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#MeToo and House of Cards?

Linus Lanfermann-Baumann · Friday, June 28th, 2019

Ever since the #MeToo began to spread after allegations against Harvey Weinstein, it has had a huge impact on society. As art reflects society, the movement is discernible in our cultural reality. The sixth season of *House of Cards* makes for a particularly interesting case.

By Linus Lanfermann-Baumann

In November 2018, the last season of *House of Cards* aired. The reviewer's interest may be aroused in many ways, two of which I find especially interesting. On the one hand, the recent sixth season is the first not to feature former male lead Kevin Spacey, who took a fall in the aftershock of the Weinstein allegations and the rise of #MeToo. Instead, the focus is now on Robin Wright's character, his wife on the show. On the other hand, being a political drama series set in modern America, *House of Cards* emulates a political climate that is, at the moment, largely shaped by one of the most polarizing politicians ever to have assumed the highest office. Hence, a socio-cultural review of the show that incorporates these aspects appears to be a topical and prolific endeavor.

House of Cards - Intriguing Political Drama

House of Cards, created by Beau Willimon, was Netflix's first big hit. Based on the eponymous novel by Michael Dobbs and the 1990 British television series of the same name, the first season received much notice in 2013. All of seasons one to five received major Emmy Award nominations. Starting out as a Democratic congressman, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) is looking forward to acceding to an important and influential office: Secretary of State. However, in what serves as the inciting incident of the show, he is passed over on short notice and vows vengeance. On this, as well as on multiple other occasions throughout the run of the series, the effective use of fourth wall breaks (with Frank directly addressing his audience) underscores his character and his machinations. With the help of his wife Claire (Robin Wright) and his Chief of Staff Doug Stamper (Michael Kelly), he revengefully but carefully schemes his way up the political ladder.

The ensuing plot largely focuses on two intertwined storylines. For one, the Underwoods' criminal and intimidating rise and holding on to political power naturally plays the dominant part across all seasons. In the other major storyline, the viewer

follows several journalists (most notably Kate Mara as Zoey Barnes and Boris McGiver as Tom Hammerschmidt) as they try to find the story that may finally be the Underwoods' downfall.

To make a long story short, Frank and Claire eventually become President and Vice President, respectively. By the end of season five, Frank chooses to resign and to go into the private sector. Claire, in a turn of events, is inaugurated as 47th President of the United States. But she refuses to pardon her husband like they have agreed upon before. It becomes clear that they have irrevocably grown apart. Therefore, at the end of season five, all is set for an epic Underwood versus Underwood struggle for who holds the power over the White House. In the aftermath of the Weinstein allegations of October 2017 and the rise of #MeToo, however, severe public accusations against Spacey thwarted this approach.

Kevin Spacey - A Career Comes to an End

Monday, March 4, 2019. It is an important day for famous actor and former *House of Cards* lead Kevin Spacey. After his plea of not guilty to the charge of indecent assault and battery in January, the lawsuit is moving forward. While it was ruled that Spacey need not attend on site at the first pretrial hearing, he is required to be reachable on the phone. His lawyers have been building his defense by filing several motions. At the hearing, the judge most notably approves a request to preserve more of the alleged victim's phone records which Spacey's lawyers believe they need to plead his cause. A small success for the defense, another step towards trial is taken. Still, the hearing is but one stop of many down the road of legal proceedings.

The ongoing preliminary examination just adds another episode to the tumultuous times Spacey has endured ever since actor Anthony Rapp accused him of having made a sexual advance toward him in 1986. At the time, Rapp would have been only 14. Made public on October 29, 2017, and therefore shortly after the first allegations against Weinstein, this accusation served as a catalyst. Soon, multiple others were giving similar statements. Among Spacey's many accusers, the journalist Heather Unruh stands out, as the case that she made public is the first Spacey is now actually legally charged with. In November 2017, she stated that Spacey had sexually assaulted her son, 18 at the time of the alleged harassment, at a restaurant in Nantucket, Massachusetts, in July 2016.

