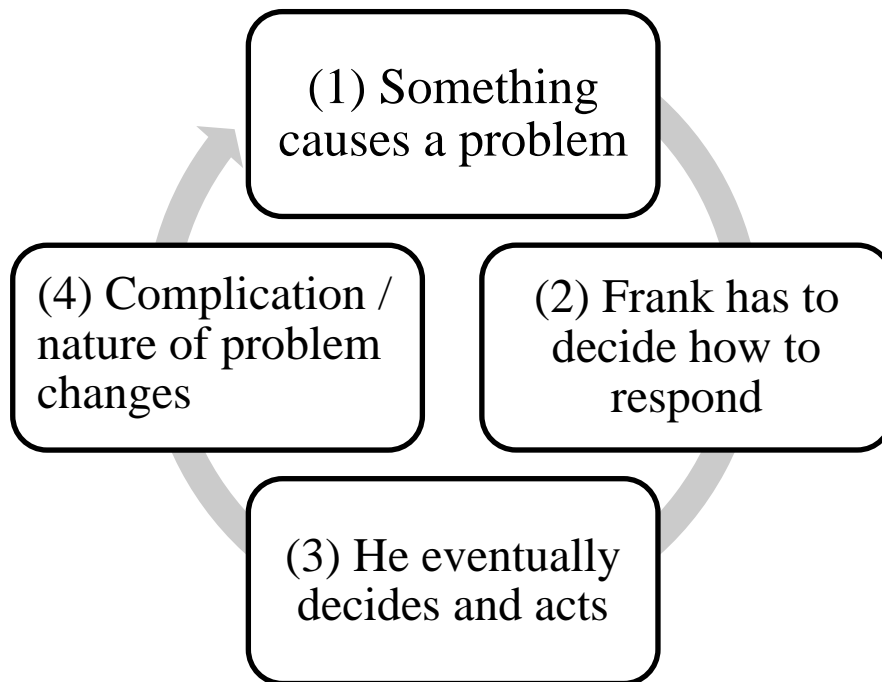

Figure 2: Brady's narrative cycle theory applied to *House of Cards*. (Adapted after Oud, Weijers and Wester 6).

Following the concept of the story line, lastly, "[…] a television story has several characters that play a part in different or several sequences of events" (Oud et al. 6). In *House of Cards,* there are several sub plots aside from Frank's story, for example following Zoe's difficulties adapting to the journalistic norms of her employer and Claire running her non-profit organization.

Analyzing these narrative structures in *House of Cards*, then, enables us to "discover the underlying norms and values of television stories […] [in which] characters represent cultural values" (6). To be more precise, "through their actions, discourse and line of development, characters personify the contradictions within our way of life (7). This is, again, reminiscent of something discussed before, for Krevolin has argued morally ambiguous characters in particular render these contradictions apparent. What follows is an outline of Frank's morally ambiguous actions in season one, leading up to him becoming Vice President.

In season one's very first scene, Frank relieves a dog, severely wounded by a hit and run, from its suffering by single-handedly suffocating the animal while making it clear he has "no patience for useless things" (Season 1, Episode 1). This, as will later turn out, foreshadows Frank's inexorable yet ruthless ambition. Frank soon reveals his esteem of

President Gareth Walker is low. Being House Majority Whip, Frank helped Walker reach the Presidency hoping he would return the favor and, indeed, he had been promised the Secretary of State's positon. Eventually, however, Walker nominates Michael Kern, upon which Frank develops an elaborate masterplan to retaliate.

The following day, he confides his plan to Douglas Stamper, his trusted advisor and director of strategy, who asserts Michael Kern is the first to be disposed of. During an orchestra fundraiser that night, Frank briefly crosses paths with Zoe Barnes, an ambitious journalist, an encounter that is the foundation for a valuable relationship. The next day, Frank meets with David Blythe, who is writing a draft of the Education Bill that has to become the first hallmark of Walker's presidency. Frank advises him to rewrite, because the current form will be deemed too progressive, upon which most of it ends in the trash can. That evening, Zoe appears at Frank's doorstep proposing to serve as media-outlet; Frank reluctantly agrees.