After many more had come forward, Spacey's career was destined to end in ignominy. Accordingly, the ongoing filming of the final season of *House of Cards* was suspended not before long and Netflix chose to sever all ties with him. In November 2017, film producers went as far as recasting his role as J. Paul Getty in Ridley Scott's thriller *All the Money in the World* entirely with Christopher Plummer, although filming had already been completed. Once revered and critically acclaimed, the two-time Oscar winner Spacey (*The Usual Suspects*, 1995, and *American Beauty*, 1999) is now shunned by the industry.

After the first allegations by Rapp, Spacey claimed not to remember his encounter with him and expressed his »sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior.« His reactions after that have become increasingly

bizarre. Coming out of the closet as gay in the midst of ongoing accusations was publicly condemned as an act of distraction. Even more grotesque was a video uploaded on Christmas Eve 2018, a little more than a month after the sixth season of *House of Cards* had aired without him. Headlined *Let Me Be Frank*, the clip shows Spacey in character as Frank Underwood addressing the public in a trademark fourth wall break. He denies the allegations and criticizes people for drawing inferences without proper evidence. The end is as confident as his behavior throughout the entire video: »Conclusions can be so deceiving. Miss me?«

After October 2017, Spacey was to be seen on the big screen only once. In James Cox's *Billionaire Boys Club* he appeared next to Taron Egerton and Ansel Elgort in one of the last projects he had been working on before the revelations. Due to the charges against him, the movie was merely released through video on demand and in a limited number of cinemas. Not only was it a huge flop at the box office, it was also panned by critics. A fitting end, one cannot help but think.

Spacey and #MeToo

This is where #MeToo comes into play. The fact that the movement encouraged alleged victims of celebrities like Spacey to come forward is often underestimated. In 2019, we have almost become inured to this kind of public scandal. But one should never forget that before the allegations against Weinstein, the open secret of massive sexual misconduct in the film industry had hardly gotten public notice, although frequently alluded to by several actors. By raising awareness to the problem, the movement encouraged people to talk about their experiences. This was dubbed the »Weinstein Effect«. Let us again consider the case of Kevin Spacey.

Spacey was a flagship for Netflix. At the end of October 2017, the allegations against him were severe but still few, and uncorroborated. The details concerning his alleged assault of Heather Unruh's son were not at all known before November 8. Still, Netflix decided to cancel the show's sixth season until further notice as early as October 30. This only goes to show how impactful the movement is and illustrates the fact that the media and the production companies were suddenly very aware of the matter - in contrast to the ubiquitous secrecy before October 2017. In this regard, it is by all means remarkable that Netflix decided to oust Spacey at this early stage and have a last season nevertheless, this time with a female lead. After Spacey was cut off from Netflix forever, how did *House of Cards* handle the loss of its main man?

Irreplaceable? House of Cards without Kevin Spacey

After Spacey's expulsion, *House of Cards* was announced to have a last season of eight (as opposed to 13) episodes with Robin Wright starring in the lead role as Claire Underwood, Frank's notorious and equally ruthless wife. The show approaches the situation by having Spacey's character Frank Underwood die off-screen. Considering Netflix's decision not to be associated with Spacey anymore, this move is but sensible and consequential. Claire's new main adversaries are the siblings Bill (Greg Kinnear) and

TV Series

House of Cards is an American television series based on the 1990 BBC miniseries of the same title. It is a political thriller that tells the story of Congressman Frank Underwood and his doings in the White House. Created by Beau Willimon, it was the first original program ordered by Netflix.

Annette Shepherd (Diane Lane). Resembling the powerful Koch brothers of real-life America, they are major business people with a good amount of influence on everyday politics. Previously unknown to the show, they are said to have struck a deal with Frank which Claire, now that he is dead, does not feel responsible for anymore. When the Shepherds demand action and she coldly and resolutely refuses them, the main conflict of this season is born.

Michael Kelly, one of several former cast members who reprise their roles, is again starring as Doug Stamper, Frank's ever-loyal lackey. His knowledge of the Underwoods' machinations renders him both a possible threat to them and a powerful ally for their enemies. Yet, all who seek his cooperation would in one way or another hurt Frank's reputation - which the devoted Doug cannot let happen. One such example is found in the reporters Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) and Janine Skorsky (Constance Zimmer), who keep trying to implicate the Underwoods in several murders.

In what way does Frank Underwood affect this? His absence brings about two big problems. One of these is inevitable - but the other is not. Obviously, the show now lacks Spacey's excellent performance. As an actor, Spacey managed to give his character a believable semblance of ruthlessness and menace, frequently interrupted by chatty, often sarcastic fourth wall breaks that soon became one of the show's signature features. His portrayal was lauded with good reason and made up the very core of the show (alongside Robin Wright's Claire). This is not to say that cutting him off was the wrong decision. Of course, the concept of presumption of innocence applies to everyone, including Spacey. Still, I would argue that the allegations were too numerous and too severe to ignore them and continue a professional collaboration. But with regard only to his acting, any show would struggle to compensate for somebody like Spacey.

To come up with an intriguing plot, however, is a problem that would have been inevitable - but the show does not manage to deliver. In essence, season six revolves around the late Frank. Of course, simply deleting the former president from the show's intraserial memory can be no option for an ambitious political drama series that has been shaped so much by its main character. Still, it has to move forward. Frank's absence is never really overcome and remains a burden for the better part of the season. Of course, it can be argued that some of these storylines are necessary to keep it coherent with the preceding season. His ties to Doug, Claire, and the other characters create a few story lines over which Frank's death naturally looms large.

But consider these plot elements: The mysterious circumstances of Frank's death are

not revealed until the season's very last moments. Each and every character steadily makes comments about him. His will and a cassette player with his recordings play an important role to advance the back-and-forth relationship between Doug and Claire. And to top it all off, Frank may not even have died childless. These storylines could and should certainly have transcended his legacy and come up with new ideas. But the effect of #MeToo on *House of Cards* does not stop with the absence of Spacey. Plotwise, the show has its finger on the pulse of time in many aspects.

A Word on the Season's Shortcomings

Season Six is, as I shall soon argue, about femininity in politics. On that note, the plot deserves praise for speaking to society in an up-to-the-minute fashion. Still, a review that does not cover the considerable number of shortcomings this season suffers from would seem misleading; having Frank have such an unnecessarily huge impact is certainly not the only problematic decision the showrunners have made.

One thing *House of Cards* has never been good at and continues not to have is subtlety. Once again, the imagery is rather ungainly. Take the bird scene in the first episode of the new season: Tracing a mysterious thud, Claire finds a bird trapped in a wall. She then refers back to the very first seconds of the first season, in which Frank decidedly delivers a fatally injured dog from its pain. In season six, however, Claire releases the bird instead of killing it, saying »Francis, I am done with you.« One gets the feeling that this should be somewhat significant, but did it really need the freeing of a bird to show that Claire has finally overcome Frank's demise? It is all very showy, but really there is no profundity to it. Having seen the rest of the season, I cannot seem to find any importance in this metaphorical bluntness.

Similarly, a big show is made out of Doug shaving the enormous beard he has been growing during part of the season. After Claire speaks rather critically of Frank on TV, he goes into his bathroom and grabs a razor blade. Now, of course, it is not enough to just get rid of the beard. There must be blood, so Doug cuts himself. Dramatically, he breaks the fourth wall as well, saying »She leaves me no choice.« Again, the imagery is so exaggerated that it nearly cloy.

This scene also exemplifies the underwhelming use of fourth wall breaks in this season. After Claire has already shown that she is aware of her audience at the end of last season, the fact that she basically takes over Frank's part was to be expected. Plus, as I have just indicated, Doug also employs this practice on rare occasions. Unfortunately, while many of Frank's talks have been memorable, Claire's and Doug's cannot quite compete. This is mostly due to disappointing writing, of course. Furthermore, Robin Wright does not deliver the corresponding lines quite as naturally as Spacey did, although her performance is, in all other respects, as stunning as in all previous seasons.

Thankfully, this holds especially true for the otherwise anticlimactic finale. The height of suspense prematurely arrives in the gripping episodes four and five. Three hours of television later, many storylines end somewhat disappointingly and remain unresolved. The very final scene is still impressive though, thanks to Wright's and Michael Kelly's performances.