Meanwhile, the police pull over Congressman Peter Russo for driving under the influence, but he gets off with a warning. Not much later, however, Russo meets with Frank, who reveals that it was actually him who made sure no charges were pressed and that he is aware of Russo's alcohol and drugs-filled past. Frank is willing to keep this all quiet, but this requires Russo's complete support for his cause. In short, Frank now has a Congressman and a journalist in his pocket. This last outlet is immediately important, as Frank instructs Stamper to save the pieces of the Education Bill draft and passes them on to Zoe, who includes it in a compelling piece that ends up on the *Washington Herald*'s front page.

Frank's plan immediately proves its effectiveness as he, in light of the recent Education Bill leak, receives complete responsibility for drafting a new version. In a meeting with Blythe, who is still unaware of this development, Frank pretends he is willing to take the blame for the bill's initial failing and reaches for the phone to call CNN. At the last moment, however, Blythe interrupts and, realizing Frank has an important role to play getting the bill through the House, declares he is willing to take the blame himself.

Stamper has found an offensive article relating to Israel in the *Williams Register*, the student newspaper of which Kern used to be the editor. Thereupon, Russo gets his first task. He contacts a former student companion and co-editor of Kern's, Roy Kapaniak, who confesses to Russo that it was actually him who wrote it but Russo bribes him to falsely testify that Kern did write the piece. Frank, in turn, passes this distorted information on the Zoe, who publishes it. When Kern appears in a talk show that night, the host confronts him with the piece Zoe has written and Kern is dumbfounded. He eventually tries to dismiss it as something done in his uninhibited student years, but the situation – and thereby his position as

Secretary of State – has become untenable and Kern steps down.

Frank meets with the Democratic National Committee to discuss who should succeed Jim Matthews, who is the new Vice President under the Walker administration, as Governor of Pennsylvania. He suggests Russo, and although nobody seems to agree, Frank manages to keep him on the list.

Underwood and his team are fine-tuning a new version of the Education Bill, but there are still some differences to be overcome, for the Speaker of the House Bob Birch refuses to compromise. Frank therefore plans to remove him as Speaker. This requires the backing of thirteen House Democrats; instrumental is the support of Majority Leader David Rasmussen. Frank, again using his sleek inducement skills, offers Rasmussen Birch's position, but Rasmussen does not fall for the offer. The only option left is to persuade the African-American caucus, which is lead by Terry Womack, a Representative from Missouri. To win Womack over, Frank uses a Missouri military base that is threatened to be closed as leverage. This is the perfect way of winning Womack's favors but Frank once again needs Russo's help and gives him a new assignment; he orders him to close the shipyard in his home state Pennsylvania, which will guarantee that Womack's military depot can remain open. Russo is torn between his constituency, for his pledge that the shipyard would remain open earned him a spot in Congress and Frank, who still has leverage on him due to the DUI arrest. Because of this emotional ordeal, Russo relapses into his alcohol and cocaine addiction. With Womack in his pocket, Frank ingeniously uses Rasmussen's refusal for his own benefit by planting the – fake – rumor in Birch's head that Rasmussen is secretly aiming to take over Birch's position via a vote out. Frank promises to not participate on two conditions: Womack has to be appointed after Rasmussen is dismissed and Birch has to tone down on his education stance.

Other matters, on the other hand, seem to deteriorate fast for when Frank returns home that night, he finds Russo on his doorstep. An emotional wreck and devastated by betraying his Pennsylvanian friends; he blames Frank for all his problems. Frank invites Russo to take a bath to fresh up and while in the tub, he reveals his plan of letting Russo run for Governor, saying that Russo is still a serious candidate only because of his efforts in the DNC meeting, making Frank the only one who still believes in him. Frank leaves a razor blade on the edge of the bath, should Russo want to take the easy way out. The next morning, Russo has decided to give life another try. Frank has yet one more demand: one month of sobriety. Russo eventually publicly declares to indeed run for Governor and with Zoe's aid, the press reports on this revelation seem positive. Russo, moreover, seems to take Frank's demands seriously, as he starts to visit AA sessions to remain sober.