Femininity in Politics (1): Sexism

What is really interesting about this season is its main theme: femininity in politics. I am convinced that #MeToo played a key role in producing season six, just like Spacey's private scandals in the wake of the Weinstein allegations have likely been an important factor. Evidence can be found in many cases.

Starting with the obvious, Claire is a female president. And just like Hillary Clinton would have been in our world, she is the first in the House of Cards universe. Now, of course, Claire is far from being the first female president in popular culture. What is appreciable though is that she is the protagonist. And as is often the case in the real world when women enter into traditionally male-dominated spheres, the public outcry is as revolting as it gets. The season opens with a report of the shitstorm unleashed against Claire, including a contest for the most creative way to kill her. »It involves, essentially, skinning you. Cutting your body into dozens of pieces and arranging them in the shape of the American flag. Flesh for the white stripes, blood for the red«, Claire is told reluctantly by one of her top officials.

Quite a few real-life incidents resembling this dull way of denouncing women's entries into male-dominated spheres come to mind. To give but one example: Being a recent installment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Captain Marvel* introduced the first female superhero in the franchise who actually got her own feature film. Despite generally positive reviews, it provoked howls of outrage on a review-aggregation website as popular as *Rotten Tomatoes*. It can be assumed that online trolls attacked the movie for what was perceived as a feminist agenda.

But not only the public give Claire a rough time. The Shepherds keep on pushing for a deregulation bill. At the end of episode two, they eventually get her to sign it. In an utterly humiliating move, Bill Shepherd (male, white, rich) guides the female president's hand as she appends her signature. Given that Claire is not just anybody but holds the highest office of all, he could hardly be more condescending. Claire then just looks at us without saying a word, and we know Bill is going to pay for it.

Femininity in Politics (2): Instrumentalization

In the following course of events, Claire abuses her femininity to an absurd degree - making use of the similarly absurd public discourse about women in high positions. She feigns a mental breakdown and does not leave the White House for several weeks, prompting the public to discuss her being depressed and to question her ability to lead. A popular tabloid reporter calls her a »paralyzed pussy«. Across all channels, the media dig up stereotypes that have always been connected to women. But Claire had it all planned. The Shepherds, the Vice President and Claire's cabinet choose to invoke a rarely used amendment that would, essentially, promote the VP to presidency. But just before the cabinet can follow through on this, Claire enters the room in perfect shape, fires them all and replaces them with an all-female cabinet. Quite a move.

But the instrumentalization is not limited to this one grand scheme: Some time after, Claire fabricates a terrorist threat to distract the public, antagonizing parts of her war cabinet. She goes as far as preparing a nuclear strike although the threat is, at best, a contingency. Two female members of the cabinet say out loud what everybody is

thinking and strongly object to Claire's unjustifiable plans. Since Claire knows that reason is not on her side, she talks about her baby (yes, she is pregnant), and about how the word »misogynist« is so widely used whereas the opposite, »misandrist« (a man-hater), has no place in our culture. Claire: »So what I'm getting at is, maybe we all, regardless of our gender, would do well to examine the pre-conceived notions that we have about who can and cannot act as Commander in Chief.« In a nutshell, she makes the whole argument about her gender and labels it as sexism in an attempt to shut up dissenting voices.

In general, gender inequality pervades our society in so many ways that connecting it to any subject is seldom unjustifiable. Another scene illustrates this quite well: After Claire has given a glib speech at a military base before sending the troops off to Syria, she tells a female soldier: »I promise you and every woman in this country that during my presidency the key components of the Equal Rights Amendment will finally pass. I'm gonna make sure of it. I want you to know I support you.« The soldier's responds: »Do you even have a plan? One that won't get us all killed?« Claire in return: »Would you have asked me that if I were a man?« One might argue that the fact that the insubordinate soldier is female makes it less likely that she challenged the president's authority because of her gender. But considering that it was a direct response to Claire's promise of fighting for women's rights, the president's answer appears to be anything but far-fetched. Would the soldier really have asked a male president the same?

Still, in the incidents I analyzed before, I think Claire's way of handling things making use of her gender is very questionable. The terrorist attack Claire stages is, for example, so obviously fabricated that there is just no way it can be justified. Also, both cabinet members who object to her plans are female, and both are experts offering compelling arguments against Claire's dangerous plan. The same goes for her faked breakdown: Of course, the discourse in the media is preposterous. But so is Claire's behavior during the better part of season six.

The Aim of Season Six

Ultimately, it comes down to these two aspects: On the one hand, Claire faces sexism in some of its ugliest facets. On the other, Claire instrumentalizes her gender to her advantage on multiple occasions. What is to be made out of this, what does the show aim at? Does it imply that open sexism is an automatic consequence of women in politics? Is it a statement against paternalism? Or on the contrary: Does season six insinuate that female politicians typically break down? That they talk about feminism to silence their male opponents? That they will always favor their female colleagues? Well, no, but one should not stop there.

As far as I am concerned, season six has no immediate »agenda«. It merely creates a vision, an alternative reality. In this vision of a ruthless female president, sexism plays a major role. On that score, it sure seems quite real. But the vision also warns us not to oversimplify the gender debate and not to misuse it to curtail discussions hardly connected to it. Therefore, when I argue that femininity in politics is the main topic of this season, I am not saying that any of the things Claire does are in any way representative of women in politics, or that Claire's behavior is at all times

condemnable. On the contrary, she is on many occasions very justified to mention her gender. All I am saying is that the show critically examines the female president from different angles - including both the discrimination she faces and her questionable rhetoric. The way Spacey dropped out of the show opened up this possibility of connecting #MeToo and what the hashtag connotes to the last season, and *House of Cards* makes clever and skillful use of that.

Curiously enough, the incumbent president employs speaking techniques quite similar to Claire's and is beyond that connected to the show. Therefore, at this point I would like to have a look at the current administration, which is - one needs to remind oneself of that more often - not fictional at all.

Trump and House of Cards

From the moment of his inauguration in January 2017 and already well before the campaign, Donald Trump's term in office has been linked to numerous scandals and untruths. According to Glenn Kessler, who rates politicians' utterances based on their veracity in his Fact Checker blog for the Washington Post, Trump »averaged 15 false claims a day in 2018«, a time span which Kessler calls »a year of unprecedented deception«. Mostly, the statements found to be false or misleading were about the US economy, the wall, the tax cut, and the involvement of Russia in the 2016 election (although in March 2019, Trump as an individual was acquitted of the accusation of conspiring with Russia). Kessler's shocking results merely add to the various scandals Trump has been embroiled in during the past two years, including, but not limited to, sexual misconduct allegations, the travel ban on Muslim-majority countries, rejecting both the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, and inducing the trade war with China.

Trump's presidency finds profuse expression in popular culture. Naturally, the current president is good fodder for late night shows, which regularly criticize and ridicule him. Many musicians have expressed their opposition to his policy. Within the film industry, Meryl Streep's moving speech at the 2017 Golden Globe Awards ceremony, addressing Trump's imitation of a disabled journalist, stands out. But apart from these clearly palpable effects, there are less noticeable ramifications that the current political situation entails. Let us get back to *House of Cards*.

Part of what made the show so intriguing in its early stages was that the viewers could relatively easily be astonished and unsettled by the depiction of American politics. Barack Obama had been in office for nearly four years when the first season aired and would still be the incumbent president at the time seasons two, three, and four were broadcast. And while Trump's predecessor could unfortunately not stop the US from becoming increasingly divided, he now seems to be the epitome of reason. Obamacare, his advocacy of the rights of LGBT Americans, his standing up for increased gun control, and his contribution to treaties such as the Paris Agreement and the Iran deal all stand in contrast to the current administration. Naturally, when the audience was faced with the criminal doings of the fictional Frank Underwood, many were thrilled at his schemes that at the time appeared to be fairly different from the real world.

But there was a change starting with season five. What before seemed freakish and outlandish is really not that staggering anymore. Frank Underwood tells outright lies. Donald Trump does, too. Frank Underwood shows no regard for his enemies whatsoever. Neither does Donald Trump. Frank Underwood is utterly condescending and self-righteous. So is, I opine, Donald Trump. Frank Underwood basically does what he wants without feeling enough pressure to resign. The same goes for Trump. Once, at least I had the feeling that, in a democratic society, people with great power and responsibility can only presume to play a role in a limited number of scandals before being overthrown. Trump is not the only, but a major reason for me to slowly be losing that feeling.