Marty Spinella, the leader of the national educator's union, is staunchly opposed to the collective bargaining amendment in the education bill, resulting in him mobilizing the teachers into a countrywide strike. That night, fate seems to be favorable to Frank when a brick is thrown through a window of the Underwood residence. Frank wants to link this to the striking teachers in order to put the final nail in Spinella's coffin during a television debate by making him publicly apologize to Claire, but Spinella aptly avoids the attack, turns the situation in his own advantage and wins the debate, leaving the bill hanging by a thread. The perfect opportunity for retribution arises when a young boy is shot. Frank rushes to the crime scene and with the mother in his arms, declares to the press this would never have happened had school been in session. On camera, he forces Spinella to come and work out a compromise, but when the two meet later, Frank does his utmost to get under Spinella's skin by throwing him insult after insult. This seems fruitless at firsthand, until Frank ultimately reveals he orchestrated the brick-incident himself. Spinalla can no longer keep himself together and punches him in the face, giving Frank the ultimate bargaining chip: Spinella has to terminate the strike or he will press assault charges, likely to be ruinous for Spinella's position. With Spinella out of the way, Walker's flagship can finally be made into law by virtue of Franks efforts. While this triumph strengthens the relation between the President and Frank, Matthews feels side-tracked.

In order to win back some support in Russo's home state, Frank devises a draft for yet another bill, which aims at building a large watershed that will likely boost the employment in the region that suffered from the shipyard closure. In light of this plan, a reborn Russo embarks on a large-scale whistle-stop tour through Pennsylvania, accompanied by Vice-President Matthews. The bill, however, does not pass due to resistance from the gas lobby; Russo is furious, for his chances in the Governor's race will likely be reduced to zero. He plays a powerful yet dangerous card by threating to publicly reveal how he assisted Frank with the faux framing of the former Secretary of State Michael Kern, should Frank be unable to create more jobs in the region. Frank's actions from the last few months are now likely to backfire, jeopardizing his carefully crafted plan. Were it not for the fact that Frank has yet another scheme, which he sets in motion by letting Russo attend a prestigious gala under the veil of contacting potential donors. Russo does not know that Stamper has arranged for a prostitute to seduce him at the gala, which eventually leads to Russo falling back into old alcohol-filled habits. After spending the night with this woman, Russo, still inebriated, has an important live radio interview to discuss the affairs in Pennsylvania, which he – unsurprisingly – completely ruins. Thereupon, Frank makes sure Zoe gets a hold on this, and

it does not take long before the entire political press features Russo's cataclysmic performance.

       After this disaster, Russo can evidently no longer run for Governor of Pennsylvania and his most perspicuous replacement, of course, is Vice President Jim Matthews. Frank manages to successfully convince Matthews to run for his former position, leaving the Vice President's seat empty and within his grasp. At the same time, Russo is a train wreck who has completely fallen back into his old drinking patterns. In a drunken state, he attempts to take responsibility for his actions and turns himself in but even this fails. Stamper makes sure the fallen Congressman is, once again, saved from the police and Frank drives him home in Russo's car. Parked in his garage, Frank offers him one last drink so he can "start fresh tomorrow" and even shares the bottle with him. These last gulps of alcohol make Russo fall sound asleep in the passenger's seat. Thereupon, Frank wipes away all his fingerprints from the interior, starts the engine and opens the car windows. When he leaves, he closes the garage doors, making it unable for the exhaust fumes to escape the room. Frank has killed Russo and staged it to look like suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

       Frank meets with President Walker in the Oval Office a few days later where Frank receives good news: he will replace Matthews to become the new Vice President of the United States. Thereby, Frank has successfully avenged being overlooked for Secretary of State and, through prudent yet cunning planning and leaving a trail of casualties, ended up in a position of even greater power.

The first chapter presented Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel's groundwork for provoking moral disengagement. More specifically, eight techniques have been discussed that can influence the parasocial relationship between viewer and morally ambiguous characters, which, in turn, might lead viewers to morally disengage from a protagonist's actions. Some of these methods are indeed applicable to Frank's actions over the course his season one story arc towards the Vice Presidency, as discussed above. Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel recognize, for instance 'euphemistic labeling' and illustrate this by elucidating that viewers are inclined to morally disengage if the act of lying can be interpreted as telling white lies (181). This can indeed be invoked by some of Frank's schemes in season one. His – faked – willingness to take the blame for the failure of the Education Bill, leading to Blythe taking the actual fall and giving Frank carte blanche to take the lead in the reform is a paramount example. This is a lie, but ultimately is advantageous to Frank's own sake. Him planting the counterfeit rumor in Birch's head that Rasmussen is after his position is yet another example of a white lie; eventually

bringing both Birch and Rasmussen in disregard. As all this is in favor of Frank's own position, viewers might, again, designate it as a white lie, likewise evoking viewer's moral disengagement (181). The way in which Frank deals with Peter Russo is, too, subject to moral disengagement. Russo, for example, eventually falls back into old habits of drinking and using drugs; he is a complete wreck, especially the night he ends up on the Underwoods' doorstep and the morning of the radio interview. Thus, viewers can accordingly regard him as being less than human. This process, designated as 'dehumanization' can likewise still incite them to morally disengage. (Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, 181). What is more, although Frank murdering Russo is undoubtedly a ruthless act, it is still at least in part framed as Russo's own fault. Frank offered him a chance to remain sober by giving him a new goal in life of becoming Pennsylvania's next Governor, but Russo did not succeed, letting his personal problems prevail. Therefore, the immoral killing might be justified by viewers blaming Russo himself for his deadly fate. Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel call this particular provocation of moral disengagement 'attribution of blame' (181).

Thus, this analysis has shown that Frank's action move the plot forwards into narrative cycles, once a problem is solved, another one already looms around the corner. By lying to Blythe, pitting Rasmussen and Birch against each other, misleading Spinella by faking the brick incident and, most notably, mentoring Russo but also orchestrating his downfall leading to his death, Frank, through his actions, is a pivotal example of a morally ambiguous character.

5. Conclusion

By reviewing the existing literature on the evaluation of fictional characters, analyzing the ways in which the fourth wall is broken, and chronicling his rise to the Vice Presidency in season one of *House of Cards*, this research has established how viewers assess the morally ambiguous behavior of Frank Underwood.

Taking a cue from Brecht and Barthes, it has been argued that texts do not have fixed meanings. Therefore, it remains up to the viewer to distill interpretations in what is a unique, individual process. There are nevertheless certain principles that guide these mechanisms, which can roughly be divided into three subcomponents. Features of the viewer include Affective Disposition Theory (Raney 2004) and experimental closeness (Bilandzic 2006). Features of the text can invoke moral reasoning (Lane 2001) and offer moral certainty (Ommen et al. 2014) and a synthesis between the these two encompass indirect experimental closeness (Ommen et al., 2014), mediated closeness and the associated notion of transportation (Bilandzic 2006), deictic shift (Bussele and Bilandzic 2008), Expanded Disposition Theory (Raney, 2004) and schema theory (Bussele and Bilandzic 2008; Ommen et al. 2014). These processes determine the degree to which viewers identify with the character and accept or condemn the character's motivations as well as the outcomes of their actions which, in turn, can pave the way towards moral disengagement.

The fact that the viewer is Frank's sole confidant, expressed through meaningful glances and compelling monologues, both of which break the fourth wall, contributes to the process of moral evaluation. It is only in these instances that Frank expresses his true emotions, which brings him and his audience closer to each other. Often, the viewer is the only one who knows whether or not he is speaking the truth and the only one who knowns how Frank thinks about the other politicians playing the intricate game of politics in Washington D.C. Only the audience, in other words, is aware of all of Frank's plans towards the Vice Presidency. He shares with them, for example, his plan of moving Blythe out of the way in a compelling monologue. Sometimes, however, even the viewer is struck by utter surprise for instance when Frank ruthlessly kills Russo. Admittedly, Frank had already stated to the viewer that Russo was nothing but a pawn in his larger plan, but that he would actually get rid of the Congressman himself was certainly unforeseen. What remains remarkable is the fact that viewers become the only confidant of a man who seems to only live for himself. Here, talking to the viewers might work as some kind of outlet for Frank; much like some write their intimate thoughts and tribulations in a diary, he entrusts them to his viewers.

Because the stakes of the game he plays are high, this is a way to relieve the pressure.