Of course, Obama did not become president through being artless and innocent at all times. I also do not think Trump has murdered anybody like the cold-blooded Frank Underwood. It may also be argued that politicians have always been viewed as being unprincipled and unethical – although personally, I think Trump is on a level of his own. Also, the Underwoods differ from Trump in that they shape their public image in a careful and far-sighted manner whereas I can hardly ascribe that approach to Trump. Yet, my point remains: A lot of the show's former allure is tarnished by the current political climate.

This still holds true for season six. As far as scheming and political maneuvering is concerned, Claire has in no way ever been inferior to her husband. Now that the floor is all hers, it only gets better. While she has, by fits and starts, shown at least some compassion in previous seasons, her unscrupulousness in season six knows no bounds. Almost commiserating and at the same time ice-cold, she states that her Vice President just »can't help being decent. Human. His glorious flaw.« Today, you get the feeling that decency and humanity are indeed flaws – at least when your aim is to become President of the United States of America.

But except maybe for this scene, I think that *House of Cards* comments on American politics in general, not on any individual person. The Underwoods have always schemed and plotted in the same old way, be it with Obama or with Trump as the real-life president. It just so happened that the show became the hapless victim of the political shift. When real life is lurid enough, fiction à la *House of Cards* can lose some of its power.

Art and Morality – A Final Comment on House of Cards, Spacey and #MeToo

Another matter that is directly linked to the latest season of *House of Cards* and that #MeToo has brought into focus is the relation of art to morality. The decision to ostracize Spacey displayed willingness to subordinate art to morals. In this case, I believe it was the right thing to do. Nevertheless, the concept in itself must not become a general maxim.

On the contrary, I think that the tendency to moralize art is a dangerous one. In November 2017, Göttingen was affected when an exhibition in the canteen was prematurely cancelled for its perceived sexist and antisemitic approach. The suggestive depiction of female nudity as well as a painting that showed Albert Einstein with the ears and nose of a pig especially aroused anger and met disapprobation. The danger that I see lies in a potential limitation of the freedom of art. If pieces of art are

mainly assessed based on their moral instead of their aesthetic value, diversity is impaired. Or worse, censorship may be imposed, albeit unintentionally. I tried to live up to this by separating Spacey's performance as an actor, which I enjoyed a lot, from his alleged private misconduct. Yet, I have already indicated that I am in favor of Netflix's decision to drop him.

One issue is the art form in which Spacey made it so far. When you read a book, you may not be directly confronted with the author. When you look at a painting, you may do so without knowing anything about the painter. But watching any character-driven live action movie or series necessarily puts its focus on the actors. No matter how good the acting, they are easily recognized in most movies they appear in - the palpable bodily presence often suffices. The phenomenon of typecasting may serve as an example: Actors have occasionally become so strongly identified with one »type« (e. g. a hardboiled action hero) that they had problems finding roles outside their assumed métier. Hence, the medium »film/series« by itself makes it hard to separate private personality from professional artistic output. Personally, I will find it more difficult to enjoy another of Spacey's movies if the allegations actually prove to be true. Still, I can acknowledge his proficiency in the field of acting.

What is more, the nature and timing of the Spacey allegations play an important role. Sexual misconduct in Hollywood is a very sensitive subject these days. The industry has slept on the issue long enough. When the aim is to resolve any conjectures as to the involvement of certain actors in such misconduct, offering lucrative deals to alleged offenders would send out the wrong message - even though the aesthetic loss in cases such as Spacey's is evident.

To escape the dangers of restricting the freedom of the arts and to keep the focus on aesthetic value is one thing. Believably condemning sexual misconduct and eliminating archaic structures in the film industry is another. In the future, doing both at the same time and differentiating between the various cases will be a difficult task to undertake for all those involved.

In the meantime, I recommend watching the sixth season of *House of Cards*. It is not perfect at all. But in the way it responds to #MeToo and Spacey's sacking, it matters.

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