Frank's actual behavior, too, is a basis for morally evaluating his persona. As the aforementioned example indicates, he is willing to resort to murder to achieve his aims. Admittedly, this is unequivocally the uttermost rancorous example in the series' first season and can cause viewers to question their loyalty towards him. His more politically grounded schemes on the other hand, such as misleading Blythe into thinking he is willing to take the fall for the Education Bill leading to Blythe himself taking the actual fall, and tricking Birch into thinking that Rasmussen is secretly trying to take over his position, cause contradiction among viewers. Some might interpret these maneuvers as being part of the political game and define them as 'white lies' leading to moral disengagement, whereas others could envision a more noble image of what constitutes an upright politician and hence condemn these falsehoods. This is in line with Zillman's Affective Disposition Theory and Bilandzic's concept of experimental closeness, both of which have been extensively discussed in the first chapter.

House of Cards fits into a tradition of series with protagonists that do not act in an unequivocally good or bad manner, a development prompted by *The Sopranos* at the end of the twentieth century and continued into the current century. With *House of Cards*, however, yet another development seems to have become evident. The trichotomy between good, bad and ambivalent characters is arguably much more intricate (Daalmans, Hijmans, and Wester 79-80). There appears to be, in other words, a wide spectrum of gradations in terms of ambiguity at the moment. Additionally, we seem to be moving towards this spectrum's other end with protagonists that hold entirely self-centered reasons for their behavior. More precisely, current morally ambiguous characters increasingly have lost the noble, anthropological motivations behind their actions, whereas these motives are still pertinent in series that originally aired in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In *Dexter,* the protagonist is indeed a serial killer, but the de facto immoral act of manslaughter is nuanced by Dexter's humane rationale of only targeting serial killers and other felons not caught by the system. *Breaking Bad* follows the same principle; the terminally ill Walter White – at least in the series' beginning – cooked crystal meth to leave his family financially independent should he die of lung cancer. The misanthropic Dr. Gregory House adopted unconventional, morally challenging methods in *House* and even though he cannot get along with his patients, he always finds the cure to the most intricate diseases. In newer series such as *Boardwalk Empire*, chronicling the trials and tribulations of Nucky Thompson, the treasurer of Atlantic City during the Prohibition era and *House of Cards*, these anthropological ideals have almost

entirely disappeared. These series, in other words, explore a much further end of the spectrum, as the anthropological, humane rationale is entirely absent. Nucky Thompson is nothing short of a criminal mastermind, using his power as city treasurer for nothing more than making money with the illegal production and distribution of alcohol. Frank Underwood likewise lacks a humane reasoning behind his actions for he indeed does not have explicit motivations of making the United States a better place. He, after all, plays the game of politics for his own benefit, to acquire as much power and influence simply for himself. This development puts the notion of morality in an entirely new perspective.

According to Dant, "television [programs] contribute to the continuing moral education of the viewing public" (11). The fact remains that morally evaluating the ambiguous behavior of a fictional character is a very individual process, depending not only on the actual mediated message but even more on the 'unique moral make-up' of the viewer (Raney 351). Not everyone will accept or condemn Frank's actions in the same way or to the same extent. Fact remains, however, that *House of Cards* in itself refrains from offering moral closure; solely the viewer can indeed evaluate Frank's schemes and thereby whether or not reach moral disengagement, as Frank would say, probably while giving a piercing look: "what do *you* think?"

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Even though the theoretical groundwork for moral evaluation the behavior of a morally ambiguous television character has been presented, this research has been unable to cover how viewers actually evaluate morally ambiguous behavior *in practice*. The most prominent processes viewers use towards moral disengagement have indeed been presented but actual audience research falls outside the scope of this thesis. It would therefore be an alluring endeavor to use the findings of the current research to perform actual reception studies in order to discover if and to what extent viewers accept the behavior of Frank and also map out the reasons behind their (dis)approval. For viewers have a unique moral mindset, differentiating between the evaluation of men and women could lead to increasingly nuanced insights. Moreover, discriminating between, for instance, the moral evaluation of freshmen students and thirds years of political sciences could display possible differences between the tabulae rasae and those more learned in the art of politics. Comparing moral judgements of political science student or law students with completely unrelated studies such as biology or linguistics could likewise lead to new insights, as it might prove that political layman evaluate the behavior in a different way than those with at least some – theoretical – political experience.

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